

THE
HAPPY HARVEST

JEFFERY FARNOL

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A PAGEANT OF VICTORY
THE CROOKED FURROW
THE LONELY ROAD

EPICS OF THE FANCY
A BOOK FOR JANE

THE HAPPY HARVEST

A ROMANCE

BY
JEFFERY FARNOL

Colonial Edition

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To
MY WIFE
PHYLLIS MARY

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THE HAPPY HARVEST

CHAPTER I

WHICH INTRODUCES CERTAIN OLD FRIENDS

“TEN years an’ a bit!” said the Tinker, nodding at me across his black pot suspended above the fire. “Ah, nigh on eleven mortal years, friend Oliver, and gone like a flash o’ light. It seems only yesterday as you and little Clia came a-riding into the woods, both on your Dobbin hoss,—and she so small an’ thin an’ ragged! Only yesterday it seems.”

“Yes, Jeremy,” I answered, sighing, “the older we grow, the faster flies old Time. And there’s Life’s tragedy!”

“Ay, but it has its consolation too, S’Oliver, for the nearer we get to our journey’s end, the smoother and steeper down hill goes the road, and the kinder to weary feet. But, Lord bless us,—here’s me rising seventy and never felt younger, and here’s you don’t show nowise changed, high or low, since that day as you knocked Jess off his pins, Jessamy Todd the unconquered champion as no man ever beat nor ever will, knocked him down you did, old friend, flat as a flounder——”

“No, no, Jerry.”

“Yes, Oliver—well, but for that tree as propped him. We often talk of it, Jess and me . . . Which do remind me,” said Mr. Jarvis, consulting a large silver watch, bright as new from its wash-leather case, “as Jessamy is doo here in about half-an-hour. But, talking o’ yourself, Oliver, ’twill be about two years since your Uncle, Sir Everard, passed and went aloft.”

“Nearly three, Jeremy.”

“And left most of his tree-mendous fortun’ to you, eh friend Oliver?”

“Yes, being the elder, I have Abbeymead and the title, and my cousin Roland the estate of Charlwood.”

“Well then,” demanded the Tinker, jutting his long, blue chin at me rather ferociously, “you being young and so powerful rich—why don’t ye find some sweet young creeter to wife you? Every time as us comes South, Jess and me, and camps in these yere woods o’ yourn we’re a-wondering if you’ve yet took a lovesome young wife to your buzzim. Have ye so—this time, Oliver?”

“No!” I answered, avoiding his keen gaze. “Nor am I ever like to.”

“Eh? Not?” he enquired, rubbing chin with the worn shaft of his hammer. “You ain’t yet wed—nor yet even thinkin’ about it?”

“No!” I answered, and with the utmost finality.

“Ha!” quoth he, cocking his eye at me ’neath the brim of his old top-hat. “‘No!’ says you. ‘Well, well, and strike me blue’, says I, and wonders at you very ’ard, Oliver. So wherefore ‘No’ and why not, old friend?” Here he peeped into the black pot that began to give forth a right appetising fragrance, and, having thus afforded me time to answer and I remaining dumb, he questioned me, rather anxiously:

“Anything wrong, old friend?”

“No, Jerry, why do you ask?”

“Why, you shows a bit glum like, a trifle woebegone, which nat’rally sets me a-wondering wherefore and why?”

“I fear I’m gloomy by nature, Jeremy.”

“Well, you ain’t a chatterboxy sort o’ chap, Oliver, no! You’m a thoughtful cove, being of a literary turn o’ mind. But you ain’t nowise gloomy . . . except p’raps . . . well, now and then. So I’m axing you as a friend, old friend, what is it now? What’s worriting of you, Oliver? Is it your ’dopted children? Is it . . . our Clia? Is it young Robin? Is it . . . yourself? Who is it and what? Tell old Jerry Jarvis and take comfort.”

But as he spoke, and before I might answer, rose a distant sound from the dense woodland about us, a flute-like whistling right glad to hear.

“Ah,” said I, glancing round, “here comes Jessamy Todd.”

“His own self!” nodded Jeremy. “Lessee now, it’ll be all o’ six months since last us visited ye, eh old friend? Aha, since then Jess has been oncommon hard on Old Nick. There was a bloody-minded waggoner Ilford way, and a sinful butcher at Romford, ay, and two gipsies at Epping. Folks as were fort’nate enough to see those fights’ll never forget ’em, nor how,

after he'd trounced Old Nick out of 'em, he prayed peace and good-fellership into 'em—down on their bended marrer-bones all reg'lar and reverent. . . . And yere he be! How goes it, Jess?"

"Hearty as ever, thank the kind Lord!" answered a deep, pleasant voice, and out from the thickets strode the speaker, this bright-eyed, comely fellow so nobly shaped from spread of powerful shoulder to trim legs and light-treading feet; this same terrible-fisted, gentle-hearted hard-smiter of Iniquity, this the greatest, craftiest, most lovable fighting-man I have ever met or shall ever know—Jessamy Todd.

And when we had grasped hands and looked into each other's eyes, down beside me on the grass sank Jessamy with effortless ease and radiating a joyous vitality despite the greying hair at his temples.

"Brother," said he, viewing me over with keen, expert glance, "you're showing in prime condition, all sound and clean a-low and aloft,—it does me good to look at you."

"Ho!" quoth the Tinker, "shows as likely as he did the day as he knocked ye down, Jess, on your back, flat as a perishing flounder—but for that tree, eh Jessamy?"

"That he do!" chuckled Jessamy. "And how," he enquired, his pleasant voice sinking to gentler note, "how's our Princess, our Lady Clia? Well, I hope, and more beautiful than ever, I'm pretty sure?"

"I'll warrant!" nodded the Tinker, peering into his fragrant, black pot with that anxious solicitude I remembered so well. "Oliver, you'll mind as how the time as you found her ten long year ago, I foretold as she'd make a bee-u-tiful woman? And by goles, no prophet was ever truer, for so she is! Toss me the fork, Jessamy. Are ye peckish?"

"I am, Jerry. And summat smells mighty a-looring."

"Ar, a stoo, Jess. Onions, lad! Gobbets o' pork pickled and cut thick! Pepper, salt and—a poached coney as belongs to Oliver."

"Aha!" sighed Jessamy, snuffing the appetising fragrance. "When do we eat?"

"Talking of our Clia," said Jeremy, consulting the watch again, "she's got more nor beauty, wits she's got and plenty on 'em! And there's summat o' the elves and fairies about her still, like there always was. She makes me think of a beam o' moonlight in a wood, a blackbird's pipe, the sweetness as comes up out o' the good, kind earth arter summer rain. I reckon there were

sprites about when her sweet soul came out of God's infinity, eh, Jess? She's clothed in the beauty o' Loveliness,—eh, Oliver?"

"Yes!" said I.

"Jerry," nodded Jessamy, "you have said it com-plete!"

"No, Jess, there's more. There's t'other part o' her as be all human woman, so gentle yet—so precious sharp! So mighty determined in her notions. Oliver," said he, gesturing at me with the long fork, "if ever she sets her mind on a thing, she's a-going to—get it! You may think as you're a-leading of her your way, but—you'll be following hers and all unbeknowing! For, 'spite all her pretty, gentle ways—yet in that tender, soft body of her is a will—of iron, of steel, of ada-mantine rock. Now mind, I'm telling ye!"

"Brother, is she hereabouts?" enquired Jessamy. "Will she come and eat our first supper here along, according to custom?"

"Of course!" I answered.

"Good!" he nodded; then leaning back to stare at the leaves above, he enquired: "And what . . . o' young Master Robin, how's he shaping now?"

"Well," I answered, frowning at the black pot, "if he would but use his other gifts half as well as you have taught him to use his hands and feet, Jessamy, he would make a splendid man . . . with time."

"Ar—with time!" repeated Jerry Jarvis, jutting his chin at me, "but how much time? How many generations to transform ploughman to aris-tocrat? And can a little gutter-rat, bred in want an all kind of evil, ever be persuaded by love or eddicated into a fine gentleman . . . can he?"

"Yes," I answered, gazing in my turn at the leaves above. "Yes, I . . . believe so, Jeremy. I . . . dearly hope so."

"And God love ye for such faith, Oliver, let's hope it may be justified! I like the lad well, what I've seen of him through the years off and on, but . . . what's bred in the bone, thinks I, likewise . . . silk purses and sows' ears, thinks I . . . for, if there be a man alive this moment fit to wed our Clia, that man surely ain't young Robin! And you can lay to that, old friend."

Now at this I glanced at Jessamy to find him looking askance on me and showing so troubled that I became troubled also, and sat, scowling down at the toe of my riding boot, like the sorely perplexed creature I was, since I must become soon or late the arbiter of two young lives and so, very

responsible for the future happiness and welfare of these my adopted children.

Thus presently looking from one to other of my two old and trusty friends, said I:

“You have both known Robin since I——”

“Took him from the streets,” said Jerry Jarvis, “and surely saved him from prison and the gallers, for a more desprit, vicious, young animal never was!”

“A poor, little waif!” added Jessamy. “Ay, and starving, body and soul.”

“Well,” said I, “you have seen what ten years of love and care may do. You have watched the waif grow and develop into splendid young manhood.”

“He’ll be about twenty year old, eh, Oliver?”

“Approximately, Jeremy. And there is no finer-looking, more loyal or warmer-hearted young fellow alive than my Robin.”

“Agreed!” nodded Jessamy. “He peels like a young Hercules, he’s speedy, plenty o’ power and game as may be. Ay, he surely does you credit, brother.”

“Well then,” demanded the Tinker, gesturing at me again with the fork, “if so, Oliver, what be you a-worriting about?”

“I find it hard to explain,” said I, unhappily, “yes, even to you two who know him so well.”

“Ay, when not at school or college or university—Oxford, ain’t it?”

“Yes, Jeremy. But despite all this and though such a grand fellow in many ways, there is a strange, wild strain in him, something tameless . . . elemental——”

“And now,” quoth the Tinker, fork a-flourish, “now he’s in love wi’ our Clia!”

“Of course! Yes, Jeremy, he always has been.”

“And do she love him?”

“I’m—not sure. Sometimes I think she does and at other times . . . I don’t know.”

“And what’s to be the end on ’t?”

“She must decide.”

“Nay but you being her guardian——”

“No, Jerry! I shall never impose my will in such matter . . . no, indeed! The choice must be her own.”

“Lessee, Oliver, how old are you now?”

“Thirty-seven. Why?”

“Well, why not take and marry her yourself?”

“Impossible!” said I, frowning.

“Oh? How so?”

“First because I’m double her age—almost.”

“What’s second?”

“Because I . . . happen to be her . . . guardian.”

“Suppose as the sweet soul loves ye?”

“I don’t!” said I. “Not for a moment! Most certainly not.”

“Strike me pink!” exclaimed the Tinker. “Hows’ever, I reckon ’tis about time as you got wed, for, if ever a man deserved and needed a sweet young wife, ’tis you, and if ever there was sweet young wife a-waiting to be took, ’tis she——”

Now it was at this precise moment, oddly enough, that we heard Clia calling my name in her richly sweet voice and with her own peculiar lilt:

“Ol-i-ver!”

CHAPTER II

WHICH ATTEMPTS SOME DESCRIPTION OF CLIA

“HERE!” bellowed Jeremy Jarvis and so lustily that off toppled his battered old hat.

“Princess—ahoy!” cried Jessamy, and leaping nimbly afoot, was away to meet her.

“Now blow me tight,” mourned the Tinker, scrubbing at his small face with a very large and vivid bandana, “me all sooty wi’ my work!” Then his sharp, lean visage lit to glad welcome, his work-roughened hands went out in eager greeting as came one who made this little, sunny glade (I thought) the brighter by her mere presence.

“Oh Jerry!” she cried, kissing him fervently and no matter for grime or feeble protestations. “And Jessamy too—how glad I am to see you again! Six months and more . . . why so long, my dears?”

Now as she stood thus glad-eyed between these two old friends of her desolate childhood, I could not but think, yet again, how strangely beautiful she truly is, and thus marvel anew at the wonder old Time has wrought, transforming piteous waif into this splendid young creature aglow with joyous life from flaming hair to slim, proud-arching feet.

Neither child nor woman but rather, as it seems to me, some creature of Eld, remote and individual, wise with age-old knowledge of a half-remembered past, a creature of strange fancies and fierce contrasts like her long eyes so dark and slumberous that yet can seem so widely innocent or so all-discerning as sometimes to disquiet me. Tall as my shoulder, graciously formed, with hair ruddy gold, eyes and brows of midnight darkness, vivid lips that show the gentler by contrast with the resolute set of rounded chin—such is Clia. Part child, part sprite and so very much woman that she is frequently my mystification, as now; for, said she, divining my thoughts as she does so often of late:

“Stop pondering your Clia, my Oliver, and be busy. Fetch the plates and things from the cart. Jessamy, spread the cloth, I’m going to dish up. Supper is ready and smells delicious! Give me the fork, Jerry.”

Thus presently with Clia throned on the Tinker's old three-legged stool whereon she had perched so often as a child, we ate of the Tinker's stew right heartily, yet with frequent laughter and blithe talk of old days and scenes, reminding each other of this or that, recalling the past, discussing the present, hazarding guesses at the future until this joyous meal was ended. Even then we sat awhile in company with these old friends, which is surely the best company in all this world, until down went the sun and shadows began to creep.

And now, though it was still early, Clia rose, shook down her frills and furbelows, kissed them "good-bye until to-morrow", as ever has been her wont, slipped her hand within my arm and homeward we went together through fragrant, twilit woods where birds were piping their plaintive farewells to another day.

"Yonder," said I, with backward glance, "are truly great souls, Clia; time only mellows them. They talk as these birds sing, from their hearts, and as truly."

"Yes," she murmured, "I love their dear, simple ways."

"Of course!" said I, "because nearly all the best things in life are simple as Nature's self and as freely innocent of artful affectations."

"And they belong to my past, Oliver, like dear, old Dobbin, bless him—and you!"

"But the present——" I began.

"No,—the past!" she sighed pensively, "I love to think of it. We too were simpler then and nearer to each other, and very natural, and quite unaffected. My first pair of stockings . . . 'twas you put them on for me! You taught me to pray my forgotten prayers."

"And you used to say them . . . very sweetly!" said I.

"And with all my heart!" she nodded, "I was praying them to you, for you were my god in those days, Oliver . . . And my first doll! Do you remember giving it? And I speechless with joy. I named her Liz, and shall keep her always. She sleeps with me now sometimes, for she too is part of my past . . . yes, part of me and you. When I think of what I was and of what I might have become . . . the shame and misery . . . what you have made me _____"

"Not I alone, Clia——"

“Yes, you only! So when I look back through all these happy years to the poor, little misery I was and remember all the tender care that . . . lifted me from want and shame and taught me the pride and joy of life——”

“But,” said I, feeling very humbled by such words and therefore trying to deflect her thoughts, “don’t you ever wonder who were your real folk, my dear, your parents?”

“Naturally, sometimes, my Oliver. But you shall not change the subject, for what do they matter to me now? It was your strong hands were my defence, your arms cradled and cherished my childish weakness and terrors, and since then, Oliver . . . Oh, since then——”

“Since then,” I broke in, a little harshly because deeply moved, “I have endeavoured to be . . . a father to you, and——”

Now here, to my no little astonishment, she pounced at me; she halted in front of me to frown, she even gnashed her white teeth at me, fists clenched like any young virago.

“Odious!” she hissed.

“Good heavens!” I exclaimed, falling back a step, “what have I done now, miss, if you please?”

“Trampled!” she snapped, making her eyes extremely fierce and scornful. “Stamped and trampled like a hateful clumsy, brutish bull in a china shop—no, on holy ground!”

“Oh?” said I, at a loss. “Have I, my dear?”

“You have!” she retorted, fiercely. “You would! You always do! Also I find you perfectly ridiculous, and if you ask ‘why’, as you are going to, I answer—because, my poor, silly man, for all your size, your preposterous gravity and dignified austerity, you, my masculine wretch, will never—never be as old or wise as I am at this moment,—no! I was a little, suffering woman when you first took me to your care, aged by fear and hardship,—to-day I am a woman old enough to mother you,—ah yes, and to see deep into your great, clean, silly, simple heart and read your very thoughts! And what say you to this, my big, foolish man child? What can or—dare you say?”

“Nothing,” I answered, “except that you make me very—humble.”

“Ah!” sighed she, smiling at me, suddenly, “Now that I have reduced you to such proper meekness, sir, now then is the time to show you dear Robin’s letter.”

“A letter . . . from Robin? When did you receive it?”

“This afternoon. Let us sit down, here on this old, fallen tree. Come, you shall read it aloud to me and—be humble all the time.”

And when we were seated together, close side by side, she drew the letter from her bosom, that fragrant haven, and unfolding it, gave it to me.

“Now,” she commanded, “read it aloud to me, Oliver.”

Which mandate I obeyed forthwith, as follows:—

“ ‘Clee, my ever-adored, my own beloved one——’ ”

“Wait!” said she.

“Well,” I enquired. “Surely this is meant for your eyes only?”

“It is, of course, this is why I mean you to read it. And—you never call me ‘Clee’. Why?”

“Because I think your own name prettier.”

“Oh!” she murmured. “Then you may go on reading, and pray begin again.”

“Must I, my dear?”

“Indeed yes, why not?”

“It sounds extremely—fulsome.”

“It is!” she nodded. “All love letters are or should be, I suppose. Yes it’s very fulsome, yet I like it. So read it again and—slowly!”

“ ‘Clee,’ ” I read again, “ ‘my ever-adored, my own beloved one——’ ”

“Oliver, pray don’t—gabble! Now you may continue.”

“ ‘—this leaves me a gloomy retch up to my confounded ears in an ocean of trouble and wo——’ ”

“Oliver, you’ll notice he forgets to put an ‘e’ in his woe.”

“And a ‘w’ in his ‘wretch’,” I nodded.

“Yes,” sighed she, “our dear Robin always had trouble with his spelling, you’ll remember. But—go on!”

“ ‘—trouble and wo’, ” I read, “ ‘owing to having cut up rough over a blaggardly cove shall be nameless, floored a proctor, broken bounds and thrashed said blaggard. The proctor was a mistake, the blaggard deserved all

he got, and more. Consequently, dearest and best beloved, I have been gated, rusticated, hauled over the coals and in such devilish hot water generally, that the spirit hath rebelled and the soul, crying out against black injustice, soars free. In other words, dear one, I have severed the painter, hopped the perch, cut my stick and flown the confounded coop, in fine, taken French leave, shaking the dust of Alma Mater from my justly indignant boots. Though Clea dearest, to thee I candidly confess there is a devil in me when roused, that none but thou canst extirpate, drive forth and exercise. So I am coming home to thee thou dear angel that hast ever been my consolation and inspirer from the first and will be my ultimate salvation at the last and my nethermost gasp. Yes, dearest Clea, thou alone art my salvation, the one being can make me the man I would be and that Old Noll, Lord bless his solemn, old, golden nob, would have me be. And in re Old Noll, I look forward to our imminent meeting with no small apprehension for Noll can be so extreme Nollish, at times, and most absolute grim. So, my——’ ”

“Stop!” said Clia.

“Well?” I enquired again.

“ ‘Grim’ is perfectly right, Oliver, for so you can be, and sometimes you are indeed—awfully, absolute grim.”

“Surely not?” I questioned, in some dismay.

“Most surely—yes!” she nodded, “when you are really and truly ‘Nollish’!”

“ ‘Nollish’?” I repeated, pondering the word. “Pray what may this mean?”

“Well,” she answered, clasping hands about rounded knees and glancing up at me sideways, “you become truly Nollish, my dear, when you forget you are only thirty-seven and become the patriarchal great-grandfather supernaturally wise and unbelievably virtuous.”

“Oh?” I enquired, pondering this also.

“Yes!” she nodded, with the utmost finality.

“But——” I began.

“Pray,” said she, “go on with poor Robin’s letter.”

“ ‘So, my adored one——’ ” I read.

“He means me!” sighed Clia.

"I am aware of it," said I, and went on reading:

"—under these awkward circumstances, I suggest you instantly beard our old governor and——' "

"He means you!" sighed Clia.

"This also is sufficiently obvious," I answered.

"Then don't frown, Old Governor! And please continue."

"—use your never failing influence to sweeten and soothe him for me, calm him and thus ease the situation——' "

"Which," said Clia, "I hope I have accomplished. Have I or have I not, please?"

"This," I answered, "we can only know when this . . . highly characteristic epistle is read completely."

"Then go on, dear Oliver."

"However, my own beloved, come what may, my only hope, dream, thought and burning desire and constant, crying need is you, my salvation, to make you mine and myself forever yours alone and at once by wedding you with the utmost possible despatch and earliest moment. To which glorious purpose I propose tackling Old Noll on my arrival, hoping he will do the right thing by us and generously as usual, when I mean to prove myself worthy your love, his faith and my true gratitude for all his past bennyfactions, but always and ever yours most humbly and devotedly, Robin. P.S. I suggest you read this letter to him, I mean of course as much as you think he ought to hear.' "

"Well?" she demanded, soon as the reading was done, "Well, my Oliver?"

"Is it?" I enquired, frowning at this close-writ, somewhat blotty manuscript. Here she looked at me sideways again, smiling a little.

"Oliver, you have never signed yourself 'mine most humbly and devotedly', never once."

"Yet . . . I am!" said I.

"You . . . were!" she sighed. "Yes, through all the years until . . . lately."

"And am!" I repeated, "And shall be . . . through all the years to be."

"But recently, my Oliver, so aloofly, dignifiedly, preternaturally paternally!"

I smiled, whereat she laughed suddenly and was as suddenly grave, looking at me now with hint of tears in her so changeful, lovely eyes. Now as we sat thus, mute and very pensive, a blackbird in thicket nearby began to tune his evening song and very sweetly plaintive.

“Oh, Oliver,” she whispered, leaning nearer, “how wonderful it all is, how grandly solemn!”

“Yes,” I answered, tightening my clasp on the slim, vital hand that had crept into mine. “Yes!” I answered, and was silent, looking resolutely away from her loveliness, being all too conscious of her nearness and the inexpressible joy of it here in the sacred intimacy of this blessed solitude, indeed such deep, pervading happiness as my tongue might never speak. But now, and with that unknown, mysterious sense of hers, she seemed to divine something of my thoughts as she sometimes did when but a child,—and very disconcertingly often since.

“Yes,” she murmured, “I think, in such time and place as this, nothing matters in all the world, past or present or to come, except . . . just our two selves. Is this a selfish thought, I wonder, or very wise . . . and holy?”

“Selfish!” I answered. “Very selfish, so far as I am concerned.”

“Why, Oliver dear?”

“Oh . . . well . . . because, here in the country, is nothing to delight a . . . a young miss . . . no routs, balls or theatres and none to admire her beauty except rustic swains and simple folk.”

“How very, very true!” she sighed.

“Yes!” said I, rather vehemently, “I have been extremely remiss! Since you were presented at Court I should take you to London much oftener . . . you were a belle and toast . . . you need gaiety. By heavens, I will!”

“By heavens, you won’t!” she mimicked. “And shan’t!”

“Oh?” I enquired, turning to look at her.

“No!” she answered, shaking head at me. “Most certainly not!”

“But my dear child,” said I sternly, yet inwardly and very selfishly rejoicing, “my dear, you——”

“My foolish boy!” she retorted, “you are so ridiculously young or you would know without being told.”

“Let me remind you again, my child, that I am a middle-aged person, my years thirty-eight, almost, and you——”

“I am only just nineteen, sir—about! Though I may be much older since nobody knows my true age and nobody ever will. And though I am a ‘young miss’, I am not the kind of young miss for your noisy, wicked, wonderful, old London, dear me—no! Because, though I’m rather vain, extremely cattish, and alas—not a bit like the sweetly-sedate, meekly-decorous creature I seem and you suppose me, I am not the young miss to be kissed behind her fan in airless ballroom or dim conservatory, oh dear me no again! When I kiss I—prefer to do it . . . in twilit wood at evening time. And I’m not hinting, so pray don’t look so extreme distressed, my poor, dear one. And kisses, Sir Oliver and Governor, naturally bring us to the question of matrimony and—Robin.”

“Yes, but,” said I, evasively, “you certainly ought to meet more young people . . . spruce, young fellows your own age——”

“Why so I have, in Town, and do here in Sussex, Noll, so many and so often that instead of such dashing youths and lords of creation I much prefer . . . very aged, tottery, old gentlemen of about . . . say . . . thirty-eight almost! Nice, ancient, grandfatherly creatures fearfully grave and austere, with hair that curls for me to pull and twist and grey eyes that are so young and truly honest they betray his every thought—very nearly.”

“Then, Clia, you are content, perfectly happy?”

“Of course not, silly man! Who ever is? No, I am decidedly not perfectly content . . . and yet so very nearly that ’twill do . . . for the present.”

“Now what can you mean precisely?”

“Find out, my wise Governor! Find out if you can, Old Noll,” she answered, taking off my hat for a moment to ruffle my hair and putting it on again very carefully.

“As for all this,” she sighed, gesturing to the woodlands around us all aglow with the waning fire of sunset, “these dear solitudes . . . ah, don’t you remember how I loved them as a child? My woods and whispering trees! The windswept heath, the rolling Downs! The gleam of distant ocean! These indeed are my content, Oliver, my ceaseless joy. Hark to that blackbird, the mournful darling!”

And when we had listened a while and watched the shadows deepen:

“Why,” she demanded suddenly, “why must you be mournful as that blackbird?”

“On the contrary, child, I am strangely happy.”

“Then kiss me, Oliver, just once before the sun goes down and we leave this enchantment.”

So, leaning to her, I would have kissed her bright hair, but, somehow, found her lips instead; thus I kissed her as I had done often when she was a child.

“Was that a . . . fatherly kiss, my Oliver?”

“I . . . hope so! Yes . . . yes, certainly!” I stammered.

“No matter,” sighed she, smiling up at me askance, “tell me my duty instead,—can I, must I, shall I become poor Robin’s salvation?”

“Most surely!” I answered, somewhat impulsively.

“By wedding him at once? Yes or no?”

Now here I hesitated so long that she jolted me with dimpled elbow and repeated:

“Do I marry him? Yes or no? Speak your commands,—dearest Papa!”

“No!” said I.

“Ah-h-h!” she sighed, very softly, and remained quite dumb for perhaps half a minute. “Now,” demanded she, fronting me suddenly, to peer deep into my eyes, “Shall I tell you exactly what you are thinking,—shall I?”

“No!” I repeated, averting my gaze.

“Then tell me yourself or—I will!”

“Oh . . . well,” I answered, “I’m thinking you are too young . . . such ridiculous haste . . . it is quite too soon for such important matter . . . so irrevocable . . . it must not be hurried.”

“Yes,” she nodded, “but this is only half your thought and very badly expressed! What else, my child, tell dear grand-mama, do!”

Here again I hesitated and thus, to my relief, before I could frame suitable answer, we heard a rustle of leaves, surprisingly near, the tread of heavy feet, and beheld one, George Ash, approaching.

“Yes,” whispered Clia, noting my expression, “I detest the man also.”

CHAPTER III

WHICH IS A CHAPTER OMINOUS

A BLONDE young Hercules and something of rustic Lothario is George Ash, a man who farms his own land, rides to hounds on his own ‘bit of blood’, is esteemed a terror with his fists and whose reputation around the countryside is none too sweet. Moreover I saw that he had been drinking.

“Good evening, Squire!” said he, addressing me but with his bold gaze on Clia, and posing at her as very conscious of his fine figure and general good looks. “And you, Miss Everard,—Miss Clia, I hope you are as well as you show?” Here, he took off his too smart hat in manner too jaunty for my liking and showed his big, white teeth in a leer that came so nigh to enraging me that I spoke to him rather harshly:

“What are you doing on my land, Ash?”

“Yours, Squire, and yet—not yours!” he retorted, straddling his shapely, gaitered legs across the path. “I take pleasure, Squire, to remind you, Sir Oliver, as this be a public right-o’-way, always was and always will be.”

“Then,” said I, rising, “you may continue walking along it, and at once!”

“Aha!” he chuckled, very coarsely, and with knowing, evil wink, “Oho,—I see! Two’s company! . . . Well, good luck t’ ye——”

“Be silent!” said I, clenching fists instinctively. “Out of my sight—this instant!”

“Oh no, Sir Oliver Dale!” he grinned, shaking his head at me, “you can’t come the heavy over George Ash, squire or no. I don’t take orders from any man. I’ve heard as you’re pretty flash, Sir Oliver, and used to fancy yourself wi’ the mauleys, so if ye want to show our pretty lady some sport, I’m your man and—this to prove it——!”

So saying, he let drive at me with his left; but, easily avoiding the blow, I closed and instead of striking him, though greatly minded to, I lifted him from the path.

“Now,” said I, “go home until you’re sober.”

"Ecod!" he exclaimed, "You're a mort stronger than I guessed, Squire. Well, so much the better!" And he poised himself to assail me again; but this attack never came,—instead, his fierce visage took on a strangely harassed look, his powerful frame seemed to cower, as from the denser leafage nearby rose the doleful strains of a flute.

"You . . . you hear it?" he gasped, in voice altered as his looks, and glancing backwards across his shoulder. "'Tis Martin Croft's whistle! The crack-brain fool haunts me . . . follows and haunts me day and night . . . and always playing that same cursed tune at me . . . the 'Green Willow' . . . plays it at me night and day! One o' these times I . . . I'll smash his witless head for him . . . if he don't give over and leave me . . . in peace . . . this cursed tune . . . the 'Green Willow' . . ." And with another wild, backward glance that had something dreadful about it, George Ash went striding along the path at pace that soon took him out of sight.

"He seemed afraid, quite horrified!" said Clia, gazing after him beneath puzzled brows; as she spoke, the fluting died upon a note and from the thickets towards us came a small, puny figure that swung and hopped between great crutches, a figure of pain that was neither man nor boy, a shambling cripple whose pale, thin face was ageless and framed in wispy hair that might have been flaxen or snow-white.

"How are you, Martin?" enquired Clia, in her gentlest tone.

The cripple laughed bitterly and shook his hatless head.

"As well as ever I be, being what I be!" he answered in voice that had a sob in it, a voice unexpectedly soft and deep. "Poor Martin be only a—thing as no one takes account on, a blighted creeter as children mocks and no maid troubles to notice, nowadays. There was one once as did, but she's dead . . . poor Rose Thorn, pretty Rose, my flower o' love. She used for to sing 'Green Willow' afore she died . . . in the cruel water. Poor, sweet Rose, ah woeful sad were she and sang 'Green Willow' . . . and wept, she did, wept so grievous it broke my heart too! Sang 'Green Willow' the day she went to her death, for 'tis a very grievous song,—like this:

"Oh the green willow,
Willow! Willow! Willow!
And oh, the green willow
My garland must be.

"So she sang it, and salt tears in her pretty eyes, afore she gave herself to the cruel water. And what could I do? For there be things crueller than any water

as ever drowned anyone,—oh, wicked things big and strong, as laughs and forgets poor Rose and her tears till I plays her ‘willow song’. I’m small and weak but—aha! I’ve a fairy pipe give to me by them as comes to me in the woods of a night when moon be full, fairies all,—Botilda, Twinks, Womble and Wiggin. They give me this pipe—a pipe o’ power to fright the wicked and make ’em tremble when I plays ‘The Willow Song’ . . . like this, my lords and ladies, like this—hear ye all!”

And now, propped between his crutches, he set flute to lip and played again this most woeful of melodies, and very beautifully, I thought, but even while he played, his great, bright eyes shone and glittered at us through slow-gathering, painful tears . . . until his music broke upon a sob and then, before I might bestow the coin I had ready, as usual, he turned suddenly and hobbled away, thump-thumping on his heavy crutches until the leaves hid his desolate, woeful figure from our sight.

“Poor Martin!” sighed Clia. “The village folk say he’s mad and worse since Rose Thorn was drowned.”

“Come,” said I, drawing her hand within my arm, “Come, child, let us go home.”

CHAPTER IV

DESCRIBES A HAPPY REUNION

A GLORIOUS MAY morning glad with sun and the full-throated chorus of birds that came to us through the open lattice where we sat together in the library, Gregor M'Gregor and I.

A little greyer perhaps is Gregor but as square at shoulder and straight of back as ever; though at present, and despite this joyous morning, his long, melancholy visage (dark as it ever was with Celtic gloom and the sorrows of his tragic clan) showed rather more grimly dolorous than usual. He took snuff with a ferocious snort, dusted himself violently, glared at me beneath shaggy brows and emitted that odd sound never heard but from a Scot, that very peculiar exclamation I can only describe by saying it is neither sneeze, cough, hiccough, groan, nor snort, yet something of each, and, for lack of better description, I write it thus:

“Oomph—hoomph!”

“Yes, Greg,” I answered, rather despondently, “I expected you would think so.”

“Eh, but man Noll, I hae no breathed a worrud o’ ony thocht—yet.”

“But you hummed, Greg, and at such times I can read your mind as easily, almost, as Clia reads mine, sometimes.”

“Aweel, ’tis no vera deeficult under the caircumstances. Tis an unco’ wild and feckless lad yon! And rin awa’ frae the ’versity, has he! Ay, a wild wean, a wilfu’ bairn is oor Rabbie! And—abune a’—he’s for speeding this marriage whilk we, and mair especially yoursel’—hae aye regarded as a foregone conclusion,—eh Noll?”

“Y-e-e-s!” I answered, staring blindly at the many papers on the desk before me, “More or less, Gregor.”

“Though lately, Noll man, ray-ther less than more—eh?”

Now here, having no answer, I scowled at the papers and was dumb.

“And what says our bonny lass of it? What’s in that vera canny mind o’ her?”

"I hardly know. But she will be ruled by me . . . I think."

"Ay, she will that! She'll be ruled by you, Noll, but gang her ain gait sae cannily she'll lead ye her ain road afore ye ken."

"What do you think of this marriage, Gregor?"

"Sae muckle I say mickle!"

"You think I . . . ought not . . . to permit it?"

"I think ye'll hae sma' say i' the matter, forbye Rabbie's a braw laddie and vera lovable, ou ay he is that. But my dear fellow," quoth Gregor now becoming pedantically English, "since you ask me, I think—no, I'm perfectly assured that Clia will marry precisely whom she pleases, when she pleases or—not at all. A vera sonsy, canny lass! And there ye hae it!"

"Yes, but," said I, unhappily, "if she believes she can be his 'salvation' as he protests——"

"A dam' fiddlestick!" snorted Gregor, rapping his snuff-box resoundingly with bony knuckle.

"None the less, Greg, I repeat—if she so believes she will certainly marry him . . . for his salvation."

"Ay, and mebbe—her meesery! Salvation? Hoot awa' wi' sic gallimaufry o' cockaleery nonsense! A man maun be his ain salvation, ay! For, man Oliver, now mind I'm telling ye,—if all the loving care ye've lavished on our Robin cannot set him on the road to salvation, marriage never shall! No!" quoth Gregor, vehemently, "not even though he wed a holy angel bright with God's glory! Ay, and you may depend on this, Oliver, for 'tis a faithful saying,—there are no leading-strings to Heaven, no man may be charmed or hocused into Paradise, he must win his way up by his own pain and effort—as well you know! If Robin be truly a man, then a true man he will become, the greater good of him shall cast forth the lesser evil. So cease your worrying and take your comfort in this—our Clia will wed the man she loves—and him only, ay and—despite himself, may be."

"And what do you mean by that last, Gregor?"

"Losh man, 'tis yourself must guess. And now, what o' the Earl o' Storringdean's offer for Deepdene and Dapplemere?"

"No, Greg. I shall never sell that property, it was part of my mother's dowry, as you know."

“Ay, ay,—but the man offers vera guid money, y’ken, full value and a wee over, tae my thinking.”

“However, we do not sell. And especially to Storringdean.”

“Ay, he’s no a vera pleasant pairson, by accounts.”

“How are things in the village, Greg?”

“Too pairfect, Noll, much too pairfect!”

“Now, Greg, how is this possible?”

“You’ve left ’em nothing to grieve on or complain aboot, never a leaky roof or reeking lum, so they complain o’ one another!”

“Gregor, what do you know concerning the death of poor young Rose Thorn?”

“The old, pitiful tale, Oliver. Young beauty, loving too well, and too confiding for her ain weal . . . left by cowardly wastrel in the lurch. . . . Shame and death for herself and unborn innocent. Ay, a pitiful, woefu’ story that shall be told o’er and o’er again while there be sweet trusting women and base, unworthy coward men!”

“Yes,” I sighed, “poor child, I’d heard something of it and guessed more. And Widow Croft’s crippled son Martin, what of him?”

“Ah, the puir lad loved her sair, Noll, and when she killed hersel’ it turned his wits, seemingly.”

“Do you think him mad indeed, Greg?”

“Ay and no. I should say he was fey, thrawn and boglerid, ay.”

“Is there anything we can do for him?”

“No. His mother has her wee shop and does vera weel,—and better since ye reduced a’ the rents and for no reason in this worruld that any human intelligence can detairmine—except to make your lazy people lazier and mair independent, confound their hides——”

“And happier, Greg!”

“I doot it, laddie, I doot it sair, forebye——”

“Tell me, Gregor, was there any suspicion of the heartless rogue who deceived poor Rose Thorn?”

“Ay, twa-three, for the lass was unco’ bonnie ye’ll mind. But she would never tell, though folk mostly suspicioned . . . him that farms Barkstead.”

“George Ash?”

“Himself!” nodded Gregor.

At this moment we were interrupted by sounds on the broad terrace beyond the open window,—stifled, very lady-like screams, laughter, and a plaintive voice unexpected, yet joyfully familiar:

“Oh good gracious! Put me down . . . fie on you! Such an exhibition . . . my limbs . . . so undecorous! Oh gracious me!”

“Your legs are pictures, Aunt!” cried a laughing voice. “Come and show ’em to our Governor! Come and be kissed!”

And presently through the open casement appeared two very pretty feet and ankles, frills, laces, silks, and a deep, plumed bonnet and beneath it the laughing, pleading face of Saphronia, and she cradled in Robin’s powerful young arms.

“Governor,” said he, setting her down within the room, “here’s someone needs kissing, so—embrace her, sir.”

The which I did forthwith; whereupon with airy flourish to me and wink at Gregor, my young rascal vanished. And when Saphronia had smoothed, patted, preened and shaken herself like small, dainty bird smoothing ruffled plumage, down she sat between Gregor and me, bubbling over, as it were, with cheery talk and quite unquenchable vitality:

“Oh, my dears! Oh, Oliver, Noll, Olly, my own dear boy! What a morning! What a world! How well you look. Gregor too! Think of it, Oliver, two whole years since I last beheld you! Right round this teeming, wonderful world, Inigo and I! And oh the wobbly ships! The monstrous mountains and things! The marvels we have seen—thank Goodness we’re safe back with you all in dear, Old England! And, oh Noll, Oh Olly—our Clia! What superb creature! So stately! Such poise! Such vivid, vital beauty! We heard she had been presented, made her début, and such stir! And no wonder! But still so adorably her own, sweet lovable self! Quite unspoiled, thank God—and you, of course! My Inigo is out yonder now, worshipping at her shrine, he ever had an eye, you know! Ah, those days at ‘The Waterman!’ There is still a something elusive and quite elfin about her, Noll. I mean our Clia, something of the hamadryad.”

“And Robin,” I enquired, as she paused for breath, “what do you think of Robin?”

"Oh, what a burly wretch! But ah—what attractive wretch! 'Tis truly wonderful what you have done for him, Noll, my two years' absence makes it more apparent. And his air so assured, himself so polished, and his little, snubby nose that was, so developed and handsome now!"

"And pray how is Inigo?"

"Just—Inigo! His own, dear self—only dearer . . . though becoming a little—bald, alas! Though he cares not nor heeds in the slightest. But I am applying a lotion, my dears, a rare specific I discovered in Paris, and am watching for the effects with anxious, nay almost a breathless solicitude! By the way Deborah sends her love, we passed this week-end with them at Charlewood, and Roland desires you to ride over someday soon, I just forget precisely why or what for. How beautiful she keeps, motherhood suits her, Deborah I mean, and yet a little sad, I thought, though it may have been merely a migraine. And their son Oliver is like her. Cynthia takes after Roland, don't you think? And talking of him, I mean Roland, he frightened me extremely this morning, banging away with his dreadful pistols and things——"

"Pistols?" I repeated, sitting up.

"Yes, duelling-pistols, a new pair, he said he was testing them, and terribly accurate he seemed, for I watched him, so did Deborah, and quite worried, and no wonder, poor soul."

"Why?" I enquired, as again Saphronia paused for breath.

"Well, it seems Roland has fallen out with his neighbour, Lord Storrington, quite desperately. And Roland was always such a bloodthirsty fire-eater, indeed a perfect salamander, and though the earl of Storrington is by all accounts an odious wretch yet this should be no reason for shooting the wretch and upsetting his sweet wife, I mean Deborah of course. So, Noll dear, the sooner you go over and settle things, as you have done before, the better. . . . And there's my Inigo! Come in, my dear, through the casement as I did, come and greet our Oliver, bless him!"

So in came Inigo, hale and bronzed with travel but otherwise much as he ever had been and as so fully described in that narrative called *The Crooked Furrow*,—save that now he neither drooped nor languished and in his eyes the light of a deep content. And after him presently came Clia and Robin.

Here then we sat in happy converse like the old and loving friends we are. And if I was too conscious of Clia and Robin, how close they sat, of his

adoring looks and their murmurous asides, who was there to notice? Surely not they.

So was laughter and cheery talk, especially as regards Saphronia, God bless her! while I looked on, asking a question occasionally and listened rather dumbly as is perhaps my unhappy wont.

“Tell me, Inigo,” said I, suddenly, under cover of the general conversation, “what is this I hear from Saphronia of trouble between Roland and Storringdean?”

“Why Noll, as you probably know, there has been bad blood between them for some time, you knew of this?”

“Yes,” I answered, “but what now?”

“It seems they met in Charlewood village at ‘The Matravers Arms’ and quarrelled so fiercely that the earl flourished his riding-whip, so Roland promptly floored him . . . and, well . . . I have an idea they meet this evening . . . at sunset.”

“God forbid!” I exclaimed.

“Amen!” said Inigo. “I hear Lord Storringdean is pretty deadly.”

“Yes, but so is Roland!”

“So then, Oliver, if they meet it will be a very ugly business!”

“They must not meet,” said I. “They shall not.”

“But who’s to prevent them, dear fellow?”

“I shall.”

“You, Oliver . . . but how, man, how?”

“God only knows this, Inigo. But, come what may, Roland . . . ah, for his wife and children’s sakes, shall not fight. Fight? Ha, what honest word for such foul, murderous business!”

“Oliver and Inigo!” cried Saphronia, gaily. “Lord bless them, how furtively they gabble and whisper! My dears, Clia insists we stay the week and I should love to. So shall we, Inigo?”

“Yes, my dear, of course . . . most happy.”

“Why, then we’ll leave you three alone a while. Come children, out into the sunshine.”

“Och, man alive!” moaned Gregor when I told him of this troublous matter. “This is fair terrible! Roly’s juist daft, ay he is so! And you, Oliver, be canny now! Ha, damnation—to go getting ye’self killed in another’s quarrel would be precisely your fool nature! Let be, man, let be for God’s sake!”

“But Greg, what of his wife? What of Deborah and the children?”

“They maun thole his folly, ay they must make the best o’t, ’tis nae business o’ yours, damme!”

“But I think it is,” said I, uneasily.

“Ay, you would!” he retorted fiercely. “I’m telling ye let be—I’ll ride over to Charlewood this afternoon.”

“And I’ll ride now,” said I, rising. “Thank God there’s time!”

“And leave your guests——”

“You’ll be here, Greg.”

“Na na, I shall gang wi’ ye, ma mannie, to keep an unco’ canny ee on ye. Ay so, damme,—I’ll no’ hae ye running your fule’s head against a pistol ball.”

“Nonsense, Gregor!”

“Ay, devilish nonsense! So with you I go, Oliver, and there’s an end of all argument.”

“Why then, while I get into boots and buckskins go you, Greg, and bid them saddle our horses. Inigo, old friend, you’ll forgive my leaving you, under the circumstances?”

“Of course, of course, dear fellow. If I can be of any least service——”

“Yes, by making excuses to the others for my sudden disappearance,—especially Clia . . . and Robin. Tell them nothing.”

So saying, I hurried away to prepare for the road.

CHAPTER V

WHICH RECOUNTS WORDS BY THE WAY!

WE mounted hastily, Gregor and I, in a hurry to be gone before we were met and questioned; and, leaving the stables by circuitous track, were presently out of sight of the house. And now, as we rode the leafy ways, we began to talk of what was uppermost in our thoughts:

“And how,” demanded Gregor, riding near, “how d’ye propose to tackle Roly?”

“Chance must decide,” I answered.

“He was aye a wilfu’ body, vera detairmined!”

“So am I, Greg.”

“Ay, y’are that! But how if he’ll no listen to your arguments?”

“Then I must handle him.”

“What way, Oliver?”

“My fist.”

“Ah—punch him, is it?”

“Hard!” I nodded.

“Ay. And how then?”

“Ride for talk with Storringdean.”

“Ha,—to fight?”

“No, to mediate,—talk reason.”

“And suppose he refuses to listen?”

“However,” said I, between shut teeth, “he shall not meet Roland. No, even if I . . .”

“Force him to fight yourself, ay! And suppose he kills you?”

“Well . . . I’m unmarried, Greg.”

“The more fool you, damme! You might ha’ been, whenso ye would. And ye know it!”

“If you mean . . . Clia——”

“Of course I do!”

“Then I’ll never take such advantage of her womanhood because of her childish gratitude, never!”

“Fine, fine and noble!” he snorted. “And damned ridiculous! Gratitude—the devil! Clia’s a woman now and there’s a light in her eyes, when she looks on ye, that’s brighter and better than gratitude, ay—as ye’d see for ye’sel’ if not so wilfully blind, ye chivalric doddipoll!”

“Nonsense!” said I.

“And sheer dam’ folly!” quoth he. “D’ye want the poor lass to come creeping to ye on her pretty knees, begging ye to wed and wife her?”

“Yes!” said I, “yes, by God I do! And . . . God only knows how much! As it is, I’m more than twice her age and so must and will seem father instead of . . . well, anything else . . . unless . . .”

“On her knees, eh?” repeated Gregor, scowling on me askance. “Losh man, ’tis proud stubborn, tyrannous adorer ye are! Your heart aflame for her, your eyes so hot and your words so cold! Oh laddie what a splendid fool y’ are!”

“I am at least grateful for the adjective!” said I.

Gregor merely snorted.

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH I PROCEED TO ACT

IT was high noon when the road, climbing a steepish hill, brought us in sight of Charlewood Manor, this goodly, ancient house throned very stately amid its noble park.

“Lord!” exclaimed Gregor, as we reined up to breathe our horses and view the prospect before us. “Wi’ such home, such lovely wife and bairns ’tis none but muckle fule wad risk the losing of a’, ay and sae wantonly!”

“Yes,” said I, pondering, “so listen now and I’ll tell what you must do if things go as I expect . . .”

And when I had spoken and he had groaned and shaken his head at me, we rode on down the hill.

Scarcely had we entered the park gates than we espied young Oliver, my namesake and Roland’s son and heir, astride a piebald pony; catching sight of us he hooted my name joyously and came galloping up to us, the complete horseman from windblown curls to small top-boots, and, despite boyish grin, very like his beautiful mother.

“Hallo, Uncle Oliver!” he piped, reining up in full career, much as Roland himself might have done. “Hallo, Mr. Greg! I’m nine yesterday an’ this is my new pony what papa gave me an’ I call him Rex . . . an’ this is the saddle what you sent me an’ thanks awflee, Uncle! And this is the whip from you, Mr. Greg, an’ a reel gold knob on to it an’ I love it, so thank you too! An’ isn’t my Rex a beauty?”

“Splendid!” said I, smiling down into this happy young face.

“Aha!” quoth Gregor. “And all fire and mettle from muzzle to tail, a bonny prancer, my Noll!”

“Yes, yes—isn’t he, sir!” cried the boy, ecstatic. “Just roll your ogles at his props, twig his cannons and pasterns!”

“Losh, ma wee mannie, ye’re mighty knowing horseman!”

“Yes I am, sir,—I hope! Though I learned this from old Ned, our head groom.”

“And where is your father, Oliver?” I enquired.

“Coming with me for a ride, Uncle. I’m just waiting while he wipes mamma’s tears an’ comforts her a bit, like all husbands should——”

“What, is she—crying, boy?”

“Oh yes. She’s wept a lot to-day because she’s ’fraid papa’s going to be shot by old Storrington an’ I know ’cause I happened to hear them talking all ’bout it only they didn’t know, o’ course. But a lady must weep an’ a gentleman must fight when honour demands,—that’s what my papa said an’ so I say too.”

“So he’s in the house, your father?”

“Yes, Uncle—I’ll show you. Oh an’ won’t they be glad to see you—my eye!” And off he galloped before us, shouting as he rode:

“Papa, oh father, here’s my Uncle Oliver an’ Mr. Greg!”

Thus, before we could dismount, forth came Roland to greet us, and so gaily, with look so entirely carefree and joyous that I instantly suspected the worst, since Roland (as I know only too well) is never so light-hearted as when running some hazard, small or great.

“Well, Old Sobersides!” he laughed, reaching up to grasp my hand. “So here you are when most needed, as usual! And deuced well you’re looking! Have you had ’em on with Jessamy lately? Is he with you this month, or is it next?”

“Yes,” I answered, dismounting rather heavily. “Jessamy is at Abbeymead with Jerry Jarvis, though we haven’t boxed.”

“Lord forgive you! What sinful waste of golden opportunities! And how is it with you, Greg old fellow? By heavens you show so confounded glum and grim it does me a power o’ good! Your long, devilish lugubrious old phiz reminds me of other days. . . . Tom, ha Tom!” he cried to the smart stable lad who had come hurrying at sound of us. “Tom, take their horses, rub them down and stable them! You’ll stay the night, of course, Noll. Now come in, you old ruffians and we’ll crack a bottle.”

“Wait!” said I, and slipping my hand within Roland’s arm, I led him aside until we were out of sight from the house.

“Eh? What the devil is it now?” he demanded. “Why the infernally portentous brow and so forth?”

“Roland,” said I, “what damnable thing are you about to do?”

“Ha, damme!” he exclaimed, peevishly. “So you’ve heard, have you? The last person I wished to know of it ’til the business was over! Saphronia, of course! That woman’s tongue goes like a clattering coachwheel . . . she babbles, she chits and chats like any confounded——”

“Are you going out with Storrington?”

“Well, since Saphronia’s peached,—yes, I am!”

“When?”

“To-night, at sunset, if you must know. Well, now what the devil are you glowering at?”

“I’m thinking of Deborah’s tears.”

Roland stamped spurred heels and cursed until, meeting my look, he scowled on me very fiercely instead.

“See here,” quoth he, aggressively, “don’t come any of your virtuous reproaches or damned sermonizing——”

“No!” said I.

“I go my own way as I always have and always shall, d’you hear?”

“Yes,” said I. “But your way is Deborah’s also and should be a way of joy and happiness instead of grief and misery——”

“Stop your cursed dismal croaking and understand I will brook no least interference in my affairs from you or any dashed, breathing soul!”

“Not even the pleading of your wife——”

“You will leave her out of this!”

“Impossible!” said I. “She, being your wife, is part of yourself, the peril you dare so lightly is hers also!”

“Namby-pamby drivel, Mr. Tom Fool! Were you any other than the prim, sanctimonious, old buffer you are you’d know a gentleman must fight where his personal honour is concerned, yes—and the women expect it and scorn him if he don’t.”

“So said your little son,” I sighed, “or much like it.”

“Certainly,” Roland nodded, “because he also is—a gentleman bred and born, and therefore a man of honour!”

“And for this,” said I, frowning in my turn, “for this selfish folly, this vain thing you call personal honour, Deborah must weep and possibly be

widowed?”

“Precisely, if Fortune so determines, for a gentleman, my poor clod, dies willingly for such ‘folly’—if he must. And be damned for a snivelling Job’s comforter, moaning your infernal Jeremiads, a croaking, pessimistical figure of confounded gloom!”

“Yes!” said I. “And with reason. This egotistical pride you miscall honour——”

“Ha, so——” cried he, rather wildly, “yourself being so removed from such thing as honour would never stoop or hazard your skin to fight for it!”

“No!” said I. “Never with your murderous steel or hair-triggers!”

“Then, for the present, you are extremely out of place, here!”

“Entirely!” I answered.

“Shall I send for your horse?”

“Pray do—though first . . . Roland, is there no possible way in which this miserable business may be compro——”

“None!” he cried fiercely. “No damme! The fellow would have struck me with his whip, so I dropped him with my fist, and very prettily!”

“Were you and he alone?”

“Yes. Why?”

“No matter. And you will not let me see Storringdean and endeavour to mediate——?”

“I’ll see you hanged first!”

“Then,” said I, suddenly, “look up, Roland! Up into the sky above us—there!” Instinctively he raised his head and in that moment I smote him, hard and true, and caught him as he fell; and feeling his vigorous body all limp, and flaccid in my embrace, I knew the blow was all-sufficient, and whistled. So came Gregor, according to my past instructions, and between us we bore Roland’s senseless form into a small, disused shed in remote corner of the old herb garden. Here I gagged and bound him securely.

“Lord save us all!” moaned Gregor. “What now?”

“Well,” I answered, setting a folded sack beneath Roland’s unconscious head, “while I lie to Deborah and set her mind at ease the best I may, do you see our horses saddled and with Roland’s Saladin, then bring them here yourself, Greg.”

So to the house I went and was presently looking down into Deborah's brown eyes, beautiful as always, though just now dimmed by recent tears.

"Oh Oliver," said she, giving me both her hands in her own pretty, eager manner, "thank God you are here! You have seen Roland?"

"Oh yes," I answered cheerily as I might.

"Where is he?"

"We are riding over for word with Storrington. I have great hopes this sorry business may be averted——" Then she was clinging to me, her tear-wet cheek pillowed on my breast.

"God bless you, Oliver!" she sobbed. "Save him for me . . . you must or . . . I shall die too! If anyone can save him from himself it . . . is you, my dear. Go, Oliver,—I would go too, but . . . he will not hear of it . . . I must wait instead and . . . pray." So I kissed her troubled brow and left her upon her knees.

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH IS OTHER ACTION AND TO BETTER PURPOSE

“SIR,” said the flunkey, bowing and returning my card, “Lord Storringlean regrets he is engaged, begs you’ll excuse and can see no one to-day.”

“Go back,” said I, “and tell his lordship the gentleman he expects this evening at sunset, cannot possibly come, and that I am here to explain why.”

“Oomph—hoomph!” sighed Gregor, as the servant departed. “And how if this Storringlean man still refuses ye?”

“I shall find some window and break in, Greg, for see and speak with him I will!”

“Breaking and entering’s felony, Noll!”

“No matter!” said I.

“Lord save us a’!” moaned Gregor.

“Sir,” murmured the footman, reappearing, “his lordship will spare you a few minutes. Be pleased to walk this way.” So, bidding Gregor wait me, I followed whither I was led.

Lord Storringlean is a lean man whose features run to nose and chin, his smooth, pale face looks forth somewhat sardonically from between whiskers glossy black and with a certain stark ferocity of curl; he was and still is very much a dandy and in his hot youth had been what was known as a ‘buck’.

He rose to receive me with a chill graciousness; he bowed very ceremoniously. I did the same. Then I took the chair he proffered, we bowed again and thereafter sat mutely inspecting each other, for hitherto we had met so seldom as to be almost strangers.

“Well, Sir Oliver,” said he, at last, caressing his whiskers with a tenderness that seemed only to render them the fiercer, “needless to say I am surprised, and await your explanation with a very definite interest. Your cousin, Mr. Verinder, is of such deadly repute that I have been busied making provision against certain—unpleasant eventualities that may ensue, letters and so forth—and, sir, I detest writing! But now you suggest my

labour is vain. Yet Verinder is of such nature he would permit nothing on earth to interfere—except sudden illness, of course. He is very well, I hope and trust?”

“He is not ill, sir,” I answered. “At least—not dangerously, though, at this moment he lies perfectly helpless——”

“Good God! Sir, you alarm me! Has he met with an accident? Is it a stroke, a fit?”

“It was—a stroke, sir.”

“Poor, poor fellow!” exclaimed Lord Storrington, and very sincerely, I thought. “Pray carry him my sympathy, Sir Oliver, and say that I shall be happy to wait his own time, to defer our—ah—proposed meeting until he finds himself perfectly recovered and able. Tell him—no, by Jove, I’ll positively scribble him a line,—though I always smear and blot myself most damnably!”

“Wait, sir!” said I, sure now of the man’s sincerity and feeling therefore somewhat guilty. “There is more to explain, but before doing so, I beg to know if anything can be done, or suggested, that may smooth over and right this most unhappy misunderstanding between you and my Cousin Roland?”

“Ah no, no!” murmured his lordship, showing teeth the whiter by contrast with hair and whisker. “There is no misunderstanding, sir, quite the reverse,—indeed all was perfectly straightforward and everything arranged,—the time, place, surgeon, seconds, who are actually in conference now, I believe . . . And all to be again, the matter deferred until Verinder is well. A pity! A great pity! But poor fellow—a stroke, you say, and quite helpless?”

“Quite!” said I. “He is tied up very securely,—in fact a prisoner,—my prisoner, sir.”

Lord Storrington widened his eyes on me and gaped, or very nearly, he clutched himself by either whisker and rose, much as if he had lifted himself thus bodily from the chair.

“Prisoner . . . ?” he repeated, faintly. “Yours . . .”

“Indeed, my lord! Rather than let him hazard his life so wantonly, and he a husband and father,—I hit him while he was not looking, struck him sufficiently hard to stun him,—I gagged, bound, and hid him where none is like to find him, for some time at least.”

Lord Storrington sat down again and suddenly, as if his legs had failed him, and sat gazing on me blankly, a very image of speechless astonishment.

Therefore I continued my explanation, somewhat hurriedly and a little at random:

“Sir, my cousin Roland has a little son . . . and daughter . . . I left his wife in tears . . . she believes Roland is now here with you. . . . She is praying God to intercede between you and her husband. Can such prayers be in vain? Well, my lord?”

“But, sir . . . sir . . .” he stammered, “your cousin struck . . . actually struck me! No man of honour may pass over such affront . . . it is impossible! I could not . . . I cannot! I dare not!”

“Nor shall you,” said I, “if you will allow me to take his place. And thus you may fight him by proxy.”

“Proxy?” repeated Storringdean. “You . . . ? But I’ve heard Verinder declare you scarcely know one end of a duelling pistol from the other!”

“I am also unmarried, sir!”

“But, Sir Oliver . . . Dale, I have no least cause for quarrel with you
_____”

“I can easily provide one,” said I.

“Preposterous!” he exclaimed, angrily. “Ridiculous and most absurd!”

“Yes,” said I, heartily, “duelling always is!”

His lordship rose with dignity, the better to frown at me.

“Sir,” said he, his face and whiskers more sardonic and ferocious than ever, “your suggestion is as irregular as it is extravagant! The whole situation is too egregious for my consideration. Roland Verinder transgressed against me unforgivably and must answer for it, according to the code, so soon as he is able.”

“My lord Storringdean,” said I, advancing a step in my earnestness, “I do not ask what provocation you gave him, but I do entreat that if blood only may wash your honour clean, that blood may be mine. I beg this, sir, for the sake of my cousin Roland’s wife and children——”

“Enough, sir!” cried his lordship peremptorily. “I’ll hear no more! Such pleading is——”

A crash of breaking glass behind me, and, turning hastily, I saw the lattice swing wide and, beyond this, the face of Clia. Then somehow, despite

the folds of her long riding habit, she was in the room; she frowned on me, she looked at Lord Storringdean and addressed him, very gravely serene:

“Sir, I trust my entrance was sufficiently dramatic to honour the occasion properly. For I am here in matter of life or death,—your death, my lord, or Sir Oliver’s death, or the death of Uncle Roland. Of all this dying, it seems you are the arbiter——”

“Nay but,” his lordship expostulated, “my dear Miss Everard . . . Miss Clia, I must protest——”

“Oh, you shall, my lord, you shall indeed, but first, pray suffer me to state my case and do honour to this . . . this very masculine and therefore bloodthirsty occasion as only a mere weak feminine creature may. Have I your permission?”

His lordship bowed with grace.

“Well then,” she continued, “it appears that you, my lord, like very passionate, naughty boy, threatened Uncle Roland with your whip, and that Uncle Roland, like even naughtier boy, actually struck you! Consequently, for this silly boyish show of bad temper, you are going out, like grown men and gallant gentlemen, to maim or kill each other . . .”

Here she paused for breath and here Lord Storringdean, avoiding her level, dispassionate gaze, glanced at me, the floor, the ceiling, drew himself up, cleared his throat portentously, but, before he might utter a word, she continued:

“But, my dear Lord Storringdean, Uncle Roland has a wife and family, Sir Oliver Dale has neither—as yet, no not—as yet! And therefore he came galloping here to beg and plead you would shoot him instead. Oh, yes, I knew! Besides, I listened there outside the window. So, my lord, ’tis now for you to choose whom you will shoot or be shot by! But, sir, here now am I and, forgetting your horsewhip, I plead your acceptance of my most humble apologies for Uncle Roland’s blow—behold me here at your feet, my lord, your very meek and lowly suppliant!”

And here, to my fierce mortification and his profound embarrassment, she sank before Storringdean on her knees.

“Dale!” he exclaimed. “Great good God—this is devastating! Miss Everard, pray do not so . . . so abase yourself! Oh, great Jupiter Olympus! Miss Clia, no no! Sweet Innocence, I beg you won’t——”

“You may call me ‘Clia’!” she sighed.

“Clia, then—my dear child, I beg you will not so confound me! Rise, I implore.”

“Never!” she retorted. “Here will I remain until I sink and swoon at your feet unless, like the gallant gentleman I believe you to be, you write and retract your challenge, and be done with this wicked business before you kill Uncle Roland, or he you, and my Aunt Verinder breaks her poor heart with grief.”

“But . . . oh great heavens, child—how may I?” he exclaimed, almost wildly. “Such things are not done . . . cannot be! ’Tis beyond nature, unthinkable, impossible——”

“Yes,” she answered, “to any man but you! Yet to some all things are possible—almost! And you are such man! I believe you will not, I know you cannot, let a woman plead in vain!”

“Do you,—ha, do you, b’gad!” he exclaimed and with such altered look that even his whiskers seemed tamed to an unwonted meekness. “And if, child,—I say if I yield to your pleading—how then?”

“Then you may write informing Uncle Roland that his niece refuses to allow you shedding his blood, and that instead of his cruel foe you are willing to become his kind friend for his sake, your own, and the sake of . . . your very grateful and loving Clia. . . . Will you, Lord Storringlean . . . will you indeed?” Now as she looked up at him, he gazed down on her; and in this moment his sardonic features were quite transfigured by a smile that seemed to sweep his grim cynicism and cold reserve clean away, as, reaching down both hands, he lifted his lovely suppliant to her feet.

“I will!” said he. “Yes, by Venus and her downy doves, you win! Clia, most sweet and guileful innocent, it shall be done! I’ll write Verinder as you desire—no, by Jingo we will compose the letter together! Dale, my dear fellow, be good enough to pull the bell. We’ll have up a bottle worthy to toast our bewitching peacemaker. For bewitched truly I am, Clia, and all the better—ay begad and younger for your vitalizing presence. God bless thee, child!” And he kissed the hands he still held with a courtly reverence far above mere gallantry.

So, while I watched them and wholly unregarded, down they sat, blooming cheek by bewhiskered jowl, and together, after no little argument and discussion, composed the following letter which Storringlean read out to me with great gusto and more than one chuckle:

“‘My dear Verinder, instead of killing or maiming each other over mere boyish tantrum—as saith your charming and clear-headed niece Clia,—I write to withdraw my challenge—let who say what they will—and proffer you my friendship instead. To which purpose I hope to see you at Dale’s place Abbeymead on the afternoon of Wednesday next the fifteenth instant, when we will, yourself I hope willing, clasp hands to ratify a friendship and neighbourliness which, I am happy to think, may endure. As to that boundary and right-of-way which, if I remember, was the long past original cause of our falling-out, I say damn it. Your obedient and hearty well-wisher, Storringdean.’ ”

This letter duly sealed was given to Clia; then the bottle having made its appearance, we filled our glasses, Storringdean and I, and honoured his toast, drinking together in such jovial and kindly fellowship as left me somewhat dazed and rather more laconic than usual which mattered no whit since Clia talked for me and herself also, and Storringdean so unfeignedly sincere and genial as set me to marvelling I should have so misjudged the man.

Thus it was as a friend that we took leave of him with promises of future meetings and hearty good wishes and a mutual esteem.

But hardly were we mounted and away than Clia, riding between Gregor and myself, turned on me like the veriest young fury:

“How could you?” she cried. “How dared you! And such odious stealth, so wickedly sly! To creep away so soon as my back was turned! To slink and skulk and crawl and creep away like a great snake in the grass! Oh, most abominable!”

“Goodness me!” I exclaimed.

“No,—vile and sinful you!” she retorted. “To attempt such wickedness!”

“Wickedness?” I enquired.

“Yes,—devilish, hellish wickedness.”

“If you mean——” I began.

“Of course I do!” she answered, raging at me. “If Lord Storringdean had accepted your hateful offer you would certainly have been wounded or killed . . . and then——”

“Not necessarily,” said I. “And besides——”

“Oh!” she cried, glaring at me. “Indeed there are times when I yearn to scratch and bite you—hard! And this is one, so do not try me too far—with your vain and pitiful excuses!”

“But, my dear——”

“Don’t—do not ‘dear’ me, sir! And pray be hushed!”

“Very well,” said I. But in this same moment she was at me again.

“And—I think you are the most selfish man alive!”

“Oh?” said I, pondering this.

“Yes. Yes!” she cried, repeating the word, “suppose you had been killed, what of me, what of me, sir—and Robin, of course?”

“Well,” I answered, “you would, I expect, in due season have married one another and——”

“Oh!” she gasped, recoiling as if I had struck her; and then I thought she would have been at me with her whip, but, instead, she turned away and actually began to laugh and very unpleasantly, I thought.

“Greg,” cried she. “Oh Gregor, look at our heroical Nollish desperado that loves us all so much he is eager to toss his life away and be done with us.”

“Ridiculous!” said I.

“It was!” she retorted, bitterly. “And pray why did you run such ridiculous risk? Was it for sake of Uncle Roland or—Aunt Deborah?”

Now at this I began to laugh, but, seeing how she frowned, I did the same and deigning no answer, rode in silence while she hummed very blithely, and Gregor, glancing from one to other of us, smiled in his hand.

But after we had gone some distance thus, said she:

“You may speak, my Nollish one, when you have well and discreetly considered your answer.”

Finding me still unresponsive she sighed mournfully, and changed her note:

“At least then try to be grateful to me for winning Lord Storrington to friendship! Are you not grateful to me, Oliver,—just a little?”

“Infinitely!” said I, and with such fervour that, meeting my eyes, she actually flushed.

“Ah, my dear,” she murmured, “you can say so very much with just one word that it overwhelms me—almost!”

“I have been wondering,” said I, “how in the world you chanced upon the scene so very opportunely . . . exactly how you contrived to . . . discover _____”

“Oh!” sighed she. “Ask Greg!”

“Ah,—you mean——?”

“Havers, man!” quoth Gregor. “Knowing what was in the mind o’ ye, I juist informed our bonny lass that you were riding to your death. . . .”

CHAPTER VIII

OF NO PARTICULAR INTEREST

It was in glow of sunset that we came again in sight of Charlewood; and here I drew rein to glance down at the bruised knuckles of my right hand, and from these to Clia, a little apprehensively.

“Yes,” she answered, reading my look, “he will be like a wounded bear, a ravening lion, a furious tiger! Oh yes, Uncle Roland will be—distinctly annoyed.”

“Therefore,” said I, “he must remain secured until I have explained, he must listen to reason——”

“He won’t!” said Clia, very positively. “No, he will want to bite you. So Greg must explain and do the untieing while you and I show Aunt Deborah this letter and prepare to receive him—don’t you agree, Greg dear?”

“Ou ay!” he moaned. “It would be mysel’! Aha, furious tigers and ravening lions! Aweel, a man can dee but once!”

“And take your own time, Greg dear, loose him by degrees.”

“Ay, I will that, my lass!” So Gregor turned aside towards the distant herb garden, while we rode forward along the avenue. But scarcely had we reached the house than to us came Deborah all breathless haste and tearful anxiety.

“Oliver!” she cried, as I dismounted. “Oh my dear, what news? Where is he? Is he safe? Where is Roland?”

“Safe!” I answered, whereupon she kissed me.

“And,” said Clia, “there will be no duel—dear!”

“No duel? Oh Oliver, is this true?”

“Perfectly!” I answered, drying her tears with my handkerchief. “The ugly business is averted, owing to Clia——”

“Oh, thank God!”

“And Clia!” I repeated. Now at this, Deborah turned and going beside Clia’s horse, for she was still mounted, reached up her white arms, very

round and beautiful I thought them, and Clia bowed to her kiss, though much too stately it seemed to me.

So we presently went indoors, talking in question and answer; yet our story was but half told when we were interrupted by other voices, one upraised in mournful reproach, the other loud and angry, with fierce tread of hurrying feet; doors slammed furiously, casements rattled,—then on the threshold, scowling on me with the utmost animosity, stood Roland, a wild, dusty somewhat bedraggled figure, and, for the moment, impotent and speechless with the rage that choked him.

“Roland,” said I, rising.

“Villain!” he gasped. “Ruffian! What’s the meaning of this . . . this most . . . infernal outrage?”

“If,” said I, humbly, “you’ll permit me to explain——”

“Ex-explain?” he stuttered. “Explain . . . your . . . your murderous attack . . . that, ha . . . that dastard’s blow? I’ll have none of your damnable excuses! I’ll say no more till we’re alone! Come outside——”

“My dearest!” cried Deborah, clasping the quivering fist he had shaken at me, so passionately. “Hush now! Hush, Roland, the children may hear you . . . the servants——”

“Deborah! You know he . . . he struck me senseless . . . a foul, a craven’s blow?”

“Yes, Roland, but——”

“You know he . . . tied me up . . . trussed me like a poor, accursed chicken . . . helpless as a . . . a positive dam’ mummy! You know this?”

“Of course, Roland dear, I’ve just heard, but——”

“Ha! Of course, d’ye say?”

“Yes, Roland, but now if you will please let me——”

“And you, Deborah, you can permit such miscreant . . . this ruffianly half-murderer of your husband to breathe the same air with you!”

“Roland, will you be quiet and listen?”

“No! I’ve been quiet long enough,—gagged, choked, bound hand and foot—ha, malediction! Villain, come outside with me! Outside, I say, or——”

“No!” said Clia, rising to confront his fury. “Take me instead, dear Uncle Roly-poly, because I am the one to vent your naughty temper upon——”

“You?” he exclaimed, in a choking voice. “You? Now what the——”

“Hush, dear Uncle, and I will tell you how I went down on my knees to Lord Storringlean——”

“Eh . . . what . . . your knees . . . Storringlean . . . ?”

“My knees, Lord Storringlean—yes! I knelt to him very humbly pleading with him for my poor, foolish, random, self-sacrificing Oliver’s sake.”

“For . . . Oliver’s sake? Oliver’s . . . ?” gasped Roland, forgetting rage in astonishment, or very nearly. “But why? What on earth . . . how does Oliver come into it?”

“Be patient and I’ll explain. I went to Lord Storringlean. I cast myself on my knees at his feet, pleaded and proffered him my humblest excuses for your wicked temper and the blow you struck him, and all for sake of—my Oliver!”

“But great good heavens, girl, what had Oliver to do with it? Deborah, am I mad or is she, for upon my everlasting soul I swear——”

“Don’t!” sighed Clia. “Give me your hand, my poor, distraught Roly and come with me, and I will tell you all and—show you a letter,—come!”

And, like the perfectly bewildered and justly indignant hothead he was, Roland went.

“Now,” said Deborah, so soon as the door had closed upon them, “what did she mean, Oliver? You told me you shut my poor, fierce darling out of harm’s way and rode to see Lord Storringlean, but nothing more.”

“No, we were interrupted.”

“Did you take Clia with you then?”

“No indeed, she came upon us quite unexpectedly but talked with Storringlean to such happy effect that—well, he proved perfectly reasonable and far better fellow than I had ever supposed. Let us hope Roland is half as amenable. Now pray take me to the children. I’ve scarcely seen young Oliver and not a glimpse of little Cynthia, God bless her!”

So away we went and presently found them with Gregor, one perched on each bony knee, listening entranced to a tale of fairies and enchanted forests;

for, despite his somewhat forbidding aspect, Gregor is the beloved of all children. The story ending, rather suddenly, we romped together, all five, as was our wont, until afternoon deepened to evening and the children were led away bedwards.

“Nay but,” said Deborah, as I turned towards the stables, “my dear, you’ll stay the night, as you always do?”

“Not this time,” I answered. “Clia and Greg will, of course, but I have business at home.” So, despite her gentle reproaches, I ordered my horse, kissed her good-bye and departed.

Now being pensive, I rode slowly and thus presently heard hoof strokes rapidly approaching and beheld Clia and Gregor coming after me.

“So,” said I, as they joined me, “you didn’t stay then?”

“Which,” Clia retorted and quite ungraciously, “is a perfectly futile and absurd remark.”

“It was!” I agreed. “But why did you not remain?”

“Because, for one thing, I prefer my own bed! And you kissed her again, I suppose? And don’t ask ‘who’—I mean Deborah, of course. You did?”

“Naturally!” I answered.

“You would!” said she, more ungraciously than before.

At this I chuckled, then I laughed outright.

“Lord, Clia,” said I, “what a silly jealous child you were—and are!”

“Oh laugh,” she snapped, “and enjoy yourself while I plague my poor wits how to save you now from Uncle Roland’s vengeance. He is thirsting for your blood!”

“And with some reason!” I sighed.

“The animus he bore Lord Storringlean is now transferred to you.”

“I can well believe it.”

“He vows to ride over to-morrow for an explanation—with his heaviest whip!”

“Indeed?” said I, a little troubled.

“Yes indeed! And he will! Oh he will!”

“Quite possibly!” said I.

“Well, what shall you—do?”

“Await the event.”

“And if he attacks you?”

“I shall endure long as I am able.”

“And then?”

“Pound sense into him.”

“With—your fists?”

“Of course!”

“Like two odious school urchins, brutal hobbledehoy—”

“Or Englishmen!” said I. “However if needs must I shall thrash him.”

“Are you so sure you can?”

“Perfectly!”

“Oh Greg!” she sighed. “Gracious goodness! Oh me! What a perfectly frightful responsibility one mere Oliver can be!”

CHAPTER IX

WHICH CONCERNS ITSELF WITH ROBIN

BRIGHT and merry of eye, vigorous with young life, tall as myself and all lissom strength from light, quick feet to comely face, Robin closed the door with elaborate care, shot his wristbands, settled his admirably fitting evening coat, smoothed his curling auburn hair and striding up to my desk, saluted, struck an attitude and stood looking down on me with his wide grin,—his frank, most infectious smile.

“Sir most esteemed and Governor right well beloved,” quoth he, in his pleasant, ringing baritone, “we about to front thy Jovian thunderbolts salute thee well. How sits the wind, sir, fair or foul? Am I in for a wiggling? I am! Do we shake hands first or not, sir?”

“Not—for the present!” I answered.

“A-ha! No fatted calf for this poor prodigal! And—no wonder! *Mea culpa*, Governor,—*peccavi*, sir! Behold these arms meek-folded, this devoted head bowed to the vials of your just wrath! Now—let deep ocean roar——”

“And you may be seated, Robin.”

“At your bidding, sir!” And picking up the nearest chair in one powerful hand, he tossed it aloft, set it lightly beneath himself, subsided thereupon and bowed.

“Now sir,” he smiled, “have at me and expect no vain excuses. Ha—one thing though! I left Oxford owing none of the tradesmen a penny. I paid all my debts, sir, every blessed stiver!”

“You surprise me, Robin. How did you contrive this miracle?”

“With astonishing ease and happy forethought, sir. I borrowed the needful from old Rags and——”

“Rags?” I enquired.

“Viscount Ragworth, sir, a stout, good soul and passably hot with muffles and mauleys, though no match for your humble devoted, thanks to Jessamy Todd and yourself——”

“How much did you borrow?”

“Exactly one hundred and three pounds, odd shillings and no pence, sir.”

“Then,” said I opening my cheque book, “I will set it at one hundred and four pounds——”

“Oh but, Governor, no! I can repay it out of my next allowance——”

“Which,” said I, writing, “is already mortgaged.”

“Jingo!” he exclaimed, ruefully. “So it is, of course. No matter, Rags can wait, he rolls in the necessary, so there’s positively no need for such indecent haste, sir. You see, Old Rags——”

“Shall be paid at once, Robin.”

“As—you say, sir!”

“And now,” said I, laying down my quill, “now as regards yourself——”

“Ah—now for it!” quoth he, squaring his broad young shoulders. “Go it, Governor and sir, blame me as I deserve, for——”

“No, Robin,” I answered, “I shall not waste breath to blame or reproach, but, since you have fled from your duty because you are either blind fool or spiritless craven——”

“Hey—Governor!” he exclaimed, wincing. “Sir—that hurts——”

“I hope so!” said I surveying his flushed face feature by feature. “However, since you have run home in such unmanly fashion, I desire to know what now you propose to do with yourself?”

“Well sir,” he answered, his gay bravado quite gone and showing now rather pitifully boyish, “I . . . I have been hoping . . . I meant to ask you . . . to tell you everything I had in mind, but now . . . I can’t, your eyes strike me dumb!” And here indeed he fell silent, looking at me very miserably.

“Robin,” said I, more gently, “ever since you were a boy I have tried to make you happy, but, far more than this, to make a fine, clean-souled man of you. It is well to be a gentleman, it is a nobler thing to be a man strong and true and capable. All these years I have worked and hoped for this, Robin. I have done all I could, the rest lay with you. And now . . . to-night I am wondering if we have failed . . . if it has all been vain?”

“No—no!” he exclaimed, passionately. “I’m no mere failure, sir,—at least I hope you think better of me. Do you—do you, Governor?”

“How may I, Robin? In a few months you will be of age, your own man, and what have you achieved thus far?”

“Well, sir, I . . . I can shoot straight. I can ride anything on four legs and beat anything on two. I’ve never told lie and never shall . . . and hope desperately to yet prove myself all you’d have me.”

“And so far,” said I, “you have shown yourself no more than an extreme careless, lovable, irresponsible boy!”

“No, sir—no! I am really and truly so very much the opposite that I . . . I want to marry and settle down. I wrote to Clee telling her all about it, yes everything and asking her to read you parts of my letter——”

“She allowed me to read it for myself, Robin.”

“Did she, by Jingo!”

“Consequently I am aware you hope to redeem past failures by marrying her . . . and for your own salvation.”

“You make it sound pretty foul, sir.”

“I speak precisely as you wrote.”

“Then curse me!” cried he, in one of his sudden, wild furies. “I’m God’s own fool! I put it all wrong! For I love her—oh Governor, I love her better than my fool self, far better than my life! I always have . . . I always shall . . . and with all and any of me that is truly good. Well, if I want to marry her, can you blame me? Isn’t it natural and right, sir?”

“Perfectly!” I answered. “Nor do I blame you for such love, it is a holy thing . . . an inspiration . . . and should be a safeguard, boy, only——”

“Then, Oliver—help me! Oh Governor, help me now as you have always done. Tell her you consent . . . say you want her to marry me . . . and I know she will. Give us your blessing and by God I’ll be all you’d have me, or kill myself trying! So promise . . . promise you will.” His young face showed aged, pale now and almost haggard, and he was up, long arms outflung to me, hands quivering with the passion of his supplication, and I so moved myself that I answered, almost harshly:

“On . . . a condition, Robin.”

“Anything, sir! Anything in this world, to win her with your blessing.”

“Very well then,” said I. “It is my wish, no—my command that you shall not marry for at least one year from now——”

“Good . . . God!” he gasped, shooting to his feet again. “But Oliver . . . sir . . . Oh Governor——”

“Sit down, Robin, and listen, sir! Sit, I say!”

Casting himself into his chair, he glared at me now beneath lowering brows.

“A . . . year!” he groaned, hopelessly. “A year——”

“Yes!” I nodded. “You love Clia, I believe, with a true and deep devotion——”

“God knows I do!” he muttered.

“And, Robin, I think she . . . loves you. But you are both young . . . do not interrupt me! Young, I repeat, and my chiefest concern, now as always, is to ensure the happiness of both. So, I mean to test you, Robin, to try your capabilities. I am going to set you to work.”

“Eh—work, Governor—work? Oh . . . well, very good! Ah yes, I’ll work, sir, like any miserable slave, for Cleo . . . fingers to the bone, day and night, as long and hard as you will, for her glorious sake. Only tell me how?”

“It will not be quite so drastic, Robin. You are going to my farm at Dapplemere——”

“Oh . . . good . . . Lord!” he ejaculated, quite aghast. “Dapplemere is twenty miles away—more!”

“A pleasant ride!” said I. “Of a Saturday afternoon—if you can find the time.”

“But Governor, can’t you place me somewhere nearer home . . . where I may see her oftener? You’ve lots of other properties and so on,—can’t you, won’t you?”

“No. I am sending you to Dapplemere because, firstly, it is twenty-odd miles away, and secondly——”

“Wait!” he cried, between shut teeth. “You know I love her! You know I’m . . . dying for her and if she’s willing, why . . . why keep us waiting? Why afflict us in such damnably cruel manner? Why . . . why, unless——”

“Well,” I demanded, leaning across my desk the better to front the growing malevolence of his fierce young eyes and meet what was coming at last, “Unless——?”

“Unless you . . . love her yourself! Do you . . . do you? Ha—yes, yes . . . I see it in your face . . .”

And now occurred one of those swift and dire changes in him that have so greatly disquieted me more than once; up he leapt with a certain wild-animal ferocity, teeth bared, eyes aflame, fists clenched—as if yearning to attack me.

“Confess!” he panted, thickly. “Confess you love her! Admit it and be done!”

“Yes,” I answered, and in his own words, “I love her better than my life, I always have, I always shall, but——”

“Oh hateful!” he cried. “Foul and most detestable . . . that you and she . . . you? Oh vile,—you are too old . . . old enough to be her father.”

“True!” said I, rising to confront him. “And as a father I regard her . . . my beloved daughter. And, Robin, because I know myself so very much too old, I am trying you, testing you,—hoping to make you fit and worthy to be her husband and . . . perhaps . . . the father of . . . her children.”

He was down in the chair again, crouching there speechless and abased, his face hidden from me; now, seeing him thus downcast, I clapped my hand upon his bowed shoulder and kept it there, saying no word; yet he understood, for presently his hand came creeping to clasp mine and, with face still hidden, he spoke almost whispering:

“Forgive me, sir! Oh Oliver . . . dear old Noll . . . forgive me!”

“Of course,” said I, “of course!”

“I . . . was a jealous fool, Noll . . . dear old sir, I only tried to hurt you because I so love and honour you . . . ! And I’ll go whenever you say and wherever you will.”

“To Dapplemere!” said I, cheerily as I might. “To Dapplemere, Robin, because—secondly, it is far dearer to me than this great house; and thirdly, because you and Clia passed your childhood there. It is there I was happiest. So it is there, my dear Rob, I would have you prove yourself a worthy mate for . . . her.”

“Right, sir!” he answered, squaring his shoulders, “I understand now . . . and besides, when you look at me so, Governor, I’d do anything you ask. So, say the word and I’ll go—to-night!”

“No Rob, no, a week hence will do, a week from to-day. And you’ll find all the folk there glad to welcome you, bless their hearts! And,” I concluded, setting my arm about him, “old fellow, do your best! Yes, if you have any love for me, be my Robin Goodfellow, prove yourself worthy, a clean, manly fellow such as . . . she may truly love . . . and honour also!”

“I will, sir!” he answered, huskily. “Oh Noll, I swear by God I will! And . . . as for loving you. . . . Oh, Governor, when I remember. . . . Oh Lord love me! Aren’t you all the world to me, now as you always were and will be? Sir . . . Noll . . . I can’t say any more . . . only I . . . do love you . . . honour you . . .” Here, seizing my hand, the dear, warm-hearted fellow caught it to his lips, and so left me, almost running in his haste to be gone, for my hand was wet with his tears.

And so, the hour being late, I presently went up to bed.

CHAPTER X

CONCERNS ITSELF WITH A HORSEWHIP AND A POINT OF HONOUR

A DROWSY afternoon very hot and still; outside upon the lawn in leafy shade Inigo nodded over a book with Saphronia seated beside him frankly asleep, while I in my study meaning to write and continue this narration, yawned over it instead until my eyes watered. The great house about me was so hushed and silent I could hear the hum of bees among the flowers on the terrace beneath my open lattice, a pleasant, sleepy, lulling murmur.

So I yawned at my manuscript (which example, I pray, my dear reader, you may not be induced to follow), I took up my quill, set it down again and leaning back in cushioned chair, closed my eyes. . . .

A fly tickled my ear; I brushed it away, but the tormenting insect became so persistent that at last I opened unwilling eyes to behold Clia in the act of tickling me again with the feather of my pen.

“Pestilent child!” I groaned, sitting up.

“Sluggard!” she retorted, sitting down—on the arm of my chair. “Lazy, careless man!” she continued, “Oh, heedless creature! Have you forgotten? But of course you have!”

“Pray what?”

“Uncle Roland! To-day! With a whip!”

“Dear me!” I murmured, “I wonder if he meant it?”

“Dear you!” she repeated, scornfully. “He did, because he is here now! And has a whip, a heavy one with nasty, long, cruel lash!”

“Indeed!” said I, rising. “Where is he, Clia?”

“Safe from you for the moment, sir. I sent him to look for you at Jerry’s encampment.”

“Oh?” said I. “Then if you’ll contrive to keep young Robin out of the way——”

“Robin, my poor Nollish One is galloping to Lewes for yards of ribbon I don’t want. And—I have warned Jessamy to look after you. And now what, if you please? And don’t frown at me, sir!”

“Now,” I answered, turning towards the door, “I shall take a walk with Roland—alone!”

“Ah!” she cried, leaping to seize me by the lapels of my coat. “To fight with him?”

“No!” I answered meeting her wide gaze serenely. “No, I promise you.”

“Then,” said she, with that strange intuition I find so disquieting, “you mean to let him thrash you, whip you—yes, I see . . . I know you do!”

“But,” said I, avoiding her gaze, “only to a well . . . reasonable degree, such punishment as I deem merited and just——”

“He may . . . half kill you!”

“Surely not, dear child! Besides I do indeed feel I owe him some reparation for his abominable treatment by me.”

“And you mean to say,” she cried, standing away, the better to scorn me, “you will allow any man to use a whip on you?”

“Only one man, Clia, and—reasonably.”

“Oh . . .” she gasped, clenching fierce hands against me. “Oh——” But now, to escape the impending tirade, I turned and left her in such haste that I forgot my hat nor thought of it until I was half-way across the park; so on I went bareheaded, following a path through the spinney that led to those denser woods where Jerry Jarvis had pitched his dingy tent. But scarcely had I entered this grateful shade than leaves rustled violently and Roland bestrode the path, confronting me.

For a long moment we stood thus foot to foot, eye to eye and both dumb; then, falling back a step, he began slowly uncoiling the long lash of the formidable whip he grasped so purposefully.

“Roland,” said I at last but making no movement, “feeling I owe you some atonement I shall not defend myself, though a whip was more than I bargained for. However even this I propose to endure for one full minute by my watch, but pray don’t mark my face, be so good to spare me this indignity——”

“And did you spare me?” he demanded fiercely.

"Of course not, ass," I answered, "it would have spoiled my plan."

"Curse your plan!" he cried.

"Certainly!" I nodded. "Though it was the best I could contrive."

"I might have forgiven you that dastard blow," he continued less wildly. "Yes, I could have forgiven that—but you made me a public laughing stock _____"

"Not public!" I retorted.

"You made me ridiculous in my own esteem . . . you shamed me, ha—damn you . . . you robbed me of my self-respect and . . . for this I mean to shame you."

"Impossible!" said I, contriving to smile.

"We'll see . . . when I've marked you!" he nodded and having now freed the lash, drew it slowly through his fingers while I unfobbed my watch.

"I give you precisely one minute——"

"And I shall thrash you precisely as long as I will!"

"I shall call out, Roland, and tell you when the minute is up and now warn you not to strike me after . . . or——"

"Or what?" he demanded, as I paused.

"I fear I may hurt you not a little, my poor Roly Poly."

Now at this he was shaken by such raging fury that, being inarticulate, he leapt to action instead; back swung the whip, I set myself to meet the sting of its lash; then a voice shouted, a powerful arm swung me aside and between us stood Jessamy Todd.

"God save us!" he exclaimed. "Is it murder, sirs?"

"Stand aside!" panted Roland. "Stand away or it will be!"

"No no!" said Jessamy, still interposing. "Mr. Roland, a whip 'twixt men as be men is all wrong, 'tis foul, sir, 'tis shameful thing as'll shame only yourself!"

"Shame?" cried Roland, wildly. "I'm shamed already, damn him! So stand back—out of my way, you!"

"No, sir, no!" said Jessamy advancing instead. "Mr. Roland . . . sir, give me that whip——"

“Ha—take it then!” cried Roland and smote him down. . . .

Bleeding, bareheaded from the powerful stroke, Jessamy rose to his knees and stretching wide those mighty arms of his, looked up into Roland’s passion-contorted face.

“Brother,” said he, gently, “strike again if ye will, but . . . if ye can, then the Lord ha’ mercy ’pon your poor soul!”

Roland stared down into this face so mild and still serene for all the quick blood that streaked it, and recoiling, dropped the whip as if it had burnt him.

“Oh . . . damn you, Jessamy!” he exclaimed in strangled voice, “don’t look on me so . . . so cursed meek . . . makes me feel like your murderer! You so devilish lamb-like and I . . . the infernal butcher! Oh, Jessamy Todd, you go beyond nature . . . bleeding like stuck pig and so dashed humble, damme you confound me! Such hellish humility unmans a man. . . .” So saying, he whipped out handkerchief and began to wipe the blood from Jessamy’s brow and cheek, mumbling fierce maledictions the while. Then he picked up Jessamy’s hat, smoothed its ruffled nap and set it upon its owner’s head with a very particular care, saying:

“How are you now, old comrade?”

“Right as a trivet, sir!” answered Jessamy rising with his usual effortless ease.

“It was a devilish clout, Jessamy, for which I am infinitely sorry and beg your forgiveness—with all my heart.”

“Which I should grant you, Mr. Roland, and with all o’ my heart, sir—on a condition.”

“What, pray? And don’t call me ‘Mr. Roland’ or ‘sir,’ dammit! What’s your condition, man?”

“That you take Oliver’s hand . . . brother!”

“But you . . . you know how vilely he used me?”

“Ay, I do——”

“Ha, so then he told you, eh? Ay, and laughed—dam’ him!”

“Neither one nor t’other, sir! ’Twas our Princess as told me of it, Miss Clia.”

“Well now,” demanded Roland, still ignoring me. “Well, Jessamy, can—or could, or would—any true gentleman sit down beneath such heinous affront, forgive such vile, dastard treatment—could he?”

“Why,” answered Jessamy, pondering the question, “not a gentleman p’raps, but a man could. And you, sir, are both, I think, or are you—only a gentleman?”

“Only?” exclaimed Roland becoming instantly extremely stiff in the back. “Only, d’you say?”

“Ay sir—only!” nodded Jessamy. “For a fine gentleman what wi’ pride o’ birth, blue-blood, tradition, ah, and ancestors—as be generally old bones,—don’t have much chance to be anything better than a fine gentleman, poor chap!”

“Oh?” enquired Roland, stiffer than ever.

“Ah!” nodded Jessamy, with the utmost finality. “So the question is—are you, Mr. Roland, only a fine gentleman, or a man, or both, sir?”

“Well,” answered Roland, pondering in his turn, “hang me if I know!”

“Then s’pose you come and think it out over a mug o’ Jerry’s tea, sir?”

“But I abominate the swill.”

“Well, there be water in the brook, Mr. Roland.”

“And that’s worse! And do—not ‘sir’ and ‘mister’ me!”

“Then—brother, come on!”

But here, espying his fallen whip, Roland sent it flying with a vicious kick; then with Jessamy between us and in single file, for the way was narrow, we went on nor spoke until we beheld Jeremy Jarvis, battered hat acock, perched upon his three-legged stool, busily cutting bread and butter, and four extremely thick china mugs set forth upon a white napkin outspread at his feet.

“Greeting friends!” quoth he, peering up at us with his sharp eyes that missed so little. “Tea’s ready so set and fall to.”

“Eh, mugs—and four of them,” said Roland, eyeing these vessels with a too-evident disfavour, “but you couldn’t have expected me, Jerry.”

“Why not?”

“Because I didn’t know I was coming here.”

“But I did.”

“Amazing!”

“Not a bit! Oh no, con-sidering as our Clia, throned on this here very stool like the Queen o’ Hearts she is, told me as here you’d be, Mr. Roland, sir, along of friend Oliver, and here y’are——”

“But how on earth should she know or predict——”

“Eh?” exclaimed Jeremy, with a pounce. “‘Pre-dict’ says you,—that’s a noo one, says I and a stranger to me.”

“And means ‘foretell’, Jerry. How should she foretell my arrival here?”

“Why, Mr. Roland, being Clia, d’ye see, she just nat’rally knows more about most folks than most folks knows o’ theirselves, I reckon. She says as you’d come for tea, tea’s ready, so sit down on the log here and drink it while ’tis hot.”

“Thanks!” said Roland seating himself obediently. “And how are you, old friend?”

“Hearty, thankee! And how’s yourself, Mr. Roland, sir?”

“Curse and confound it!” he exclaimed pettishly. “Why must you and Jessamy ‘sir’ and ‘mister’ me with such damned persistence?”

“Well,” answered Jeremy, surveying Roland’s stately elegance with his keen gaze, “it seems only nat’ral to the likes o’ we—and you such a noble looking gen’leman, all bloo-blood from the proud cock o’ your noble chin to the jinglers on your lordly heels.”

“Then, damme Jeremy, let me tell you——”

“No—don’t! Bite into this here slab o’ bread and butter instead. Bread’s a bit thickish p’raps, but so’s the butter and both noo-tritious,—which is a word meaning good for the innards,—eh, Oliver?”

“Yes!” said I, speaking for the first time, whereat Roland flashed a scornful glance at me, picked up his bread and butter, scowled at it and put it down again.

“I’ll be cursed——” he began.

“P’raps!” nodded Jeremy. “Though not here, not among old friends. And we are all friends, ain’t we? Eh—why, Lord, Jessamy what’s come to your phiz, your face, lad?”

“Bit of a knock, Jerry——”

“From my riding-whip!” added Roland. “I struck him, Jeremy——”

“Though the real cause was myself!” said I.

“Strike me—blue!” exclaimed Jeremy, glancing from one to other of us, “What’s the trouble this time?”

Here, seating myself also on the log though far as possible from Roland, I in turn set down my yet untasted bread and butter.

“Roland,” said I, “you have so great cause for bitter anger against me I can plead no excuse,—only this, that what I did was very well meant. Fronted by threat of such sudden catastrophe I did what I might to avert it in the only way that seemed possible——”

“And made me a . . . a damn Jack-fool!” said he, bitterly.

“To whom?” I demanded.

“Storringdean,—curse you!”

“But,” said I, “the earl is both a man and a gentleman, Roland. You have seen his letter, written I am sure with the utmost sincerity. For myself—all I can do is to beg you will, at least, think of me fairly as you can.”

Here ensued a protracted and somewhat awkward silence wherein Jerry Jarvis munched, staring at the little fire, Jessamy stirred his tea round and round, while Roland picking up his bread and butter rather as if it might sting him, turned it this way and that, viewing it with the utmost abhorrence, then, and just as I expected him to hurl it away, he took a great bite instead, but glanced at me across his shoulder with expression of such fierce scorn and bitter animosity as seemed beyond speech.

“Roland,” said I, responding to this so direly eloquent look, “speak man! What have you to say?”

“Oh,” he answered, lightly, “merely that I regret the loss of my whip, so must bring another for you, shall we say—to-morrow?”

Motionless I stared at his smiling malevolence and finding no adequate rejoinder, was dumb. Not so Jerry Jarvis for uttering ferocious snort, he dashed his battered old hat to earth and turned on Roland in surprising fury.

“Now shame on your blasting pride!” said he. “Such natur’ as yourn I hold baser than a dog’s. And lookee my fine fool-gen’leman as ain’t man enough to forgive,—don’t ee try whipping friend Oliver or he’ll knock the vicious pride out o’ you with his good bare fists as honest man should. So—be warned!”

"I am," Roland nodded, "and astounded you should imagine Sir Oliver can stand up to me——"

"You!" exclaimed Jeremy and spat violently at the fire, "you couldn't last with Oliver—not ten minutes!"

"Aha!" laughed Roland. "And what think you, Jessamy?"

"Why sir, I think as you might last ten,—though I doubt it, ay, I doubt it."

Roland flushed hotly; then up went that proud head of his, back went powerful shoulders and he laughed again.

"Why then," said he, leaping afoot, "though a whip were more suitable, I must thrash him without,—just to prove how extremely mistaken you are. . . . Stand up most virtuous and worthy cousin, stand up and take what you have so richly earned."

Perforce I rose, but so unwillingly that Roland was at me before I could remove my coat . . .

What ensued I will not describe, nor indeed were there many blows struck; however, when Roland got to his legs for the third time, he thought better of it and lay down again.

"Not so . . . young as . . . I was!" he gasped.

"No!" quoth Jerry Jarvis. "And, young or old, never a match for Oliver, eh Jessamy, eh?"

"Never in this world!" answered Jessamy.

"Nor yet the next!" added Jeremy, and with such cruel finality that I, knowing how this must hurt Roland's proud soul even more than I had his body, turned away not to see him in his humility and sinking down upon the log again, felt very miserable in my victory and strangely desolate. Presently Roland being still prone upon the trampled grass, spoke such words and in tone so unexpected as surprised me beyond measure.

"It was kind——" he paused to lift himself with a painful effort, then repeated, and more distinctly, "it was kind . . . extreme kind of you not to . . . mark my face! Accept my thanks. . . . Noll, Old Thunderbolt."

Then I hastened to him, but, refusing my aid, he arose and stood feeling himself over with both hands very tenderly.

“One complete, confounded bruise!” he nodded, “and no wonder . . . fists like infernal cannon balls! Too devilish accurate, never one miss, the torso informs me.”

“Ah Roly,” said I, flinching when he winced, “after this, you will hate me more than ever . . . or we shall be better . . . truer friends than in all our days. Which?”

“Friends!” he answered instantly. And with wry smile, “Lord, but you hammered me! You’re too dam’ quick for your size, Noll. Friends, of course, —damme but I’m stiff! Now where’s that mug of tea, Jerry?” The mug was in his hand almost as he spoke.

So down we sat again, side by side now, to sip somewhat tepid tea and munch our bread and butter.

“Roland . . . old friend,” quoth Jerry Jarvis suddenly, “I drink you friendship—with all my ’eart.”

“Jerry . . . old friend,” answered Roland, bowing with sincere and unwonted gravity, “you honour me.”

“Ay I do, and heartily. For a man as can take such defeat with such noble grace, should be honoured,—eh, Jess?”

“Truly!” answered Jessamy. “Honour is the word. So now I drink to a gentleman as is a man, and a man as is—my brother in the Lord. And may the kind Lord keep us brothers all henceforth—amen!”

CHAPTER XI

WHICH CONCERNS THE WRITING OF THIS NOVEL

“’Tis strange thing,” said Roland, linking his arm in mine as we strolled stablewards, “it’s odd, it’s damned queer that a little bodily violence can have such a soothing effect upon the mind. For, though the sore-battered person must show like a confounded patchwork quilt—bruises and so forth, the soul now sits serene, Noll, and all’s well with the world.”

“Good!” said I.

“It is!” he nodded, cordially. “Though I think we had better evade the public eye—for your sake, my old fellow.”

“Mine?” I enquired.

“Certainly! Your golden locks so wild, your coat torn at the shoulder here, and a nice little bruise on your cheek-bone, Noll,—all of which might lend a handle to suspicion that there has been—doings. Regarding which same, I freely confess that after you fainted me wide open and grassed me with that leveller, this soul-shattering right of yours, being so decidedly down I knew it was all up with me! I was completely winded, groggy, shaken to the confounded marrow,—otherwise . . .” he sighed mournfully, looked at me very wistfully and shook his head, saying: “Perhaps, Noll, you’ll allow me another chance at you . . . some day . . . with the muffles?”

“Whenever you will, Roly.”

“For which, old companion, accept your woeful victim’s gratitude!”

So, by circuitous ways, we reached the wide stable-yard where Roland’s steed, a fiery creature as usual, danced forth between two staggering grooms whereon he contrived to mount with his characteristic dashing ease, though such effort must have cost him no little pain, nodded to my admiring stable men, saluted me with airy grace and spurring his eager, snorting animal, departed at his customary rearing gallop. Then I, conscious now of bruised cheek and ripped coat, entered the house by a side door and sought the seclusion of my study. Being within this peaceful haven I halted suddenly for, seated in my own elbow-chair, (and in somewhat abandoned posture, I thought) was Clia. Turning languid head crowned with its coppery tresses

bright with the sun, she surveyed me with quick, appraising glance and troubled to sit up.

“You may come in—Gladiator!” she sighed. “And pray close the door.” When I had done so, she rose, shook down and ordered her frills and flounces, then leading me to the chair, pushed me gently therein and stood looking down on me with those long, sleepy yet all-seeing eyes of hers.

“Well!” she enquired. “Well, Sir Oliver?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Oh?” said she, leaning nearer, “I don’t see the expected signs of blood and battle. And you are not marked as I expected and therefore as you ought to be. However—yes, your coat needs mending and here to be sure is a graze on your cheek—just here!” and she touched it lightly with one fingertip. “But—nothing else . . . at least that is evident to sight. So I suppose you actually won! Pray tell me all about it.”

“Which,” said I, “is nothing. So run away, child, I’m busy.”

“Poor, hard-working Grandpapa!” she murmured and instantly perching herself upon my knees, began to ruffle the hair I had combed so carefully. “Now won’t he kiss his little child for saving him from the nasty whip?”

“Oh?” I enquired.

“Yes!” she nodded. “Didn’t I warn Jerry and send our Jessamy to interfere just in time?”

“You?” said I.

“Me!” she answered, “I! Clia! Indeed but for her, heaven only knows what would have happened. Ah, my poor wretch if ever I should be taken from you—what a pitiful, wretched wretch you’d be, how perfectly, utterly lost and helpless!”

“Nobody will,” said I.

“Will what, pray?”

“Take you from me. At least—not yet.”

“And they want me so.”

“Who do?”

“My languishing beaux, my adoring suitors, besides Robin and Rags and the Earl.”

“Do you mean Lord Storrington?”

“Oh yes. I met him out riding this morning,—such a gallant figure on a horse! And I begin to adore his whiskers. So we rode along together and he desires to make me his daughter-in-law.”

“Does he, by Jove!”

“No, by his son Ragworth, he intends to, as he said, ‘open the matter with you’ on the first opportunity.”

“Oh?” said I.

“Yes!” she nodded; and so we were silent again.

“But . . . Robin——” I began, at last.

“Ah, Robin,” sighed she, “poor boy, you intend to marry him to me, don’t you?”

“I . . . suppose so—yes, yes, of course.”

“Wrong, sir, quite, quite wrong!”

“What is?”

“Your ‘of course’ because of course there can be no such thing about such a thing.”

“What thing?”

“It! The It, the very It of Its! Marriage, dear Sir Oliver, matrimony, wedlock. Robin loves me, but so do others! Now do I love Robin, in a marrying way, any more than I do these others?”

“Heavens, miss!” I exclaimed, in some exasperation, “Do you or—not?”

“Well,” she answered, hand to puckered brow as if in profound meditation, “Robin is a perfect dear . . . and yet can I bear to imagine myself Robin’s wife? No, I—can-not! Now, I wonder why, Oliver?”

“Sheer contrariness!” said I, whereat she instantly put out her tongue at me; then suddenly cuddling nearer, she sighed down my neck so gustily that I shivered.

“Oh, Darlingest,” she murmured, using this foolish pet name of her childish days that yet is for me always a mingling of joy and pain, “if I should ever leave you how sad and woeful you would be . . . wouldn’t you? Come, admit it like a very bold, audacious male creature,—say ‘yes’!”

“Why to be sure . . . yes, of course!” I answered.

“No!” sighed she. “Not the least tiniest bit like it in the world! Must I show you?”

“Quite unnecessary!” I answered.

“Very well then, listen—with both your ears and I’ll say it as you should and would if we were in a romantic novel: ‘Yes, Beloved, answered Sir Oliver Dale (with a capital B) his deep voice hoarse with a consuming emotion that was beyond the control of even his iron will. My devouring passion can no longer brook restraint, I love thee, nay I worship, adore thee! Life bereft of thy beauteous presence is a horried desolation,—with thee a joy, a bliss, a rapture I tremble to imagine . . .’ Oh,” she sighed, “Oh, Oliver, why are we not in a novel?”

“We are,” I answered, thoughtlessly, then, meeting her wide gaze, could have cursed myself and felt inclined to cower.

“Ol-iver!” she whispered, “Oliver Dale . . . what do you mean? Can you . . . could you . . . are you writing a book, a romance? You are! Oh joy! This is what keeps you so mysteriously busy here half the day and heaven knows how long at night! A novel!” she repeated, sitting back the better to look at me. “And of course all about you . . . and me!”

“And others, child.”

“But naturally we are the chief characters. And pray, am I your heroine?”

“Well . . . in a way . . . yes——”

“Then who—who is the hero?”

“There is none.”

“Oh! I suppose, being your own author, you can’t—or won’t, be your own hero?”

“Preposterous!” said I. “And now——”

“It is!” she nodded. “A novel without a hero is like food without salt, flowers without fragrance, a woman without charm and a novelist without an idea or pen to write it with. So you must have a hero. Now what can we do about it?”

“Nothing!” said I. “And if you will be——”

“Nonsense, Noll! Let us consider. A hero is usually a fool who goes carefully out of his way to get himself into all kinds of impossible situations, is always wrongly suspected, takes all the kicks and no ha’pence, is always

true and faithful and brave and blind and dense and therefore always wins the heroine at last and is crowned with happiness . . . Oliver . . . my dear . . . your hero is and must be . . . yourself!"

"Child," I answered, wearily, "again I tell you my novel has and shall have no hero."

"Then your novel will be so ponderously Nollish that nobody will ever be able to read it, or wish to."

"Probably not," said I and so solemnly that she became so too and began smoothing my ruffled hair.

"But," said she, consolingly, "on the other hand it may be a wonderful book, a perfect opus! I know you are wise and very much cleverer than you appear or anyone could possibly suspect. Have you written much of it?"

"About ten chapters or so."

"Would you—will you read me a little?"

"No!" I answered and with the utmost decision.

"Or permit me to read it—just a word or so?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then," said she, giving my hair a sharp tug, "I'm sure and positively certain that your novel thing is very you-and-me-ish! Confess!"

"My dear, it is simply a commonplace narration of everyday incidents and ordinary folk."

"But is anything ever commonplace to you, Oliver? I answer—no! Because you find interest in everything—yes, as you taught me to do while I was your little adoring child. Do you ever find anybody merely ordinary? No, again! Because you can make the dullest persons talk and interest you in spite of themselves. As for me and Robin and all the rest of us if we were all frightfully ordinary as I fear we are, we shan't be so in your novel, because your ducks are all swans."

"In-deed!" quoth I, somewhat discomfited and not a little indignant.

"Oh yes!" she continued. "To you incidents are events, pebbles diamonds, and I—ah, how have you described me, I wonder? You'll certainly call my red hair auburn, and seeing I'm so extremely human and robust you have probably turned me into an impossible creature, though extremely beautiful, I hope,—but half-fairy, half-angel very mysterious and

remote, a sort of unearthly, feminine abstraction without blood or bones, all soul and no scrap of body, instead of the terribly vital, female animal I am _____”

“Good!” I exclaimed as she paused for breath, and snatching a pencil, began to write.

“What now?” she enquired, trying to peer over my shoulder.

“You!” I answered, scribbling hastily, “I’m putting you down . . . in black and white, my ‘female animal.’ You have given me enough for a page at least. . . . Though I venture to think your description of yourself is not in the best taste, indeed slightly indelicate. However, down it goes to help build up my hitherto somewhat inadequate portrayal of you . . . ‘no blood or bones and not an atom of body’——”

“Beast!” she exclaimed, “You’ll never put that in your book.”

“Every word, Miss.”

“Oh well, it will never be printed.”

“Certainly! I shall publish it myself . . . perhaps.”

“Oliver, please—won’t you read me——”

“Not a line.”

“Then I can imagine what it will be like, my Nollish One. Oh yes! Something in this style: Let us take a moving scene between the heroine and the hero: ‘Darlingest,’ she murmured, her maidenly form agitated by a deep and very real emotion, ‘can it be your will I should thus sacrifice myself on wedlock’s altar to another man’s salvation?’ Sir Oliver looked deep into her beautiful eyes just now so womanly and therefore so unfathomable (such bosh!) and, his manhood shaken, himself utterly baffled by the secret, feminine mystery of her (such ridiculous nonsense!) yet conscious of the frank appeal of her ineffable virginal remoteness, he was touched not a little, and, sighing deeply, he stared down at his boots instead; thus when he spoke, his voice was strong again and sure. ‘Yes, my child,’ he answered, with the expression of an aged, and therefore doddering, grandpapa, ‘regarding you both with a parent’s eye, my chiefest care and constant concern is for the happiness of each’. Now at this she sighed, her lovely, young bosom tempestuous with some feminine and therefore deeply mysterious woe; then she glanced up at him ’neath dewy lashes, bowed her lovely head crowned with the glory of glossy, auburn tresses, murmured brokenly: ‘Fiddlesticks!’ and so was gone, leaving Sir Oliver Dale amazed,

astounded, and in no little perturbation. . . . There!" she exclaimed, rising from my knees to salute me with mocking though stately courtesy, "will your version be very much better?"

"Clia," said I, looking up into the eyes that met mine with such quick alertness as puzzled me, "do you love him?"

"Who?" she questioned and a little breathlessly I thought. "Who, pray?"

"Robin."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, turning from me almost pettishly. "Robin? Of course, yes, as I have done all our days."

"Enough to marry him . . . soon?"

"How soon?"

"This week . . . or month . . . whenever convenient . . . I mean——"

"Never!" she exclaimed, and quite angrily now.

"Then you . . . cannot love him, Clia, or——"

"Not in—that way!"

"Have you told him this?"

"I may do so before he goes away."

"Which is six days hence. And you must do so, and I think, in simple fairness to the poor fellow, you should tell him at once."

"And I think," she retorted, frowning on me quite fiercely, "that in simple fairness to my poor self—oh—dear—no!"

"Now," said I, astonished, "whatever can you mean?"

"That I may change my mind. I shall be ruled by Circumstance, or Fate, or Destiny, or just let Chance decide——"

"Absurd!" I exclaimed indignantly, "Preposterous utterly!"

"And—quite ridiculous!" she added. "But, dear Sir Oliver, nevertheless——!" With the word, she swept me a profound and gracious curtsy; then she was gone very suddenly, leaving me truly in no little perturbation.

CHAPTER XII

OF CLIA, HER SCHEME

I HAD been breaking in a spirited young plough-team and was trudging homewards comfortably tired and extremely muddy as to boots and gaiters for there had been rain in the night. I walked slowly and with head down bent, my mind profoundly busied with the harassing problem of Clia and Robin and their future, when my thoughts were interrupted by a voice nearby calling upon someone named ‘Giles’; so I halted in some surprise this being my own land and the name quite unfamiliar, and, glancing about, I now espied a fine saddle-horse tethered to a stile whereon drooped a youthful person, of resplendent attire though despondent of mien, who surveyed the universe (and presently myself) with wistful, blue eyes in a high-nosed countenance adorned by pale wisps of silky and somewhat ineffectual whisker; an apparently vague young gentleman who, having viewed me over, became lost in dreamy contemplation of his glistening riding boots. Surprised at this, for we were entirely alone, I now addressed him:

“Sir, you called, I think?”

“Eh?” he ejaculated, starting violently. “Oh . . . ah . . . yes, yes I did. I called you, Giles, on impulse . . . spur o’ the moment. You are a Giles of course, knew it at once, by your boots and gaiters and rustic honesty,—positively no mistaking——”

“But you do——”

“No, impossible, if so—no matter, for what’s in a name, as what’s-a-name says. Besides all farmers are called Giles, celebrated genus common to the country according to old songs, ballads and so on. And you are a farmer, a jolly yeoman to plough and sow and reap and mow and labour here on the Abbeymead estates, been doing one or other lately, now haven’t you?”

“Well . . . yes,” I answered, drawing shirt-sleeve across damp brow for the day was hot and my coat was over my arm, “So then it was to me you called?”

“Why yes, Giles, to be absolutely and perfectly frank, it was. And I called because though I’m here on a stile, I’m also in a hole and, judging by

the good-natured cut of your chivvy, I took odds on your being the kind of cove willing to help a fellow cove over a stile or out of a hole,—if you twig my meaning?”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Ha! Then are you game to earn five shillings,—ten, no, a sovereign, a thick ’un? Are you?”

“How?” I enquired, viewing the speaker whose general appearance struck me as vaguely familiar.

“Well,” he answered, rubbing his chin very hard with the gold knob of his riding-switch, “I suppose you . . . you know Miss Everard by sight, eh Giles?”

“Who are you, sir?” I demanded.

“Aha,” he exclaimed, shaking head, “now b’ged you don’t look quite such a jolly old yeoman as I thought! As for me, I’m merely me, old hearty, Ragworth or Raggy better known as Rags.”

“Viscount Ragworth?”

“Himself, old horse, yet no—far from it! I’m feeling like a badly blown egg, neither here nor there. Hence the dem debility and general lowness o’ spirits, Giles. And all by reason of one must be forever immune from woeful me and for two of the demdest reasons you ever heard! I mean . . . Miss Everard.”

“How so, pray?” I enquired, attracted by his youthful ingenuousness so evident beneath his affected man-of-the-world air.

“Should you like to hear, could you bear it?” he enquired, switching his riding boot jauntily but looking on me more wistfully than ever.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Then,” said he, beckoning me beside him, “since you show such kind sympathy on a stricken cove needing all the sympathy he can get—and not another dem soul to confide in, and remembering the yeomen were the bowmen and backbone of Old England, sit here on the stile and hearken, friend! And first,” said he, sighing deeply, “first of all, old tulip, I, though no ladies’ man, am in love, up to my dem ears! This may surprise you?”

“Not altogether,” I answered.

“Well, it perfectly astounds me, Giles, for being always too dem retiring I have hitherto ducked all feminine wiles until precisely two weeks and three days ago . . . for then, ah then young Eros, dem his small naked hide,—let fly at me with his rosy bow and got me clean through—liver, lights, heart and all, b’ged, and his barbed shaft rankles, old sportsman, rankles no end! One shot, Giles,—one glance from her glorious peepers, old Crecy and Agincourt, and I was—skewered!”

“Which,” said I, averting my head, “sounds decidedly uncomfortable.”

“And feels decidedly worse!” he sighed. “And so dem sudden! There was I one moment like a young roebuck on a mountain, feeling my oats, all high mettle and gladsome gaiety—the next, flat as flounder and mopish as a sick calf! And, to cap it all, she is engaged to my best friend the Devil.”

“Who?” I exclaimed.

“Robin Dale. You must know him. Robert the Devil, usually called Devil because he is such a positive devil, or Dev for short.”

“An evil name!” said I.

“But downright splendid fellow, regular top-sawyer at everything that really matters, naked mauleys, muffles, barkers, sharps or horses, and—my best friend. Consequently, as regards the . . . the lady, honour forbids, eh?”

“Naturally!” said I.

“And so,” quoth he, sighing deeper than ever, “though Friendship seals my lips so demnably and Honour strikes me dumb, I can and may use my eyes and worship her afar, eh, old friend and sportsman?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Then,” said he, dismounting from the stile, “take me where I can steal a peep at her loveliness and worship the sweet soul unseen and all unknown. Ha——” he exclaimed, halting suddenly, “and take particular care we don’t run foul of the old ’un!”

“Whom do you mean?”

“Your master, old Dale, Sir Oliver. I’ve dodged him so far.”

“Then you’ve never seen him?”

“And don’t mean to until I must.”

“Why not?”

“Well, from all accounts he’s a precious formidable old party, ponderous personage, no sense o’ humour,—in fact a regular grim, old Tartar—which, b’ged, reminds me I’ve a letter for him from my respected progenitor who is a bit of a Tartar too! Which is dem odd considering that until lately he couldn’t abide the fellow! But to-day,—‘Ragworth’, says my governor, shaking his whiskers in my chivvy, ‘never judge a man until you’ve met and talked with him,’—Report’s a dem liar and—Ha, there’s Dev! See how he rides—straight for the highest part o’ the hedge, of course!”

As the words were uttered, over the hedge came Robin astride the powerful hunter I had given him (by request) for his last birthday. And indeed a noble pair I thought them, horse and man alike so splendidly proportioned and both aflame with vigorous life and the young joy of it.

Catching sight of us, Robin shouted cheerily, wheeled and came down upon us at a hand gallop.

“So,” cried he, reining up his eager animal, “you’ve met old Rags, Governor?”

“Eh?” exclaimed the Viscount, “‘Governor’, Dev? Who . . . what——”

“Certainly, Raggy—my Governor, our Governor, Sir Oliver Dale, the one and only genuine article! My father, mother, brother and—friend! Why—what on earth——?” he exclaimed, for the Viscount had reeled, and now stood hand to brow, gazing about him rather wildly.

“Lord!” he gasped, “Oh . . . Lord——!” Here, chancing to meet my eye, he flushed painfully, stammered incoherently, mumbled and was dumb. But, seeing him so truly distressed, I laughed, clapped him on drooping shoulder, grasped his nerveless hand, shaking it heartily.

“Viscount Ragworth,” I said, “pray believe I am glad to know and welcome you to Abbeymead where I hope to see you often. Now come and pay your respects to the ladies.”

“But, I say, Governor,” enquired Robin, dismounting to walk with us, “what’s been doing?”

“I have been finding out a friend for myself, Robin, and now congratulate you on yours, I mean Viscount Ragworth. And yonder on the lawn I see Saphronia and Clia, go and surprise them, off with you. Though Viscount, first I’ll trouble you for the earl’s letter.”

“Certainly, sir, oh yes . . . certainly!” said he, fumbling desperately through the pockets of his perfectly fitting coat; retrieving the letter at last,

he handed it to me with a little bow.

“Sir,” said he, diffidently, as he grasped the hand I now proffered, “since you honour me with the name of friend, could you, pray will you drop the handle and permit me to be ‘Rags’ to you, will you, sir?”

Smiling, I promised and leaving them, came to the house there to wash and change my yeoman-like, miry garments and, thus refreshed, sat down at my writing-table, unfolded the earl’s missive and read this:

“MY DEAR DALE,

“I have a letter from your cousin Verinder which I here copy down for your perusal, viz:

“ ‘TO THE EARL OF STORRINGDEAN,

“ ‘MY LORD,

“ ‘I have read your communication delivered by Miss Everard, and am astounded.

“ ‘Yours, etc.,

“ ‘ROLAND VERINDER.’

“Whereeto, my dear Dale, though I abominate writing, I instantly troubled to respond, as hereunder:

“ ‘MY DEAR VERINDER,

“ ‘You have my permission to remain astounded so long as you please, since your present state of mind touches me so little that I herewith subscribe myself,

“ ‘Your very determined and assured friend,

“ ‘STORRINGDEAN.’

“This answer I despatched forthwith, since when I have had no word, so deem the incident now closed, though not entirely so amicably as desired. Howbeit, except Mr. Verinder stoop to personal violence, I am determined neither to shoot at or be shot by him. To-morrow, my dear Sir Oliver, I propose driving over in the afternoon for the pleasure of seeing you all at Abbeymead as arranged. Meanwhile pray know me

“Yours in all friendship,

“STORRINGDEAN.”

“P.S. Thanks to my son Ragworth I have met your Robin and a very handsome, manly fellow he seems. Please convey my humble duty to Miss Clia for whose beauty, wit and courage I entertain the profoundest admiration and very highest regard.”

“How very right! How extreme proper and well expressed!” said Clia herself who had stolen upon me quite unheard and read this letter over my shoulder.

“Good gracious, child!” I exclaimed, “How you startle one! Robin and Ragworth are seeking you.”

“Yes, sir. So when they’d found me I left them with Aunt Saphy and came to find you. And now—this ridiculous, mischievous letter, I mean Uncle Roland’s.”

“Clia, what do you think of it?”

“Perfectly odious and obvious, my dear! It’s meant as an affront, of course. Oh Noll, what a pest and plague he is with his silly arrogance and pride! He will force on this duel unless prevented.”

“Surely not!” said I. “My dear, you exaggerate.”

“I only wish I did!” she sighed. “But no,—he will write other letters, I know,—he intends to goad Lord Storringdean beyond endurance. Yes, I’m perfectly certain, Noll!”

“But how do you know this, how be so sure?”

“Because I know Uncle Roland. Look now, my Oliver,—the other day you bested or worsted him with your fists, like a horrid hobbledehoy instead of tottery old grandpapa and dignified gentleman—and very horrible it was for these maidenly eyes to watch, oh yes every blow—from behind a tree! So I watched how Uncle Roland, soothed and quite dignified by defeat, made it up with you and now you are better friends than ever, eh, my dear conquering hero?”

“He did, and we are,” I answered.

“Ah but,” said Clia, shaking her head at me, “what follows? Tell me this—if you can. But no, I’ll tell you. The animosity Uncle Roland bore you is now to be vented upon Lord Storringdean, he will hazard being shot, risk his very life—just to vindicate his hateful pride and restore his arrogant self-assurance. Now, don’t you see?”

“I . . . wonder!” said I, frowning at the letter in no small perplexity.

“Knowing his character, isn’t this precisely how you would expect Uncle Roly to act?”

“Well,” I began, dubiously, but she cut me short.

“Of course it is!” said she with the utmost decision. “So, unless this odious business is to happen, we must scheme how to make him swallow his pride—I wish it would stick in his arrogant throat—and accept Lord Storringdean’s proffered friendship.”

“Then,” said I, “for goodness sake let us think.”

“I am!” sighed she, perching on the arm of my chair to look down on me with troubled eyes. “Oh my dear, I am indeed, for your foolish sake.”

“How mine, Clia?”

“Think and—hush!” said she, closing my lips with one slim finger which I kissed instinctively, before I might check the impulse, whereat this finger became the more pressing until I averted my head. “Think!” she commanded. “Think hard! Are you?”

“Be sure of it!” I answered; but after we had pondered thus for perhaps half a minute, she grappled me suddenly by the hair to frown into my startled face and hiss at me between white teeth:

“However, Sir Fool Oliver, you shall not risk yourself again, no—not for a thousand Rolands and fifty thousand Deborahs! And do—not—, smile at me in that most detestable, superior manner! Now, continue thinking, sir.” Here, taking up the earl’s letter she scanned it over again.

“‘To-morrow,’” she read aloud, “‘I propose driving over in the afternoon.’ And he has a passion for horses, like Uncle Roland and you and every other male creature . . . horses! What could we do with horses, Noll?”

“Ride them, my child——”

“Don’t be flippant, sir, for . . . I’ve . . . the glimmer of an idea, the ghost of a plan. Will Uncle Roland be here to-morrow?”

“Highly improbable under the circumstances.”

“Well, he must be. Could you induce him to come, somehow, anyhow?”

“I believe I might—by offering to box with him.”

“Then write your offer at once and send it by one of the grooms, Tom May shall go on a fast horse,—no, I’ll take your message myself and Robin

shall ride with me and Ragworth too. I'll race them all the way. So write, my dear, write while I jump into my habit."

"First," said I, seizing a fold of her robe, "what is your scheme, miss?"

"Horses!" she answered. "And don't drag my pleats out——"

"What horses, how many, what for and where?"

"You know Uncle Roly has been trying for years to breed the perfect horse, speed and endurance?"

"Like hosts of other men. Yes, I knew this."

"Well, what you don't know, or anyone else, for it has been kept a profound secret, is that he thinks he has succeeded at last and so does Ned Braden his stud groom."

"And how do you know, Clia?"

"From Ned. You may remember I took care of his children when his wife was so ill and Ned is grateful. And the horse looks a splendid creature and they've named him 'Whirlwind'!"

"But, my dear, how——"

"Oh!" cried she. "Write that letter do and leave the rest to me." And away she sped.

Thus presently, though with some misgiving, I indited the following:

"MY DEAR ROLAND,

"If you are indeed wishful for a friendly go with the padded gloves, I shall be at your service to-morrow afternoon. Jessamy shall referee and Jerry Jarvis keep time for us. Also this will afford you the opportunity to bid these old friends Good-bye for the present as they leave for their usual travels very shortly. My love to the children, bless them, and humbly affectionate regards to your Deborah, with the same to you. Pray believe me now as ever,

Your dutiful cousin,

"OLIVER."

Which note was duly borne to its destination by Clia escorted by her two cavaliers, and with, for me, the following wholly unexpected result.

CHAPTER XIII

OF BACCHUS THE BENEFICENT

THE great chiming clock over the distant stable-yard had struck the hour of three and I, alone in my library, was completely absorbed with the writing of this narrative when, in pausing for the better phrasing of a sentence, I became aware of a very surprising noise, a most unusual stir, a tumultuous hum becoming louder. Laying down my pen I arose, crossed to the open casement, that affords a prospect of sunny gardens and wide park beyond, and was amazed to behold the tree-shaded lawn below the terrace athrong with people, all of them men, mostly young and many bedight in hunting pink.

I was viewing this unexpected company in ever-growing surprise when I caught sight of Gregor on the terrace and beckoned him to me.

“Gregor, can you explain——”

“Man, will ye tell me——” we began and both in the same moment.

“What’s the meaning of it?” I enquired.

“’Deed, Oliver,” he answered, shaking his head, “’Tis my own wonder. All the County is here, or vera nearly,—the younger half, but why, man, I ken nae mair than ye’sel’.”

“But there must be some reason.”

“Wheesht!” he exclaimed, his dour visage transfigured by sudden smile. “There she is, ay—and as lovely a reason as ever gladdened man’s eyes! Eh, but will ye notice the sweet yet stately grace o’ her,—that curtsy to Sir Jasper Dawe! That smile for young Thorpe! Losh man, ’tis nae wonder she’s the reigning toast ’twixt here and the sea, ay and further!”

“Still, Greg, I don’t understand.”

“But ye soon will,—she’s leaving her fine company and coming hereaway, and sae fleet o’ foot,—like a pretty fawn, ay, a free-limbed nymph——”

“Precisely, Greg, except that a fawn has four legs.”

“Ay, my metaphors were mixed a wee though both lovely.” And now she was before us, a shapely, vivid creature and so clad for the occasion that we both gazed dumbly, surprised that one so lovely could seem ever more so.

“Gracious goodness!” she exclaimed, viewing me with the utmost disparagement. “Look at him, Greg! Behold our Sir Oliver, his hair all—anyhow, his cravat rumpled and loose, and this shabby old coat! Be ashamed, sir, and your company here, and more expected!”

“My company?” I repeated. “Mine, Miss? Their mere sight amazes me _____”

“Will you change them, Noll, and make yourself presentable or must I do it for you?”

“Child,” said I, retreating hastily towards my writing-table. “I shall remain precisely as I am and, what’s more——”

In she came at me through the window, heedless of her silks and laces, frills and furbelows, and hustling me away to my dressing-room, had off my coat and whisked away my disparaged cravat all in a moment.

“Your hair! Stoop your head!” she commanded.

Meekly I obeyed and instantly she attacked me with brush and comb, and, thereafter, proceeded to half-throttle me in starched cravat which, having adjusted to her fancy, she next made selection of a coat into which she bustled and urged me, then stood away to judge the effect.

“Well?” I inquired.

“No!” said she, “you never will make the most of yourself, so I must, and do—ever since I was your little, anxious child-mother. Do you remember—or don’t you?”

“Of course!” said I.

“Which,” quoth she, “is no answer. Stand still, sir!” Saying which, she was at me again to pull me here, tug and pat me there until, finding me sufficiently presentable, forth she led me to welcome these guests,—and I none too willing, for though I love my fellow man, what man may possibly be intimate or even companionable with a crowd of him? However, these being mostly neighbours and all familiar, more or less, by sight at least, I contrived to play my part well enough, I hope. . . . But as I passed among them, in the air about me and on every lip was a word repeated over and over again:

“Whirlwind!”

Upon my confessing I had never as yet been privileged to behold this animal, I was informed by the many ‘knowing ones’ that he was a true horse lover’s dream, a paragon, a four-legged phenomenon; that he was a sorrel, a roan, a bright bay, a black with white points, a piebald, a skewbald and a flea-bitten grey . . .

I was hearkening to a young sportsman chiefly remarkable for whiskers short and curly and spurs long and straight, when, hearing the sound of horsehoofs approaching at tremendous speed, I glanced thitherward and beheld Roland coming up the long avenue at his usual stretching gallop. His appearance was hailed by a rousing cheer as, reining up with his wonted masterly grace, he glanced around upon these cheering young sportsmen in some surprise but perceiving their welcome was for him alone, saluted them from the back of his prancing, high-spirited animal with gracious smile and flourish of hat. Then leaving his capering steed in care of the waiting grooms, he dismounted and was instantly surrounded by eager admirers, for Roland is extremely popular with The County, a paladin in the hunting-field and acknowledged horse master.

And the word as before, but louder now was: “Whirlwind.”

“Eh? But . . . damme, gentlemen,” said he, “Who . . . how . . . what the _____”

“Leave him to them!” murmured two lips close by my ear as, slipping hand into mine, Clia led me aside to a seat in shady corner whence one may view the long, curving sweep of drive with its noble trees.

“Clia,” said I, shaking my head at her, “what does it all mean? What have you been doing?”

“Well,” she answered, with the languorous content of successful accomplishment, “I have let it be known Roly Verinder has bred such a wonder horse that, considering it unbeatable, he has, or will, enter the marvel for every possible classic race and is here to discuss its points and possibilities with his sporting neighbours, like the good neighbour and noble sportsman he is.”

“Good heavens!” I exclaimed. “Most irregular! Extremely uncanonical, not to say—”

“Then, dear Papa, don’t say it!” she retorted. “However I have made Uncle Roland hero of the hour, and all men love hero-worship, especially he! I have also made other arrangements—and here comes Nicholas to tell

you.” And she gestured where perambulating dignity now approached in the portly form of our butler, Nicholas Jenks, very conscious of the occasion and his own importance and therefore all that a butler could possibly be, from deliberate feet to the crown of a head silvered by long service here at Abbeymead.

Halting before us, he bowed with slow and stately flexion of his dignified rotundity, and addressed the empty air about a foot above my head.

“Sir, I have port of Number One bin, with sherry of the yellow seal, Amontillado, sir, with spirits and other refreshments, in the gun-room, sir.”

“But why there, Nicholas?” I enquired.

“Because,” answered Clia, instantly, “the gun room is also a horsy room—whips and spurs and brushes and foxes’ masks and things, and meant to-day for the two horsiest men in the South Country, to drink, and talk horses and forget everything else, especially their silly animosities—— And there’s the earl’s carriage at last, thank heaven! And look at Uncle Roly—yonder! You can just see the top of his hat above his horsy worshippers. Now sit here, sir, while I greet the earl and when I lead him to you pray leave the real talking to me.”

“With all my heart!” said I.

Thus, when the earl’s carriage had rolled smoothly to a stand-still, there was Clia to welcome him and forth he stepped with very youthful nimbleness, a lean, elegant figure, to bow with stately ceremony and thereafter, greet her with a very sincere heartiness; then with her slim hand tucked within his arm, they walked and talked themselves from view.

“I beg your pardon, sir!” said a voice, and Nicholas Jenks reappeared from the imminent leafage.

“What is it, Nick?”

“Well sir, Miss Clia gives me to understand that some serious drinking is to occur.”

“Oh, indeed?”

“Yes, sir—the Earl of Storringdean and Mr. Roland, sir, in the gun-room.”

“Probably—yes.”

“Under which circumstances, sir, and being forewarned, I have, with your permission, sir, made due preparations.”

“How, Nick?”

“I shall commence action, sir, by opening for their sober and therefore due enjoyment, the Number One port or Amontillado, than which there is no more perfect or truly noble wine in bottle to-day. This consumed, sir, and their palates thus less able to appreciate, I shall follow with a somewhat less precious vintage,—hoping you agree and rely upon my judgment, sir.”

“Positively, Nicholas. You are indeed the very sage and philosopher of bins and bottles! Yes,—you have been part of Abbeymead since ever I can remember, eh Nick?”

“And before, Sir Oliver,—long, long before! Six and sixty years! Bootboy to butler, sir. Ah, the years, they roll, sir, they—roll!” So saying, Nicholas bowed and departed with his usual leisured dignity.

Presently I heard Clia calling me—and then was shaking hands with Lord Storringdean.

“My dear Dale,” said he, with that unexpected heartiness I found so attractive, “this is an occasion! I’m head over ears in love with your witch, this amazing combination of beauty and brains, maidenly coyness and womanly audacity named Clia. I want her for my daughter-in-law if possible, Dale, if not, why then—I shall continue wanting her——”

“Horses!” said she, “Come and talk horses with Uncle Roland. And, though I could respect you as a father-in-law, I shall love you better as a friend. Oh Un-cle Roland,” she called, in her clear, ringing voice, “pray come here,—no, Lord Storringdean and I will come to you,—make way, gentlemen!”

Then she led his lordship forward, the company around Roland parted and these two enemies were fronting one another; Roland extremely stiff in the back, his handsome face rather grim,—the earl’s hawk-like features entirely expressionless, though I thought to see a slight, though ever-growing, menace in the curl of his tell-tale whiskers. Then Clia’s laugh broke the spell, for off came their hats and they bowed to each other though with such an extreme of ceremony as caused me no little trepidation; but Clia drew them together that she might slip a hand within the arm of each.

“Now,” said she, gaily, “come where we may talk cosily together, though first I shall be your Hebe and fill goblets and things that you may honour the toast I shall give you. So come with me!” And, willy-nilly, they went, though both of them very ominously stately.

Drawing a deep breath I glanced, almost furtively, at my visitors who still laughed and talked together, wholly oblivious of all but themselves. So, leaving these cheery souls to their own devices, I stole away to my library and sank down in my easy-chair to mop damp brow, marvel at Clia's sublime audacity, and wonder what was to be the outcome. Then, seeing my pens to hand, I unlocked my manuscript and proceeded to set down the incident to the best of my ability, as you read it here; and, finding myself in the vein, wrote on heedless of time and all beside, until I started at sound of Clia's voice and glanced up to behold her smiling in at me through the open lattice.

"Have they kissed each other yet?" she enquired.

"Who, my dear?"

"Your heroine and hero."

"Certainly not!"

"Poor, poor things!" she sighed, perching herself on the low window-ledge.

"Nonsense!" said I, rather peevishly.

"It is!" she nodded, "Nonsense indeed, because your poor heroine, sweet soul, knows your silly hero, miserable wretch, is positively yearning to kiss and be kissed as heroes and heroines always should yearn—and do!"

"Absurd!" quoth I, folding my manuscript together rather hastily.

"And have you done proper justice to the shining tresses of your lovely heroine's glorious hair, dearest Author?" she enquired, giving her own bright head a suggestive shake.

"I venture to think so, miss."

"Often?"

"Once or twice."

"And to suggest, very delicately of course, the perfect symmetry of her admirable form,—or should it be—forms?"

"Abandoned female animal!" I retorted. "Run away and suffer me to write while the mood is upon me."

"Very well," she sighed, meekly submissive, "Only I thought you might perhaps care to know."

"Know what, pray?"

“That our—no, that my plan succeeded.”

“Bravo! But—how?”

“Beyond description. So won’t your High Mobility be pleased to come that your meek and lowly handmaid may be privileged to show you?”

“This moment!” said I. And so, by way of the window, out to her I went.

“Oh Noll!” sighed she, slipping her arm in mine and leaning her head against me, “Oh Noll, it worked like a charm! I began talking of horses and foals and fillies and kept filling their glasses until they both began talking too. So I went on filling their glasses till they forgot their arrogance, themselves, and even—me, and talked horses at each other, dry horses and mud horses, jockeys, feed, trainers, chances of position and all so agreeably that,—well, here I am to receive your amazed and grateful commendations. So what have you to say?”

“Baggage!” I answered, squeezing the round, soft arm I held. “Where are you taking me?”

“To behold my handiwork,—a peep at our two ferocities,” she answered with sound very like a school-miss’s giggle. And presently she halted me behind a certain leafy screen whence one might see into the gun-room very plainly through the open window. And I beheld bottles very many on a table where sat Roland smiling upon Lord Storringlean who beamed back at him.

Quoth Roland, full-toned:

“M’ dear Mortimer ol’ friend, I protest a’ vow I was never happier than t’ know you m’ dearol’ friend Mortimer, ’pon m’soul ’n’ honour!”

Answered the earl, in voice a little more strident than usual:

“M’ dear Verinder . . . my . . . very dear . . . Roland, there is no . . . man-in-all-the-land . . . your friend Mortimer . . . myself . . . shall welcome more warmly . . . hearth and home, stables ’n’ cellar than my honoured-and-steemed friend Roland Verinder. Sir . . . God bless you! Roland . . . my hand!”

Very slowly and with a certain deliberation they rose and clasped each other’s hands.

“Mortimer . . . ol’ f’low,” quoth Roland, “such sent’ments, so nobly expressed, touch me, sir, touch me very sensibly, damme! Y’honour me, Mortimer, y’do indeed. Henceforth pray know me yours! Friend and brother, Mortimer, brother b’gad!”

“Roland,” answered the earl, “Friendship and Brotherhood being . . . holy bond, let’s honour ’em in a last glass.”

“With you, Mortimer . . . bumper and no . . . heeltaps!”

“There!” murmured Clia, as we stole away, “Bacchus has his uses, my Oliver!”

And after some while my lord rang for his carriage which duly presenting itself, forth he went arm in arm with Roland, both walking with some care and extraordinary dignity; they as carefully mounted into the spacious vehicle, bowed and smiled together bareheaded upon the universe, and together were driven away.

CHAPTER XIV

TELLS HOW AND WHY I BEGAN TO BE TROUBLED

“OCH-HEIGH!” moaned Gregor M’Gregor, sinking back in easy-chair and shaking his grim head at me, “Man Oliver, there’s trouble brewing oot yon, —our ferocious young Rabbie!”

“How so, Gregor?”

“Him so passionate, Clia so proud, and both of ’em so mighty detairmined!”

“What about, Greg?”

“Marriage, Noll. Our lassie, being a woman forbye, and knowing her own mind in one way, has changed her mind in another way, ay! It seems she loves Rob so well that she’ll leave him to bless the arms of a better woman than hersel’. Whereupon Rabbie flies into a tantrum, and sma’ wonder, calls her faithless, rages and raves to heaven and so does she. Ay, they did so, taking no more notice o’ me than if I had been a china ornament or picture on the wall. Finally, she cries shame on him for his unmanly fury an’ childish lack o’ restraint, ungentlemanly vituperation and general ‘odiousness’, her ain particular worrd, ye’ll mind, and sweeps oot o’ the room and awa’, leaving Rob to curse vera bitterly and kick the furniture. And what d’ye say to this gallimaufry o’ botheration, Noll?”

I shook my head, and before I might find an answer, knuckles rapped, door opened and Nicholas Jenks appeared, though without his usual ponderous dignity, and speaking all in a breath:

“Sir, I crave your presence! Finch, sir, ’tis Finch my second footman, on his back, sir, in the Long Gallery with Mr. Robin standing over him extreme desperate, who, I fear, may proceed to even further lengths, indescribably violent, sir, nay—quite murderous,—threatening to slay poor Finch if he so much as stirs a finger! I beg you’ll intervene.”

So I arose and coming into the gallery filled with the staring portraits of a long ancestry, found the second footman prone, with powdered head in a corner, and motionless as a corpse and Robin, a two-fisted fury crouched above him.

“Robin!” said I, grasping his arm. “Stand back, sir, and let the man up! D’you hear?”

“Oh yes . . . yes, I hear,” he answered thickly so that when he straightened his powerful young frame to scowl on me I saw by his flushed cheek and flaring eyes that he had been drinking. “Fellow got in my way, damn him!” he cried hoarsely. “Listening at keyhole——”

“Sir,” quoth Nicholas, “I declare, with all due respect, Finch was not!”

“Robin,” said I, “come with me.” Muttering, he turned to obey but chancing to catch sight of the long line of staring portraits, shook his fist at them very wildly.

“Look at ’em!” he raved. “Look at ’em—sneering fine ladies and gentlemen all! And scorning me, every one, because I’m no better than I am . . . no fine gentleman but nameless wretch, creature o’ the gutter, slime and misery and sin. . . . Oh curse them! And she knows it too and remembers it against me——”

“Be dumb!” said I, shaking him violently. “Silence that drunken tongue and follow me.” He broke from my hold, he clenched his fists against me, then laughing scornfully, bowed.

“Lead on, respected sir—I follow!” The which he did, close upon my heels and stamping till his spurs jingled, for he was dressed for riding.

“Close the door!” said I, when we had reached the library. “And you, Gregor, pray remain. And now, Robin,” said I, sitting down the better to survey this young ferocity, “it is evident you have broken your solemn promise and have been drinking again——”

“Yes, I have . . . I have!” he nodded. “And it has only made things clearer . . . lies and hypocrisy——”

“Why must you savage my servants?” I demanded, my anger stirred by his too evident defiance. “How dare you behave in such ruffianly fashion?”

“Dare?” he answered, with very ugly smile, “I dare any thing and anybody, so—be warned!”

“Robin, are you threatening me?”

“Yes . . . yes, I am!” he cried, in choking voice, “and if you’d know why—ask Gregor, he knows, he heard! She’s . . . thrown me over . . . jilted me! And why . . . why? Because she’s deceived me . . . you and she . . . behind my back! Oh, I know . . . ha, damnation!” he cried, his passion rising to a

frenzy beyond control. "I know of it all . . . I've heard talk in the village, curse them! You and she . . . in the wood . . . kissing . . . in each other's arms _____"

"Stop!" cried I, and was afoot so suddenly that he recoiled, then set himself as if expecting me to attack him.

"Robin," said I, "such unworthy, such vile implication shames only yourself——"

"Then, tell me I lie!"

"No! Instead I tell you it was a kiss bestowed in all innocence——"

"Innocence!" cried he, with look and gesture so wild and threatening that M'Gregor started up and flung himself between us.

"Hold off, Rob!" said he, laying bony hands on those powerful young shoulders that made to throw them off yet could not, "Never raise fist against your benefactor! Don't say or do that you'll grieve for a' your days! Go wi' old Gregor as minds ye when ye were no more than poor, destitute bairn. Come, lad, come!"

Now when Robin had suffered himself to be led away, I sank down in my chair with head bowed between clenched hands and remained thus a great while, reproaching myself very bitterly for that kiss in the wood which, though innocent as God knows, might perhaps have seemed otherwise to the hidden spy who must have seen, to spread such evil gossip in the village.

I was yet grieving for all this, when back came Gregor; he closed the door, set his back against it, took out his snuff-box and inhaled a copious pinch, gazing on me the while and I at him.

"Poor Robin!" said I, voicing the thought uppermost in my mind, "He's quite distracted,—and—no wonder!"

"Ay," nodded Gregor, "poor lad, indeed! He's mounted and ridden off like a madman. 'Where awa'?' says I tae him. 'To fight!' says he. 'Who?' says I. 'Anyone!' says he, and off he goes. . . . 'Tis an unco' unchancy business, Oliver."

"It is!" said I, despondently.

"And ye've no' worrd to say against the lad?"

"Not one, Greg! No, I hold myself to blame."

"Ay, you would. Though the young fury would ha' been at ye wi' his fists but for me."

"And indeed, Gregor, were I so despicable as he evidently believes, so contemptibly base to . . . make love upon the sly . . . woo . . . behind his back, then I should deserve the severest thrashing he could give me."

"Agreed!" nodded Gregor, rapping his snuff-box very loudly. "But . . . that kiss in the wood, Oliver?"

"Yes!" I answered, "as we have kissed ever since she was a child,—no more, Gregor, on my soul, no more!"

"Losh man!" he exclaimed, with sound between strangled laugh and groan. "Oh Noll, y' great innocent, ye've been making love to each other all her days, 'tis in your voice, looks, ay your every gesture,—almost!"

"Now God forbid!" I exclaimed.

"However, so it is, Oliver!"

"Then," said I, staring up at him in the utmost dismay, "this is truly frightful!"

"No, 'tis only natural, Oliver man. She crept into your heart as a little desolate waif and made it her nest,—to-day, being a woman, she'll make it her home yet. Ay,—frown if ye will, but the sooner the better, say I!"

"Poor Robin!" said I, again. "Poor, dear boy!"

"Ay, boy it is, Oliver, and the woes o' youth are easier borne and sooner forgot."

"Perhaps," I answered, shaking my head, "but not always, Gregor. Youth, like Age, can suffer and break its heart and, being young, perhaps more painfully." So saying, I sighed miserably and rising, took up my hat.

"Where now, Oliver?" enquired Gregor, uneasily.

"The woods, Greg, to take leave of Jessamy and Jerry Jarvis, they are off on their travels as usual, to-morrow."

So forth I went into the hot and windless air of this midsummer afternoon. And being thoughtful and very troubled I went slowly across smooth lawns, through flowery gardens, by wide, undulating park and so to the cool, green twilight of the woods, this whispering, leafy solitude so beloved of Clia and especially myself, since it was the woodlands had first given her to my love and care, a frightened, misused, little creature of the

wild, a timid, elfin sprite to steal into my heart and make herself a nest there even as Gregor had said. . . . But now, she was a woman and Robin a man . . . ^[1] how then must I act, what could I do to ensure the ultimate happiness of these so wayward children of my adoption?

^[1] As set forth in *The Crooked Furrow*.

These troubled musings were banished suddenly as, borne to me on the peaceful stillness, came sounds there could be no mistaking and nowise peaceful, the smack and thudding impact of padded fists on naked flesh, with rustle and stamp of feet; therefore I hurried towards these sounds and thus presently beheld that I shall never forget and hope never to see again.

Hard beside the Tinker's little tent, Jessamy and Robin were close engaged in terrible conflict; here was no sane and healthy bout of fisticuffs between friends or master and pupil, but a combat very dreadful in its stark ferocity and more especially as regards Robin who, fierce-eyed, bloody and relentless, was attacking with a grim savagery that seemed resistless, for Jessamy, the master, was bleeding too, and Jessamy was woefully distressed.

"Robin!" I cried, hastening towards them.

"No—no!" panted Jessamy. "It must . . . be him . . . or me, brother, for ——" As the words were uttered, Robin broke through Jessamy's failing guard and the champion, this mighty veteran, staggered, went down backwards heavily and so lay a moment inert and gasping painfully.

"Lord . . . Jess!" cried Jeremy in weeping tone, "Oh, Gorramighty, Jess!"

"Up!" panted Robin, savage and relentless. "Get up. I'm not done . . . with you yet . . . I want plenty more . . . blood . . . yours and mine. . . Get up . . . if you're man enough and fight till . . . one of us can't. . . Up, if you aren't afraid and fight me with bare hands!"

Jessamy shook his head to clear it and rose, whereat Robin would have rushed him but that I interposed.

"Brother," sighed Jessamy, ridding himself of the gloves, "let be! Your Robin's a terror as fights to kill! Come then, lad!" he cried, flexing mighty arms, "One more round to pleasure ye, and bare knuckles. Time us, Jerry." A long moment of tense waiting, and then:

"Go!" cried Jeremy; then, almost as the word was uttered, Robin leapt . . . And now it was not his blood-smeared face or merciless blows that shocked and sickened me so much as the murderous purpose so evident in every line of his powerful, young body. For here ensued such terrible

whirlwind fighting, such cunning feints, shifts and lightning counters as went far beyond my describing. Twice Jessamy reeled and once Robin was smitten to one knee; Jessamy's broad chest was heaving distressfully, Robin's breath hissed and whistled between gnashing teeth; they swayed together exchanging punishing flush-hits, they staggered apart,—then Robin sprang forward, but—so did Jessamy to check this furious onset with masterly uppercut, I saw the swing and drive of his right, heard the impact of this shattering blow, and Robin was down, kicking, writhing; he struggled to his knees but stayed so, gasping:

“Wait . . . wait, I'm . . . not done——”

“No,” panted Jessamy, “but . . . I am! Here's blood enough . . . yours and mine! Be satisfied . . .” And crossing to the log, he sank down there, head bowed, mighty arms across his thighs and fists dangling.

“Why Jes . . . Oh Jessamy!” cried Jeremy, clasping this drooping, breathless form, “How are ye, lad?”

“Never so . . . near to it . . . Jerry. How's . . . young Goliath?”

Even as he spoke, Robin got to his feet, cursed bitterly, snatched up his discarded garments and strode away where his horse stood tethered.

“Never again!” sighed Jessamy, looking after this terrible young figure. “He'd kill me next time . . . or I him, so—never again. For there goes a born two-handed fighting-man . . . with death in each fist! Which may the good Lord forbid. Amen!”

And when I had bidden farewell to these my old friends, I turned and went my way, a man exceeding troubled.

CHAPTER XV

SHOCK

ON this brief journey through this awareness called Life, we are sometimes privileged to meet other wayfarers who bear us company awhile and by their kindly fellowship make our way the brighter and easier; and we take them as a matter of course until comes the parting and it is not until distance has hidden them from our sight and the sound of their voices but a memory, that we realize, all too late, that we have entertained angels unawares.

So it is that I am perhaps a little too prone to expect angels at every turn and, consequently, am sometimes disappointed. Yet better so, I dare to think, better be thus often deceived than be wholly unconscious of these heavenly presences that bless us all too seldom.

Now, having written this down on impulse, I must needs fall to a meditation, deliberating whether or no to permit myself this digression, since a good novel, as I suppose, must and should concern itself solely with the actions, the woes and joys of its characters.

I was yet hesitating, unable to make up my mind, when Saphronia leaned in towards me through the open window.

“Such a pretty sunset, Noll!” said she. “So come out and take a walk . . . besides I want to talk to you, come, put away your work, do.”

“With pleasure!” I answered. So, having locked away my papers, I took a hat and went out to her.

“Where shall we stroll, my dear?” I enquired, taking her arm.

“Oh . . . well . . . anywhere,” she answered, vaguely. “Yes, into the coppice. I love trees, especially at evening time.”

Now as we strolled along thitherward, I caught her eyeing me almost furtively and once or twice she half turned as if about to speak but checked herself as often.

“What is it, Saphy?” I enquired at last, smiling down upon her.

“Eh . . . oh . . . what’s what?” she demanded.

"I thought you were about to say something."

"Well, so I am—presently." And, after we had gone some while in silence: "Oliver——" she began suddenly and was as suddenly dumb.

"Yes, my dear?"

"I . . . oh . . . we . . . as you know Inigo and I are going home to-morrow, leaving you . . . I mean if we go we must leave you, of course——"

"And," said I, stooping to kiss the top of her very coquettish small cap, "we shall all be sorry to lose you, dear. Though Abbeymead is always waiting to welcome you back again."

"Yes, yes—thank you, dearest Olly, we know this most certainly . . . But . . . before I go, I want . . . I ought——" here once again she faltered, broke off, and then continued almost feverishly: "Have you heard from Rosamond, lately?"

"No," I answered, looking down at her persistently averted head in a growing perplexity. "Why do you ask, she, ah—she isn't ill, I hope?"

"Oh dear me no! She wrote to me in Paris quite vivaciously, she is very well."

"Thank God!" said I fervently. "You see, my dear Saphy, she has always seemed to me more angel than woman."

"Yes, Noll, yes. Sorrow and suffering have crowned her with glory. But she has experienced more trouble at 'The Waterman'—more horrid ruffianism.—Oh that dreadful neighbourhood! And chiefly the work of a great, wicked wretch called Black John . . . a most frightful bloodthirsty, monstrous rogue and wretch, oh terrible! And you know, I suppose, that the Faithful Three are now—only two? William was killed three months ago."

"Yes, poor old fellow! An accident, drowned, I hear."

"Well, his poor, battered body came ashore below bridge, but how he died was never quite certain,—so bruised and disfigured as they always are—Goodness gracious! What's that?"

"Only poor Martin's flute," I answered, halting, as to us stole the sound of the little cripple's elfin music.

"Who is 'Martin',—why poor, and why a flute?" she enquired, glancing about in her quick bird-like way. "And why in the world does he pipe here all alone among these prickly thickets and things?"

"Come and see!" I answered, and turning from the path, came where stood the musician, his puny, misshapen body hunched between his clumsy crutches and leaning against a tree, playing soft, trilling notes, his great, wistful eyes up-staring into the leafage above him as though they beheld some glorious vision.

Becoming aware of us, he ceased playing to snatch off his shapeless old hat, saluting us in turn with an odd little bow.

"Gracious lady," said he, in his pleasant, strangely cultured accents, "no need you should pity me to-day for, though I show so small and crooked outside, I am all glorious within, straight and strong as a giant, for she is with me, mam, ay—throned up there on the sunbeam! So I be happy a bit, mam. Sir Oliver can tell ee why and who. Sir Oliver he do tell me as there be no death, only a passing out o' life into fuller life where none can be weak and crooked and woeful. And somewhiles I believes—almost, ay—specially when she comes back to me out o' the grave . . . my poor Rose. But so happy I be to-day, lady, as I'll blow ee a jig for sixpence . . . roses for her grave, lady, roses red and white, sweet as Rose herself . . . loved roses her did."

"My dear boy," said Saphronia, plunging small, mittened hand into her reticule, "take you this, and this! There, and there!" And into Martin's old hat money showered and clinked. "Go buy your flowers, go boy go, and God bless you!"

"Oh Lordy—lord!" cried Martin breathless with joy. "Lord love ye, ma'm, I will, I will! I'll bury her grave wi' roses! I'll make it a glory . . . roses red and white!" Then, uttering sound that may have been laugh or sob, he pocketed the money, swung to his great crutches and went thudding away.

"Mad, of course, poor creature!" sighed Saphronia, gazing after him. "Yes, poor soul, quite, quite demented! And this," said she, her gaze still fixed, "brings me to . . . Oliver, Oh Noll, have you seen Robin to-day or . . . Clia?"

"No," I answered, vaguely troubled by something in her look and tone, "I have been shut up in my study all day, but they are off together somewhere, I expect . . . I . . . hope so."

"But, Oliver, he hasn't been anywhere near the house all day long, Robin I mean. I'm surprised you didn't notice. He didn't come home all last night either, he hasn't appeared since his terrible exhibition of temper, such wicked outburst! Surely you were aware of this?"

“Well, yes,” I answered, sighing, “but hoped he would have returned long before this, and full of remorse as he always is——”

“Oh, my dear, my poor Noll,” said she, tearfully, “is your past generosity to become your present grief? Is the wicked, impish boy grown into a vile wretch, a demon man to be his own destruction and your despair? Oh Noll, I tremble——!”

“Then don’t, my dear,” said I, and kissed her troubled face, when, and to my amazement, she clung to me and began to weep so terribly that I chilled with sudden, dreadful apprehension.

“Saphronia,” said I, “my dear, what is it? Why are you so strange? Look at me. . . . Ah, Great God,—what has happened?”

And this she told I would not set down but that it explains so much of what followed.

“Clia,” she gasped, “assaulted by some man, bruised . . . torn . . . brutalized. Oh Noll, some villain . . . she won’t tell me who . . . attacked her in the wood. She has locked herself in her bedchamber! Go to her . . . comfort her, she is beyond my help——”

Waiting for no more I sped away on stumbling feet, half blind with a rage that seemed consuming me, shivering with such horror of dread that my sick mind revolted; but, deep in my soul, I knew that were my ghastly fears justified, I should certainly hunt down and kill this ravening beast that mistaken Nature had formed as man, slay him and joy to do it, no matter who he might be.

So came I to her chamber door and knocked, calling her name, at first with no response, then so fiercely that the stout oak quivered beneath my fists.

So, at last, she opened to me and, because of the look in her eyes, I cried out; then I swept her up to my breast, bore her to the bed and seating her there, cast myself upon my knees before her.

“Clia . . . my love . . . my child,” I muttered, “tell me . . . everything, and tell me . . . the truth.”

“Yes,” she murmured, laying her hands on my hot, upturned brow, and looking down at me with haggard eyes, “Yes, I must, I will. But don’t . . . don’t look so terrible, Oliver, because though it is so vile and beastly, it is not so . . . so frightful or such . . . loathsome defilement as you are thinking and dreading, my dearest dear. I’m not a sated beast’s shamed victim. . . .

And for this, Oliver, Oh how I do thank God. I have been trying to pray and tell Him my gratitude for sparing me . . . giving me strength. So don't fear, my Darlingest, and break your heart for me! . . . Yes, cry, Noll, cry, these tears are your comfort and my joy." So saying, she drew me nearer, hiding my face in her fragrant bosom and I so mightily relieved of my agonizing fears that I in turn tried to think a prayer of gratitude. . . . "No, don't move," she whispered, "lie so until I have told you."

"Was it . . ." I mumbled.

"But," she continued, as if I had not spoken, "before I tell you one word, you must make me a sacred promise, yes—an oath to God that you will seek no vengeance on this beast nor foul yourself with his blood . . . not so much as even touch him. Swear this, Oliver!"

"No!" I muttered, "No, I cannot! He might . . . attempt you again."

"He never will! So swear this by God, Oliver!"

"But . . . Oh, my dear——"

"Swear it," she cried, as if in pain, "swear it or you will break my heart . . . I shall go mad with terror and anxiety—swear!"

So, upon my knees and with her arms about me, I took this oath.

"Now, Oliver, swear again that you will never speak of this to Robin, or Gregor, or any living soul,—swear, Oliver!" And, when I had done so, she held me a little closer and spoke whispering:

"Yes, it was . . . George Ash! And if it be any excuse, he had been drinking. He tried to kiss me, so I struck him with my whip. Then he laughed and said that you . . . that I . . . in the spinney. . . Oh, he was so utterly vile I hit him again. Then he leapt on me like a wild animal . . . caught me in his arms . . . tore me, and then. . . Oh Oliver, I know now how frightful, how brutishly cruel a wicked man may be. He stifled my screams, but, as we struggled, he tripped and. . . Oh thanks to merciful God, I broke away and ran. But if . . . if he had dragged me down, Oliver. Oh . . . then?"

"You would have been my darling child . . . to love only the more," I answered. Now at this, she uttered a broken, inarticulate cry, clasping me almost fiercely and kissing my bowed head in such strange, desperate manner as frightened me; then she was sobbing wildly on my breast, like the terrified creature and shamed soul she was.

What then I did or said to soothe and comfort her God alone knows, but it was all in vain and I at my wits' end when Saphronia descended upon us,

as it were, in a whirl of words and flutter of petticoats.

“Go away, Noll . . . get away man . . . be off, Noll . . . we don’t want you . . . away . . . hurry . . . scurry—Go!”

So off I went, to sit at my writing-table staring at nothing; to ramble out upon the terrace; to go tramping aimlessly to and fro upon the lawn and hardly aware I did so, for all my thought was this: How and by what possible means, remembering my solemn oath, could I rid the neighbourhood of this brutal menace—Ash? Which problem being quite beyond me just then, I determined to seek advice of Gregor and hastening back to the house, came to that room he called his ‘office’ wherein he transacted all business of the estate, knocked on the door and entered to find him hard at work.

“Gregor,” said I, schooling myself to temperate speech, “that fellow Ash, George Ash, he . . . annoys me.”

“Umph-humph!” quoth Gregor, eyeing me keenly beneath his beetling brows. “Annoys ye, d’ye tell me? And is that all? Man, ye look as if ye were fair yearning tae tare his liver oot!”

“Nonsense!” said I, sinking upon the nearest chair.

“Aweel, let’s put it a wee bit milder and say murder him.”

“However,” said I, attempting a smile, “he must leave the neighbourhood. I mean to get rid of him, Greg!”

“Ou ay, but juist how? Will ye tell me that?”

“Exactly!” said I, frowning in perplexity. “How?”

“The man farms his own land, ye ken, and vera guid land it is, ay ’tis that.”

“I must buy him out, Greg.”

“The man’ll no sell, as ye ken vera weel. We tried last year as you’ll remember, Noll, ay—on your instructions I offered him far more than his property was worth—and mysel’ a’ of a dither for fear he’d accept.”

“So now, Gregor, we must offer even more.”

“Man, are ye fair daft?”

“He will sell—at a price, and his price shall be mine.”

“But what is his price?”

“This you must discover. Double my last offer, treble it. I give you a free hand, Gregor, there is no limit. The fellow must and shall go. And pray attend to the matter at once.”

“But,” moaned Gregor as I rose, “why . . . what’s it mean . . . what’s your reason for such mad offer?”

“Well,” I answered, smiling down, and quite naturally now, into his astonished face, “you see, Greg, the man . . . annoys me.” Then I left Gregor M’Gregor staring after me and, for once, quite speechless.

CHAPTER XVI

MURDER

THIS morning, after breakfast, having received a comforting report from Saphronia, I took a walk villagewards. But I was not many yards from the park gates when I beheld a smart gig approaching, driven by Thomas Basset, landlord of the ‘Matravers Arms’, with Farmer Tyson beside him, both worthy fellows and my tenants.

They pulled up at sight of me to acknowledge my gesture of salutation very respectfully though with an unusual diffidence, or so I thought.

“A beautiful morning!” said I.

“Which, sir,” answered Basset, staring hard at the handle of his whip, “no man never see a finer, eh James?”

“Never!” quoth Farmer Tyson. “Never no when and no where,—though a drop or two o’ rain wouldn’t do no manner o’ harm.”

“And now, James,” said Basset, glancing sideways at his companion, “oo first? Which on us?”

“You, Tom, you.”

“Very good!” said Basset, then socketing his whip, he turned towards me, took off his hat, gazed into it as if seeking inspiration therein, put it on again, and began:

“S’Oliver, on sich an ’eavenly morning as this yere, it goes ’ard agin me for to cast a shade or shadder on the path of any man ’specially sich a noble, fair-minded gen’leman as yourself, Squire. But fax, sir, is fax, and the first is—my winder, and the second—my eight-day grandfeyther clock, and the third—my nevvv Job. Not to mention young Mr. Diggle, Frank Lodge and Willyum Pring. And, S’Oliver, all along on account on your young gen’leman, Muster Robin, sir.”

“Then,” said I, seating myself on grassy bank beside the road, “this is very distressing. But pray go on, Thomas, tell me precisely what has happened.”

And Thomas forthwith went on,—thus:

“Well, S’Oliver, last evening, ’long about six o’clock ’twould be, sir, your Must’ Robin ’e comes a gallopin’ on his black ’oss and lookin’ like a wild and savage cannyball—all blood and no ’at, and comes a-stridin’ in to we-uns in the tap. ‘Be Jarge Ash yere?’ ’e axes me, mighty fierce and fur’ous like, and when I tells him ‘no,’ ’e turns on the company, which be young Mr. Diggle, Frank Lodge, Willyum Pring and my nevvv Job, glares on ’em each an’ every, and says ’e: ‘You’m all vile-tongued, damnation liars!’ says ’e, them being ’is very i-dentical words, sir, as I ’ad took down in writing. And then, Squire, then ’e sets to! He begins by knocking young Mr. Diggle into my grandfeyther clock, sir, which ain’t give a single tick nor chime since! Then ’e breaks out the winder wi’ Willyum Pring, lattice an’ all, sir, and throws Frank Lodge out arter ’im, and my nevvv Job atop o’ them both! And that, S’Oliver, that be about all, sir.”

“And quite enough!” said I.

“Well, now, sir, James Tyson do ’ave summat for to tell ee. Your turn, James!”

“Why then, Squire,” quoth Farmer Tyson, giving a tug at each of his short, trim whiskers, “my son Jim, though a goodish, steadyish lad, as a rule, has fell off o’ late,—drinking, sir, gambling and gells, b’reason as he’s took up o’ late, and agin my wishes and words, wi’ that theer George Ash over to Barksteed which George aren’t nowise no good for nobody, specially the gells, poor silly creeters! I have heered tell as poor young Rose Thorn—but, she’m dead and gone, so—let be, says I. Hows’ever, sir, yesterday evening, ’long about ar-past six, your Muster Robin comes a-riding into our yard, me being away to Lewes market, and ‘Hi, you Jim’, says ’e, ‘where be that Peeping Tom, that dam’, lying raskell George Ash?’ ‘Dunno, sir’, says my Jim, ‘unless ’e be over to his own farm.’ ‘No, he ain’t theer,’ says Must’ Robin, getting down off’n his hoss. ‘Well, ’e ain’t yere,’ says Jim. ‘Why then,’ says Must’ Robin, ‘since you be his friend and been ’arking to his lies and passing of ’em on, you’ll do!’ says he, and knocks my Jim that senseless as it takes two buckets o’ water to bring him round. And, sir, Jim in his best clothes as do be fair ruined, the water being a bit mucky like.”

“Well,” said I, bowing my head lest they should see I was smiling despite myself, “all I can say to you both is that your damages shall be made good.”

“And S’Oliver,” answered Tom Basset, heartily, “no man couldn’t nowise say no fairer! Eh James?”

“Never nohow!” quoth Farmer Tyson, cheerily. “Fair and square you be, Squire, ever and always. And, sir, I’m free to confess as I’m hoping and thinking as mebbe my son Jim may ha’ had some o’ the fullishness knocked clean out o’ him, for, by all accounts, ’twere a pretty tidy wallop as Must’ Robin give him.”

“And so, sir,” said Thomas, when he had turned the gig, “a fair good marnin’ to ee!”

“Likewise our best respex, Squire!” added Farmer Tyson. And away they drove, talking cheerily like the old friends they are. As for me, I sat there, elbow on knee and chin on fist, anything but cheery, thinking now upon my problem named Robin until, hearing a sound of hoofs coming at sedate amble, I glanced up to see our vicar, the Reverend Septimus Clegg, approaching on steed, plump and sleek as he himself is haggard and lean, who now reined up to flourish his shabby old hat at me.

“Well met, Oliver!” said he, with the kind familiarity of long acquaintance. “A glorious morning, God give you joy of it, my dear sir. How are you all at Abbeymead?”

“Go with me and see,” I answered, grasping the hand he proffered, a hand so gentle to comfort, so strong and instant in humble service.

“Abbeymead is no place for solitary old bachelor and poor parson so busy as I,” he smiled, “you make me too welcome, kind looks and words, rare old port, I find it hard to begone. Yet I am on my way there now for word with . . . young Robin.”

“Pray what is it this time?” I enquired, in some apprehension, for his gentle smile had vanished, and now his face showed graver than usual as he answered:

“Merely words—as yet! It seems he has threatened to horsewhip George Ash, indeed to . . . take his life,—though—though, of course this is mere exaggeration . . . or so I believe it, but I should like a talk with Robin.”

“I wish we might!” said I, my apprehensions growing, “but Robin is not at Abbeymead, nor was he home all last night. . . . Why, what is it, Septimus? What?” I exclaimed, in quick alarm, for, dropping the reins, he had clasped hands and closed eyes as if in prayer.

“God forbid!” he murmured. “I am hoping, praying that it be only a coincidence, for I have just called at Barksteed Farm and they told me George Ash was also away all last night and has not returned! Though, to be sure, and this is a comfort to remember, George is frequently away . . . poor,

wayward fellow! I've known him since he was a rosy-cheeked innocent . . . one of my choir-boys with voice pure and sweet as a little angel. I had great hopes of him then, but his parents died too soon and left him too much money, poor fellow. To-day I pray God help him for, Oliver, if ever a man was haunted by past evils—it is George Ash. He came to me one night recently, he'd been drinking but was not drunk, yet seemed a man terrified, a child afraid of the dark. He told me he was followed night and day by something only his eyes could see and that he was never alone unless quite drunk,—and how a voice sang to him that old mournful 'Willow' song, a voice no one could hear but himself. He told me also that poor, distracted Martin Croft plays his flute at him under his window in the black dead of night. I prayed with the unhappy fellow and did what I might to comfort him but I hear he has been more or less drunk ever since. . . . And you have no idea where Robin is?"

"No," I answered, miserably.

"Ah, well," sighed Parson Septimus, gathering up the reins, "I'll jog on to the village, a duty call. Pray give my love to Miss Clia, God bless her! I'll be in to see you all soon." So, away he rode and left me very deep in thought; and what must stick in my mind but his description of George Ash, a rosy-cheeked, innocent choir-boy singing pure and sweet as an angel.

At last, back homeward went I, across wide park until before me, throned stately upon its terraces, rose the great house of Abbeymead, this almost too splendid heritage of mine, with its many mullioned windows, latticed casements, gables and chimneys, and all very silent in the morning sunshine.

Having shut myself into the library, this spacious, book-lined chamber I have made my study, I unlocked and took forth the manuscript of this narrative and, glancing through what I had written last night, found it all so very much other than I had hoped that, chilled and disheartened by its ineptitude, I was greatly minded to destroy all I had written, when I was startled by the sound of wrangling voices, a heavy fist pounded on the door which opened to show me the portly form of Nicholas with, behind his amplitude, a glimpse of whiskers and velvetene.

"Sir!" quoth Nicholas puffing slightly and flushed with indignation, "pray believe it was not myself that knocked so loud and unseemly——"

"No, sir, 'twore me!" said another voice; a powerful, sunburnt hand set the butler aside and in his stead was the stalwart person of Josiah Beck, my head gamekeeper; he stepped into the room, closed the door, set his back

against it, shook his grizzled head, staring on me very strangely, drew one hand across furrowed brow, the other was hidden behind him.

“What is it, Beck?” said I, struck by his odd look. “What are you hiding there? Josiah, what is the matter?” “Ax your pardon, S’Oliver,” he answered hoarsely, drawing hand across brow again, “but sir. . . . Oh b’God, sir, ’tis that ghastly fearsome as I dunno ’ow for to tell ee! But first—this, sir! You know it, I reckon?” And, speaking, he stepped forward and laid Robin’s favourite whip on the table before me. “You know it, S’Oliver?”

“Oh yes.”

“Do ee notice . . . aught about it, sir?”

Now looking more nearly I saw it smeared very dreadfully with blood.

“Josiah, where did you find this?”

“Close beside . . . it, sir.”

“What do you mean?”

“The body, sir . . . the corpse . . . beaten to death and . . . no face . . . !” Here once again he drew hand across brow, and once again I stared down at the whip and my heart seemed to miss a beat.

“Josiah . . . who is it?”

“It be ’ard for to say, sir, face be all beat in like, but I d’ think as it be George Ash.”

From head to foot an icy chill passed over me and for a dreadful moment it seemed I had no power to move or speak.

“It be layin’ out there, sir, in Buckthorn Wood . . . been there all night, I reckon, sir.”

“Show me!” said I and, with an effort, I rose.

And now as I followed Josiah’s broad back towards the distant woodlands, what must haunt my troubled mind but these two sentences:

‘A two-fisted fighting-man with death in each fist!’

‘A rosy-cheeked innocent with voice purely sweet as an angel!’

We reached the woods at last, following the broad path that is a public right-of-way.

A hoarse murmuring, a mutter of hushed voices . . . now turning from this path whither Josiah led me, I beheld four of my keepers grouped above

a dreadful, sprawled shape, a ghastly, faceless thing like the blasting horror of nightmare . . . and yet I knew it.

“Yes,” I said, averting my eyes. “Yes, this was George Ash. . . . Cover it up. Get a hurdle or gate and carry it to the home farm. . . . Put it in the smaller barn, padlock the door and bring me the key.”

Then I went back homewards, and with me the memory of two voices, the one of Septimus Clegg, the other of Jessamy Todd, saying one after the other, over and over again:

“A rosy-cheeked innocent with voice purely sweet as an angel.”

“A two-fisted fighting-man with death in each fist!”

CHAPTER XVII

CONCERNING A WITNESS DUMB THOUGH ELOQUENT

INIGO and Saphronia had departed for London, wholly unaware of this dreadful happening, and now Gregor and I were seated in the library with Robin's whip on the table between us; and though we often glanced at this mute yet damning witness we spoke but seldom.

"Does Clia know aught of it?" he enquired, suddenly.

"No, we must keep it from her as long as possible."

"Man," quoth Gregor, after another lengthy pause. "Oh man Oliver, I juist no can believe it! Rabbie's an unco' fiery and passionate laddie, I'm not denying,—but 'tis no' his nature to strike a man that's down and helpless . . . and such awfu' mutilation! I couldna' bear to look. No, indeed, Noll, I'll not believe it o' the lad! Besides," he continued, seeing I was mute, "there was no reason in it. Robin had no cause to murder the poor fellow and so terribly . . . so very brutally." Now at this, knowing what reason there was indeed, I averted my gaze from Gregor's sharp eyes and stared at the whip again.

"You wrote word of it to the Law office at Lewes?" I enquired.

"Ay, I did that. The officers should be here afore evening. And a foul black business they'll make of 't against poor Robin what with a' the gossip that's flying round already."

"And this besides!" said I, gesturing towards the whip.

"Ay, they can draw but the one conclusion! If poor Rob is taken and brought to judgment he'll be foredoomed already! Och, 'tis a woefu' business! Ha, but as for that whip,—why not burn the accursed thing?"

"Had I found it, alone, Greg,—but it was discovered by Josiah Beck and his fellows,—it is known evidence."

After this we were silent again until we heard a sound that set us both rigid in our chairs, a hurry of quick, light feet, a fluttering of petticoats; then the door opened, closed, and Clia, pale and trembling, was leaning across my writing-table.

“Why did you not tell me?” she demanded, “Why let me hear it from your grooms?”

“I told them not to gossip,” said I.

“Well, they didn’t and wouldn’t until their looks betrayed something was amiss and then, of course, I made them tell me. . . . Is—this the whip? Ah yes, I . . . see it is!” she gasped, shuddering away from it. “The dreadful thing Robin killed him with——”

“No, no!” said Gregor, “I’ll not believe Robin murdered any man——”

“I said ‘killed’!” she sighed, “and there is a whole world of difference.”

“However, Clia, I’ll never believe our Robin killed, no! ’Tis not in his nature to slay in such cold-blooded fashion!”

“Oh, but he did!” said she, very miserably.

“Lassie, I’ll no’ credit it! Here was no reason, no least cause for murder.”

“Ah, but there was, Greg! You don’t know, of course, so now I must tell you George Ash attacked me in the wood, tried to shame me,—this was the reason.”

“Oh, my merciful God!” whispered Gregor.

“Yes,” sighed Clia, “I also pray God’s mercy . . . on my poor Robin, he has dared his life because of me, so I must devote my life to him, try to be for him the salvation he said I was . . . if it isn’t too late. . . . Oh, what now?” she whispered, for at this moment, with perfunctory knock, an agitated Nicholas appeared to say in tone of horror that law officers demanded instant speech with me.

“To be sure!” I nodded. “Say I will see them in a few moments, Nick. Show them in here so soon as I ring.” Nicholas blinked, bowed and departed hurriedly.

“They will question us all, I suppose,” sighed Clia, “and what must I tell them, Oliver?”

“The truth, child, but—only so far as you know it personally! Say nothing of what you have been told, for that is only hearsay, and nothing of what you think or suspect, because that is not evidence and can do not the least good but possibly harm. And now pray leave me, both of you,” and I rang the bell.

Thus when these officers of the law presented themselves they found me alone and ready for them. At my bidding they sat down facing me.

“Sir,” said the first, a bluff, country-seeming fellow, “I be Sims, Ralph Sims, chief officer at Lewes, and this be Mr. Faggis, a Bow Street Special from London as chanced to be down yere on another job.”

“Servant, sir, I’m sure,” said Faggis, a smallish, sly-eyed fellow who smiled too much and often.

“Now, sir,” quoth Sims, opening a note-book and glancing from its scribbled page to me, rather grimly, “the evidence o’ this murder, so far, is,—the body o’ one, George Ash, was found on your land this day, ’aving been feloniously done to death by repeated blows of some blunt instrument, say a bludgeon or——”

“A whip!” added Faggis, smiling and wriggling at me.

“Ar!” nodded Sims. “A w’ip as were found on scene o’ the crime by one, Josiah Beck, gamekeeper, according to dee-position of same——”

“And—here,” cried Faggis, “is the fatal whip in question, pray check me if I’m wrong, sir!” and rising, he pounced on the whip, looked it over, smiled at it happily, nodded complacently and passed it to his companion. “Item of evidence Number One—for the Prosecution, Mr. Sims,” said he, “and of the first importance, being beyond doubt the instrument whereby the Fact was committed. Now, sir,” said he, turning suddenly to smile at me again, “by your kind favour allow me a question or so.”

“Of course,” said I.

“You are Sir Oliver Dale, baronet, squire of Abbeymead and village, Deanhurst and country adjacent thereunto?”

I bowed.

“You have an adopted son, name of Robin or Robert Dale?”

“Yes.”

“Where is your adopted son Robin or Robert?”

“I cannot say.”

“Cannot or will not?”

“Cannot.”

Mr. Faggis stroked his pointed, shaven chin at me, shook his round head at me and smiled at me so very widely that for the moment he was dumb;

wherefore Mr. Sims seized the opportunity to speak.

“But Sir Oliver, the aforesaid Robin or Robert lives here with you, don’t he?”

“Oh yes.”

“But,” quoth Mr. Faggis, wriggling at me, “but you . . . don’t know where he is to-day?”

“No.”

“Not even the slightest idea?”

“Not the least.”

“But . . . he was here last night, in this house, this very room, p’raps?”

“No!”

“When did you see him last?”

“Two days ago.”

“And he left here without informing you where he was going?”

“He did!”

“And of course you are not under oath!” said Faggis, shaking his head again and smiling at me so unpleasantly that I turned and addressed myself to his companion.

“I think I have told all I know.”

“Very good, sir,” answered Sims, consulting his notes, “but from information received and dooly took down by me, ’tis in evidence as said Robin or Robert Dale did on several occasions threaten the life of said George Ash. What say you to this, sir?”

“I have heard it reported.”

“Also that said Robin or Robert was known to be of a fierce, fur’ous and quarrelsome natur’. Wherefore and therefore said Robin or Robert will be proceeded against as the guilty party with the utmost rigour o’ the law, sir.”

“And now,” quoth the man Faggis, rubbing his hands and showing me his teeth again, “you have a ward, sir, a Miss . . . Everard. We’d like a few words with the lady,—and we’d like ’em—alone, if you please. Then after her your factor, steward or bailiff, Mr. Mac—M’Gregor. And after him, your servants, each and every, male and female and we’ll have ’em in here, sir, one at a time,—by your fair leave.”

“Certainly!” said I, rising, and went out to summon Gregor.

“Ooph-humph!” he snorted, when I’d told him. “And a pretty, damning case they’ll make oot against the puir lad what wi’ him knocking down Finch, the footman and backstairs gossip! Och Aye!”

And so indeed I think they did for when, as evening fell, these zealous officers departed, their protracted examination of my household done, they appeared in such high good humour that the burly Sims was smiling as widely almost as the smiling Mr. Faggis, of Bow Street.

And surely few people more woeful and downcast than we three, more especially Clia, who, so soon as the evening meal was ended, stole away to bed, leaving Gregor and myself to glower at each other in the candlelight until at last he also bade me good-night and stalked away up the wide stair. But I, instead of following, went into my library in the hope that by writing I might distract my mind and forget in some measure at least, the pressing anxieties of the moment.

And so was an end to this troublous day.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHICH IS CHAPTER OF DOUBTING AND BELIEF

MIDNIGHT, and the great house of Abbeymead very hushed and still, a deep and brooding quietude; and myself, an anxious, strangely lonely man to-night, staring disconsolate at the idle pen in my fist that had not traced a single line though I had sat thus so long and in such stillness that I thought to hear the slow, dull beat of my heart that, like a clock, seemed ticking away the empty minutes and hours and with them my very life.

And now, as I listened, in this profound quiet, this relentless passing of time and life, there seemed to me something dreadful, something ominous, a menace that with each minute was drawing nearer. In my harassed mind thought-pictures flamed one after the other. A premonition of what might be. . . . The terror of the Hue and Cry . . . capture . . . despair . . . a swaying mob . . . a youthful, defiant figure beneath the dread and awful shadow of Murder's inevitable doom, for 'murder will out'. . . . The agony of rope and gallows . . . the shame and horror of chains and jibbet . . . for George Ash was dead, murdered! And 'murder will out.' . . . Robin's whip fouled with his victim's blood. . . . But, God help me,—I myself was murderer in intent, I too had felt the lust to kill, to rend and maim.

All this and much beside, was in the fevered hurry of my thoughts, until to banish them I dropped useless pen and bowing head between my hands, strove to pray.

Crouched thus miserably, I heard the door open and close gently and glancing up—saw Robin smiling at me.

I stared amazed, as well I might, for here was no storm-beaten, mud-sprent, hunted fugitive but a merry-eyed, swaggering young gallant all sartorial elegance from snowy cravat to glistening boots.

"Aha!" he laughed, gaily though cautiously. "The Grave Philosopher and Solemn Sage sitteth dumb—smitten and enthralled—and no wonder! Look at 'em, Governor,—Bond Street's best and latest! I've just got into 'em and for the first time. Stultz, my dear old Noll, the tailor Royal and he never did anything better,—the latest and most absolute Go! What think you of 'em, honoured sir?"

So young and gay was he, so much his most joyous and best self, that words of hearty welcome formed themselves for utterance—and then—remembering that faceless horror in Buckthorn Wood, instead of welcome I spoke a warning:

“There are law officers out after you!”

“I’m aware of it, Noll, dear, old respected sir, I know it so well that I was obliged to grass a brace of them on my way here, they compelled me, poor fools. Yes, it’s yoicks, tally-ho and hark away, begad! I’ve hunted many a time and enjoyed it well enough, but there’s more real excitement in being hunted. Sir, you here behold the quarry of the law, my hunters seem all over the place, bless their hearts and eyes!”

“Then how did you get into the house?”

“The ivy, sir, the blessed old ivy-stems, as I used to do often as a boy, and you—God love your dear, old nob, all innocent and unsuspecting!”

“Robin, your whip was found close by the dead man.”

“And no wonder sir, I used it on him pretty freely.”

“Good God! What are you saying?”

“The truth, sir, as usual and as ever. I’m no gentleman born, a duck in the eagle’s nest, but I don’t lie because I promised you as little imp of a lad, and because—well, perhaps also because I don’t fear any man breathing.”

“Are you . . . admitting your guilt, Robin? Did you kill George Ash?”

“Lord—no, sir! When I’d finished with him, though down and pretty well out, he was alive enough to curse me with what breath I’d left him.”

“Sit down, Robin, and tell me precisely what happened.”

“Thankee, sir!” said carefree Youth, swinging a chair beneath himself with one powerful hand. “Well, respected sir, and dearly beloved Governor, after I had tuned myself up with old Jessamy, as you saw, off I rode to the real business of the hour, which was—to ram certain foul lies, about you and Clia, down certain foul throats, the which, permit me to say, I did effectively and with all due despatch. But—on my way back, I met the liar in chief, to wit—G. Ash—and in our woods too, the spying villain! So, to it we went on the instant. He had his holly stick and I my whip, he cut me over the ogle here to begin with, you don’t see it because I’ve combed and plastered a curl over it, but after that, he became my plaything and joy. I dropped my whip and used kind Nature’s weapons, very soon had him groggy on his pins and

finally levelled him with such a rib-roaster that he couldn't, or wouldn't, come up to scratch, he had his fill, though he'd been game all through. So then I kissed my hand to him and rode to Lewes to dine with old Rags and one or two other sportsmen. And there, dear old Governor, you have it all in a rather large nutshell."

"You say he was alive when you left him?"

"I do, sir, and he was! Yes and strong enough, as I say, to curse me as heartily as split lips and winded bellows would allow."

"Then, Robin, when he was down, you did not stand over him and batter him to death with repeated blows of your heavy whip until his face was unrecognizable?"

"Good God, sir,—no! I naturally detested the fellow so I thrashed him and fairly, but I'd no least will to murder him and no cause."

"Yet you might have had both cause and will."

"Never in this world, sir! I'm a fair fighter and therefore wouldn't and couldn't murder any man."

"Then you don't know he attempted to rape Clia in the wood?"

For a moment Robin was utterly still, his comely face grew deeply red, then deadly pale, a white, set mask lit by a blue-eyed glare; then he rose with unwonted slowness and spoke in a whisper:

"For this . . . I would have killed him . . . I'm glad he's dead. . . . Oh, the infamous, horrible, sacrilegious beast!"

"But he is dead, Robin, and for this there are those who will believe you guilty."

"Well, let them! What the devil do I care? I wish to God I had killed the brute!"

"But—not in such brutal fashion, Robin? Beaten slowly to insensibility and slowly to death."

"Pretty ghastly!" he nodded, "Yet serves him right, though my way would have been quicker and more merciful. . . . Ha, but . . . you mean everyone will believe I did? Oh, that's damnable! And if I'm taken . . . they'll hang me for it!"

"Not unless they prove you guilty."

“And who’s to prove my innocence, once I’m in prison? Who believes me innocent now? Does Clee, does Greg,—do you? No,—no by God, I see you don’t! I can read it in your face! And here,” said he, laughing bitterly, “here’s a pretty go! Now who’s my friend? Never a one in all this teeming, damned world—only myself. Ha,—come then, old friend Robin, let’s be off, let ’em catch us—if they can and be damned! Yoicks, tally-ho, hark forrard and—away!”

Uttering these words with a look very bitterly sardonic, he leapt to the window, parted the curtains, flung wide the lattice and was gone, lost in a rustling darkness, for a wind was risen, and all before I might prevent, though indeed I made no effort.

And after a time I secured the window and went up to bed, but lay sleepless thinking of poor Robin out there in the raving darkness, for now a mighty wind was abroad filling the night with clamorous stir, going his solitary way by desolate tracks like the hunted wretch he was to become, or taken by his pursuers and dragged in fetters to a felon’s prison. . . . I thought also of everything he had said, recalled his candid words and honest looks, and, believing him now, I was grievously distressed.

Thus, when at last I slept it was a haunted sleep troubled by remorse and ghastly visions.

CHAPTER XIX

TELLS HOW I SET OUT FOR LONDON

I CAME down late next morning and consequently took my breakfast alone, waited upon by an assiduous though somewhat low-spirited Nicholas, assisted in his labours by an uncommonly round-eyed Finch.

“Is Miss Clia down yet, Nicholas?”

“Oh indeed yes, sir, very long since. She is now, I believe, riding abroad, sir, taking the air. Toast, sir?”

“It blew hard last night, Nick.”

“I believe it was blustering, sir, though my slumbers were fairly serene . . . Finch—butter!”

“The law officers questioned you closely, eh Nicholas?”

“They were, sir, most pertinacious though I had little to impart saving only the assault upon Finch. I merely mentioned it, sir, but it seemed to interest them,—unduly, I thought.”

“How so, Nicholas?”

“They urged me to say whether or no Mr. Robin had committed the assault with his whip, sir, and my response being in the negative seemed to annoy them. Oh, dear me!”

“You seem low-spirited, Nick.”

“Indeed yes, sir. To know this stately mansion lies beneath the vulgar odium of murder is a weight upon us all, especially such truly loyal soul as mine,—boy and man, the rolling years, sir, boot-boy to butler! Eggs, sir, bacon, a chicken wing or cold ham?”

It was as I ended my meal that Clia entered; she was in her habit and by the colour in her cheeks and windblown hair I guessed she had been riding fast. Tossing hat, whip and gauntlets upon the settee she waved hand at Nicholas, saying:

“You may go, Nick, I will wait upon the master.”

“Who has finished,” said I, turning from the table as the servants bowed and departed. “Pray where have you been galloping?”

“Here and there,” she answered, sinking upon the window seat where the sunlight fell. “I took a ride, a gossipy ride to your three villages and I gossiped in all but especially Abbeymead. And the gossip is that Robin, though a slayer, is no murderer but fought and killed George Ash for sake of some mysterious village beauty. Mrs. Tyson hints that she has been told it was really on account of poor Rose Thorn.”

“And they all believe Robin guilty?”

“Of course, Oliver! Who else could be? And the mention of poor Rose reminds me of a very strange thing told me by Mrs. Basset,—a rather dreadful, shivery thing, Noll! She says that she was told, by someone who had seen and heard, that George Ash was constantly haunted by the ghost of poor Rose Thorn, a dreadful thing that followed him everywhere and sang to him that old heartbreaking song ‘Green Willow’,—poor Desdemona sings it, you’ll remember, just before Othello kills her. Mrs. Basset says that George Ash would come into the taproom of a night, lately, always looking behind him as if being followed, that sometimes, with the pewter at his lips, he would start round, as if something touched him, spilling his ale and staring at something nobody else could see,—or stop in the middle of a word as though listening to something nobody else could hear, and would never seem himself until half drunk. And old Mrs. Truby says she thinks he was going mad because, coming through the twitten one night she saw him in the lane—talking to somebody who—wasn’t there! Now don’t you think there is something . . . rather awful in all this gossip, Oliver?”

“It is at least terribly suggestive,” I answered.

“And pitiful, too, Oliver.”

“Yes . . . poor fellow!”

“I’m glad you can pity him too!” she sighed; and then clasping her hands as in sudden distress, “Ah,” she whispered, “if only Robin had never found out . . . whoever told him of that hateful incident in the wood, whoever breathed a syllable is to blame for . . . for all this!”

“Nobody did!” said I.

“Oliver, what do you mean? Someone must have done or Robin would never have . . . done it.”

“Robin knew nothing about it, Clia.”

“Are you sure? How,—how do you know?”

“Certain! He told me so last night.”

“You mean he was here . . . last night . . . Robin?”

“Yes!” I answered, and forthwith recounted all Robin had said and fully as I might. “Now,” I demanded, when the tale was ended, “can you still believe him guilty of this murder, Clia?”

Instead of answering she turned to stare out into the sunny gardens and remained thus so long that I questioned her again: “Clia, do you believe him innocent—now?”

“Do you?” she retorted, without moving.

“Yes!” I answered, vehemently, “Yes, with all my heart!”

“With your heart?” she sighed. “Yes, because your heart is such a dear. But do you believe this with your mind, Oliver, your brain and cold reason?”

“Yes!” I repeated, “Remembering all he said . . . his honest looks, I believe with brain and reason too.”

“Because,” said Clia, shaking head at me, “you are, and always will be, a great, big sentimentalist, my gentle dear one!”

“Say, rather, a man of sentiment,” I demurred. “And my sentiment is to believe the best until I’m proved wrong.”

“And I suppose,” she murmured, “this is why it would be so difficult for . . . people . . . not to love you.”

“Good!” said I. “Love that comes of itself, unsought and will not be denied, is, I think, a glory, the best thing in life. And as for not loving me, if it is yourself you mean and your reason Robin, there is always one sort of love you can give me, and I hope always will, the deep and pure affection of a daughter.”

“Oh,” she murmured, turning to stare out of the window again, “oh fiddlesticks! Tell me more about poor Robin and why you must believe him.”

“Because he is Robin!” I answered. “And so certain am I that, while suspicion grows and spreads against him I mean to make his cause my own, so to-day I ride for London!”

“Splendid!” she cried. “I’ll ride with you.”

“On the contrary, you will remain here. Abbeymead must not lose master and mistress at such time. Neighbours will be calling, I expect. There will be more law officers, further questionings, possible disquiet among the servants and even tenantry. However, there needs a strong hand on the reins, and this is the hand,—small of course and prettily pink and white but immensely capable——” the hand instantly raised itself to my lips and was as instantly kissed. “So,” I concluded, “you will remain to rule things for me here.”

“And what shall you do, Oliver?”

“Seek aid for Robin. For, as I say, public suspicion will grow blacker yet, the whole countryside will surely pronounce him guilty and be up and after him with the hue and cry—for his very life.”

“Oh, dreadful!” she exclaimed, wringing her hands. “How will you save him, my Oliver?”

“I hope to . . . by securing aid of the Law itself,—an old bloodhound of Bow Street. . . . Let me see . . . ten years, he must be sixty at least, but keen and fearless as ever, I’m very sure!”

“Yes, but who is he, Noll?”

“Well, you saw him yourself once or twice, I believe, yes to be sure you did, ten years ago. Can you remember him, I wonder,—Jasper Shrig, the Bow Street Officer? Of course you were a very little girl——”

“In top-boots and a blue coat with very shiny buttons, I mean he was!” said Clia. “And a knotted stick! Certainly I remember him and how queerly he talked, using W’s for V’s.”

“Yes,” I nodded, “and V’s for W’s, like the Londoner he is. Well, I must find him, I shall lay the case before him and bring him back, if possible, to check and counter the efforts of these other officers who have condemned Robin unheard, though I suppose this is very natural——”

“Listen!” said Clia, slim finger uplifted, “Listen!” Hoofs upon the drive, clattering hoofs,—a rapid, oncoming tattoo that told of high speed, high mettle, breeding, blood, fire, and reckless horsemanship.

“Roland!” said we, together.

And indeed Roland it was who came striding in upon us with stamp and jingle of spurred heels, hat and whip in one hand, a large, crumpled paper in the other, and face like a thundercloud.

“Well, heaven confound me, Oliver!” he exclaimed. “See now what you’d done for yourself and the family!”

“What?” I enquired.

“And all owing to your confounded, dashed, infernal, fantastical, philanthropical cursed folly!”

“So now,” said I, pointing to a chair, “pray sit down, take a deep breath and be coherent,—if possible.”

For answer he smoothed out the paper, thrust it upon me and stood back with folded arms, scowling on me while Clia and I, together, saw this:

£50 Reward
Wanted for MURDER

ROBIN or ROBERT DALE of Abbeymead, in the County of Sussex. Last seen in Abbeymead Village, riding a black horse. About six feet tall, very powerful build. Aged 20 or thereabouts. Ruddy complexion. Blue eyes, red hair. Speaks and goes like a gentleman. The above sum will be paid to any giving such information as shall bring him to arrest.

Signed: Saml. Opp,
Magistrate.

Long live the King.

“This,” quoth Roland, “this is what comes of nurturing a dashed infernal serpent in your confounded bosom! Great merciful Jove,—to take such preposterous dam’ risk! A gutter-imp begot in some cellar ’twixt Drunkenness and Ruffianism! Eton and Oxford—bah! A cursed sow’s ear is always a sow’s infernal ear! What’s bred in the bone comes out in the flesh and . . . well, damme it’s come with a vengeance!”

Now instead of answering this passionate tirade, I folded the bill and sat staring down at the toe of my shoe, for, what with grief and indignation, speech was beyond me just then. And my silence and stricken look seemed to affect Roland and trouble him,—he fidgeted with hat and whip, tossed them upon the settee, crossed to the wide, empty fire-place, fidgeted there a while and striding back again, stood beside me.

“Oliver,” said he, at last. “Noll . . . old fellow, I had no least intent to hurt you. . . . No, ’tis but my natural indignation ’gainst a young snake, a

villain, an unworthy young rogue has repaid all your years of care by such base and damnable wickedness. So, Noll old sportsman,—what d’you say?”

I rose, but instead of taking the hand he proffered, I laid both my own upon his shoulders and answered, looking him in the eyes:

“Roland, I say this: the nameless boy I lifted from the misery of the streets, played straight with me because he loved me,—the man he has become, is still straight and honourable, and, I hope and believe, loves me still and so—my honour is his and his, mine. And I do believe he has kept our honour clean and untarnished because, despite the suspicion and damning evidence against him, he is innocent of this foul crime.”

“But, Noll,” demurred my fiery cousin, his mood quite altered, “how can you be sure o’ this?”

“Because he tells me so, and because he never spoke lie in all my knowledge. Does this satisfy you, Roland?” But seeing how dubiously he returned my look, I shook my head and turned away where Clia was regarding us.

“My dear,” said I, wondering at the tenderness in her eyes, “be good enough to ring the bell.”

“How?” demanded Roland, bristling. “Are you going to have me shown out?”

“Never in this world, Roly-Poly. No, I’m off for London, to do all I may for my unfortunate Robin.”

“London, eh?” said Roland, rubbing dimpled chin, “London, b’gad! For long, Noll?”

“It depends, but I hope not.”

“When do you start?”

“This hour.”

“Then, by heavens, Noll, I’ll ride too; you can lend me a shirt or so. ’Twill be like old times, you and I ten years ago riding for London, fifty-odd guineas in our pockets—and quarrelling all the way!”

“But your Deborah?”

“I’ll send her a note by one of your grooms. I’ll write it now if you’ve a quill about the place.”

"In the library!" said I. And so while he hasted thither to write his missive, I ordered my best horse 'Midnight' and a valise packed.

"No, pray, Mrs. Bennet," said Clia to our stately housekeeper. "No, Lucy dear, I will pack the master's fal-lals, if you please." And when Mrs. Bennet had curtsied and rustled away in her black bombazine gown, Clia came to me and laying both hands on my shoulders and looking up into my eyes precisely as I had done with Roland, she smiled at me, though with a hint of tears in her lashes.

"Noll, my dear," said she, softly, "very presently I am going to kiss you,—no, don't start and flinch and tremble and wince and look self-conscious and stupid and silly, because it will be as daughterly as I can make it. But first, I wish to congratulate you for such masterly handling of our fire-eating, swashbuckling Roly-Poly, and then to love you very deeply, and not quite daughterly, for your defence of Robin—it was so very Nollish, which this time means—noble, my Darlingest. Now—stoop your head—do!"

I did.

"There!" she sighed, "Pray how was that, sufficiently daughterly, sir?"

"Well," I answered, glancing over her bright head to the sunny gardens but seeing nothing of them, "well——"

"And what do your two 'wells' mean, Sir Oliver?"

"Not . . . very!" I answered, feeling ridiculously self-conscious.

"Oh?" said she, demurely. "Then we must do better next time—if possible. Now, I'll go and pack for you."

Hardly was she gone than back came Roland with his letter sealed and, after him, Nicholas, bearing with elaborate care, and in small wicker cradle, a cob-webbed bottle.

"Sir," quoth he, depositing his precious burden upon the table as if it might splinter on contact, "I ventured to open a bottle of Bin Number Four, I hope with your approbation, sir?"

"Entirely, Nicholas."

"Sir," he answered, filling the glasses with deft and steady hand, "I find your approval extreme gratifying."

So, watched by my bottle sage like a large beneficent geni, Roland and I pledged each other and drank.

“You find it worthy, gentlemen?”

“Of crowns and sceptres, Nick man!” answered Roland. “In fact—primest of prime. Fill again.” The which was done and so often that the bottle was low when Clia returned.

“My dear,” said she, “you are forgetting your boots!”

“To be sure,” said I.

“And pistols!” added Roland.

“Are they necessary?”

“Certainly, Noll,—plenty o’ the High Toby gentry ’twixt us and London, so you might lend me a brace.”

“In the gun-room,” said I, as came our first footman Anthony with my riding boots, and to say the horses were at the door. Scarcely was I into my boots and Anthony departed to find Roland, than Clia brought me my hat and gloves. She looked me over with critical eyes, gave my coat a tug and a pat here and there, nodded final approval and pushed me to the door.

“Farewell, dear papa! Take care of yourself and my love to dear old Tom and George, and Aunt Rosamond!” said she, reaching her arms about my neck. “Oh . . . good-bye, my Oliver!” she murmured. “Come back soon. . . .” Her arms tightened upon me; and then, moved by some wayward, uncontrollable impulse, I caught her up, lifted her high upon my breast and wisely avoiding her lips (even in this moment) kissed her eyes and fragrant hair instead. Then I set her down again but with such feeling of sudden guilt that I caught up my hat and opening the door to begone heard her murmur:

“Oh Noll . . . Oh, my dear!”

CHAPTER XX

WHICH IS CHAPTER OF NO IMPORTANCE

“Now what the deuce,” demanded Roland when we had travelled some half mile in silence, “what on earth are you glooming over? You’re dumb as a boiled cod-fish, my dear fellow—why?”

“Because I find it hard to converse and meditate both at once, Roly.”

“Then why meditate? Talk, man, talk—no, I will. And first, Noll, I’m free to admit you score heavily with Clia, she more than repays all your care and does you, and all of us, absolute and infinite credit, damme! There, Noll, waif though she was, we have birth, breeding and beauty, witchery and wit, which is a truly remarkable combination. Yes, b’gad, Clia has turned out an uncommon fine creature, a woman to be proud of, a beauty to turn the head of any man—and does too, by the score! She has a host of adorers, you saw a few of ’em the other day.”

“How,” said I, “can you mean that crowd of young sparks that took Abbeymead by storm——”

“Lord, Noll, that was not half of ’em. She’s a—no, she is the toast, man. Could wed whom she will, when she will—and well she knows it, the witch! And here’s the confounding and amazing miracle,—that you and old Time have wrought between you. Think of her now and ten years ago! You’ll remember that morning we woke to find her nestled between us in that hay-pile, a wretched little misery, all rags and bones and dirt! And to-day—the daintiest most bewitching fine madam of ’em all! And—all your doing, Noll.”

“Say rather—Nature’s and her own, Roly.”

“However, what with her beauty, and the fortune bestowed on her by The Nunks, God bless his memory,—she can wed, as I say, whom she will. And she couldn’t do better than Marmaduke’s son, Storringlean’s son and heir, young Ragworth, a regular fine young fellow, Noll, though he rides a trifle too short in the stirrup for my liking. And Marmaduke himself is mighty keen on the match, he was telling me so only yesterday.”

“You see the earl frequently, then?”

“Naturally. And let me tell you, Noll, he’s a prime fellow through and through. We do wrong to pre-judge any man. I regard Storringdean as a truly noble fellow, and I esteem his friendship highly.”

“Your late fierce animosity is quite forgotten, Roly?”

“Not so, Noll, its memory knits us in closer bonds of friendship and we respect each other the more. This reminds me that Marmaduke, having an eye for a horse as well as a woman, thinks so highly of my ‘Whirlwind’ that _____”

“Roland,” said I, voicing my thought, oblivious to what he was saying, “why have you never liked Robin?”

“Eh? Robin? Oh, well, probably because he never liked me. Besides, what with schools, college and what not, I’ve seen little of him. He’s a fine, upstanding fellow I’ll admit, and knows how to sit a horse, and . . . if you do honestly believe in his innocence, old fellow, then b’gad, I’ll try to do the same, damme if I don’t! And no one could say fairer.”

“And for which pray know me truly grateful, Roly.”

“Why then to prove it, ride, Noll, ride. Yonder is fine stretch of turf. I’ll race you to the ‘Wheatsheaf,’ half a mile, about—I’ll ride you for five guineas,—no, a pint of ale, eh?”

“Done!” said I. “Are you ready? Go!”

And so, like two youngsters instead of the sedate middle-aged persons we are, away we went,—knees in, heads bent, hands low and coat-tails flying. And I will confess I enjoyed it as did the splendid, high-spirited creature I bestrode, this ‘Midnight’ horse of mine. . . . Rush of wind, creak of leather, muffled thunder of eager hoofs as our animals, black and bay, whirled us past trees and hedgerows that seemed to fly past—back and away from us; now Roland’s bay won an inch, a foot . . . a touch of my spurs and ‘Midnight,’ snorting, crept up and slowly passed until the bay was a yard behind, but only for a moment,—back he came and past, lifted, as it were, by Roland’s consummate horsemanship; but ‘Midnight’ would not be denied and, as the ‘Wheatsheaf’ hove in sight we were galloping neck and neck . . .

“B’gad . . . you win!” cried Roland, as we checked and whirled our still eager horses opposite the inn.

“Hardly!” said I.

“By a short nose, damme!” said Roland, “Hey—you sir!” he called to a solitary being who sat on bench beside the door. “Which of us do you say?”

A slim man this, dark-avised and of few words seemingly, for at Roland's question he merely touched hat and answered:

"Black 'un!"

"That settles it!" nodded Roland. "Ho—tap!" he roared. "What. Bob . . . Samuel . . . ale! Two pints . . . in tankards!"

Very soon the ale appeared, borne by Sam Hobbs the landlord himself, as round of eye and stiff of hair as ever and who, having welcomed us, shouted for his 'Soo-san' to do the same, the which she did, looking buxom and jolly as in days gone by.^[2]

^[2] Vide: *The Crooked Furrow*. Ed.

Now instead of dismounting and going indoors with them, I took my ale in the saddle, for I had noticed the laconic man on the bench wore a red waistcoat. So now I lifted my tankard to him, which salute he instantly acknowledged by as silently lifting his own to me; and when we had thus drunk to each other, I spoke:

"Bow Street runner, I think?"

"Yes, sir," he answered, patting his red waistcoat.

"Then," said I, reining my horse nearer, "you may be acquainted with an old friend of mine, a Mr. Jasper Shrig?"

The man sat up and his sharp eyes seemed to become even keener.

"Yessir, I do!"

"He is well, I hope?"

"Never better, sir."

"I'm glad to know it for his sake and my own, because I'm riding to London for speech with him. Perhaps you will be good enough to inform me where to find him?"

"I can, sir. But Jarsper's uncommon busy these days, he's what the wrong uns call a bashaw o' the pigs, which means cock o' the covey, head o' the office,—though thinking o' giving over for good, he is."

"My business with him," said I, "is important and very urgent."

"What might your name be, sir?"

"Oliver Dale of Abbeymead."

“What,—Sir Oliver Dale?” enquired the man, and, rising very nimbly, he came and stood at my stirrup.

“Yes. Why?”

“Rum!” quoth he, “Precious rum, sir, considering as I’m on my way to Abbeymead, by Jarsper’s order, to take charge, special,—that murder o’ Farmer Ash of Barksteed and . . . your son, I think sir.”

“By adoption.”

“And you want word wi’ Jarsper?”

“I do, and shall find him somehow, to ask his help, according to promise he made me ten years ago.”

“Ah, you know him, sir?”

“Very well in those days. He honoured me by the name of ‘pal’ which, I believe, is Romany for ‘brother’.” Hardly was the word uttered than off came the man’s hat and his saturnine features were brightened by a quick smile.

“Sir Oliver,” said he, “if not a liberty I should like to shake your hand, for anyone as Jarsper so names must be true blue.”

So, very solemnly, we shook hands.

“Now sir, I can tell you as Jarsper Shrig is like a dad to me, ah and mother too! I was a little, starving gutter-rat of a boy, but, Lord love him,—Jarsper took me, fed me, had me educated, took me under his wing, learned me all he could and made me all and whatever I am. I have a name, sir, but I like the one Jarsper give me best,—he calls me ‘Gimblet’ because he thinks I’m pretty sharp. And now if you want to find him go to the ‘Gun’ tavern in Gray’s Inn Lane about ten o’clock of a morning, the Bow Street Office till five in the arternoon and ’twixt six or seven you’ll find him along of his old friends at the ‘Jolly Young Waterman’ in——”

“I know it well,” said I. “And, Mr. Gimblet, I am grateful.”

“And, Sir Oliver, you can drop the ‘Mister’ because you and I would spell ‘gimblet’ without the B.”

“What—Noll, another pint?” called Roland through open casement, at this moment.

“Two!” I answered. “My friend the Gimlet will join me, I hope.”

“Eh? The—what?”

“Means me, sir,” answered the officer, touching his hat. “And I’ll be happy.”

So presently forth came Roland bearing two foaming tankards himself, like the good fellow he is.

“This officer,” I explained, when I had made them known to each other, “is sent down for special enquiry into the murder.”

“Ha!” exclaimed Roland. “Oh begad, then you mean——?”

“To arrest Robin, since he is the only person suspected. So, Gimlet, if you do indeed, I beg you and your men will be good enough to spare him what shame you can, for I believe him guiltless of this crime as myself.”

“Sir,” answered Gimlet, with vehement nod, “you being pal o’ Jarsper’s, I will so.”

“Then,” said I, grasping his hand, “pray know me grateful once again, and so—Good-bye!”

Then waving farewells to Bob and his Susan away we rode Londonwards.

“And where,” enquired Roland as we cantered along together, “where do you propose to stay in town since you have closed your house in St. James’s Square,—though why, damme if I can understand?”

“Because, except for the servants, it stood empty after Aunt Rosamond left to devote herself to Saphronia’s ‘poor ones’.”

“Ha yes, in that infernal murder hole down by the river, I think?”

“‘The Jolly Young Waterman’,—yes.”

“A devilish odd taste, Noll, at her age! Dirt and misery, ruffianism and crime instead of luxury and ease! A truly amazing choice of home for any delicate gentlewoman, and she so frail!”

“And yet so strong and valiant of heart, Roland! If possible I shall stay with her at ‘The Waterman’. I usually do, when in town.”

“Which,” quoth Roland, “of course you would, being such a devilish odd sort of fellow. However, do pray give her my warmest and most affectionate greetings, old fellow, for she is indeed a still lovely and most appealing creature and one I truly esteem and honour,—though I as heartily abominate her choice of residence, a positive den and dog-hole of iniquity. Though I

won't say I may not pay her a visit while in town. Meantime I shall put up at one or other of my clubs, I'll let you know which and where, later."

Thus northward rode we in great good fellowship, following the long, white road by woodland and pasture, cosy farms and fragrant rick-yards, by sleepy hamlet and country town—on and on through this dear and most lovely England, and so in the late afternoon of the second day, reached the mighty City.

CHAPTER XXI

TELLS OF CERTAIN OTHER OLD FRIENDS

EVENING had fallen when I reined up before this age-old structure more fully described in that narrative called ‘The Crooked Furrow’, this ancient, hoary tavern of ‘The Jolly Young Waterman’ whose painted image smiled down on me jauntily as ever despite the perilous tightness of his nether garments, and in all the glory of cap, coat and badge.

I was yet gazing up at this mute old friend of paint and wood when forth to meet me came two others of flesh and blood, with vociferous and cheery acclaim.

“Well, I say you can drownd me,” quoth Tom, bearing down on me with a roll to port and lurch to starboard like the grizzled old sea-dog he is. “I says drownd me fifty fathom if this ain’t a prime pleasure!”

“Which,” said George, advancing to salute me very smart and soldierly, “is a sentiment as I echoes, sir!”

“Waterloo and Trafalgar,” I answered, dismounting to grasp their ready hands. “God bless you both!”

“Ay, ay, ‘both’ is the word, only just the two on us now,” said Tom, nodding until his pig-tail quivered, “I says only the two on us, left, sir, as the eye can ob-sarve, our messmate Willyum having ‘gone aloft’, yet ’tis the three on us as now give’s ee greeting, S’Oliver, I say the three on us, sir, now as ever, eh, George?”

“Ar, the three on us!” George echoed.

And thus did these old friends make me glad welcome with hand, look, and word.

“And her ladyship—my aunt, is she well?” I enquired as we went, all three, to stable ‘Midnight’.

“Ay, she is, thank the Lord! I says she’s blooming, sir.”

“As a blossom!” added George. “Though folks now calls her their Lady o’ Comfort, which, sir, I think is a good name.”

“Yes!” I answered. “Yes indeed!”

“Ay, and I says Comfort she is, S’Oliver! Lord love your eyes,—there’s no more starvation anywheres about the old ‘Waterman’ these days, no more to suffer and die, like beasts as perish, since she finished a building of the noo hosspital! Spends money like water, sir, but right plenty to show for ’t.”

“Yes,” said I, “Cherry Orchard Court and Lamb’s Alley are quite transformed. I see changes for the better every time I visit you.”

“Ay, sir, things is a sight better,” Tom nodded, “though there’s dirty swabs in this here world, as nobody can’t make no better,—swabs they was and swabs they will be, I says, eh, George?”

“Ar, Tom—’specially one!”

“Ay, ‘The Smasher’, sir! A par-tickler dirty swab as terrifies other swabs into being worser swabs than they might ha’ been. Whereby, S’Oliver, comes bloody mutinies, sir, which, I says, always leads to trouble abroad and atween-decks. Ay, Life, sir, is a troublous ocean, biller on biller! But, Lord love her,—our Lady your Aunt, sir, meets ’em bow-on, all snug alow and aloft and rides ’em serene as a seventy-four. I never knowed her like,—except our Commodore Miss Saphronia, no—Mrs. Drake, which, I says, is a good name, being right sailorly. She’s coming aboard of us soon, so your lady Aunt do say, which will be a occasion! But, there,—I’m babbling away like a sea-lawyer. Pray how’s all at Abbeymead? Miss Clia, bless her sweet eyes,—how’s she, sir?”

“Very well, I’m glad to say and sends her love. But tell me, do you expect Mr. Shrig here to-night?”

“Ay, sir, Jasper should step aboard at six, twenty-five, prompt as usual.”

“Then pray let me know the moment he comes. And now, is Aunt Rosamond at home, Tom?”

“She be, sir,—in ‘Unicorn’, going through her hosspital books . . . three hundred-odd cases, sir, and more waiting! Will you see her now?”

“If I shan’t disturb her.”

“Lord, sir, she’s always ready to be disturbed, night or day, and her’ll be main glad to see you, S’Oliver, I’ll take my oath!”

So, entering the old tavern, I made my way to that little, so familiar chamber named (Heaven only knows when or why) ‘Unicorn’, and knocked.

“Come!” answered my Aunt Rosamond. “Oliver!” she exclaimed, so soon as I opened the door. “My dear, what a glad surprise.”

“Aunt . . .” I began, then, words failing me as they so often do at such times, I picked her up and kissed her instead.

“Gracious me!” she sighed, “how big and strong you are! You always were, of course, yet I am always just as surprised at the size and power of you.” Placing her back in the chair I stood looking down on her with that sense of awed wonder I have always felt for this strangely beautiful and gracious lady, this gentle, valiant soul whose woeful life and grievous sufferings seem only to have lifted her nearer heaven.

Her hair, though white now, is luxuriant as ever, her form as slender and upright, her deep, gentle eyes wistfully tender as when I first looked into them ten long years ago; indeed each time I see her it seems as though Father Time, to make up for past sorrows, has crowned her with an ageless beauty. I think something of all this must have been in my look for she flushed almost girlishly and drew me down beside her.

“It is almost six months since you were here last, Oliver.”

“But,” said I, kissing the hand I held, “you have been often in my thoughts.”

“And you in mine, Oliver. You see I was expecting you, though not quite so soon.”

“But, Aunt Rosamond, how should you?”

“Since last night, my dear. Ah, then you don’t know,” said she, smiling at my perplexed face. “Last night, just as the house was shut and all quiet, Robin came to me seeking shelter.”

“Robin? Here?”

“He told me everything, my dear, and his greatest trouble seems to be your disbelief in him. He is bitter with Clia for jilting him, he is fiercely defiant against public suspicion of him, but he sorrows for your lack of faith.”

“Aunt Rosamond, do you believe him?”

“Yes, Oliver. Oh, I have seen and learned so much of this poor, suffering Humanity that though blind and wayward is yet the noblest creation of God, I have seen so very much of falsity and evil that I know truth when I meet it. And my dear, truth is in your Robin’s eyes, his every look; truth, fearless and manifest.”

Now here I kissed her again, for very gratitude, and told her how after doubting poor Robin, belief had come to me, such instinctive and positive assurance of his innocence that I was now in London to see Jasper Shrig on his behalf.

“Mr. Shrig?” she repeated, with very youthful laugh. “Such a dear, grim creature and almost overpoweringly respectful. Ah, but much less the dreaded person than he used to be in this terrible neighbourhood, there is so much less for him to do nowadays, for, oh my dear, we have so much less drunkenness and consequently less sordid brutality and crime. Our people are beginning to respect themselves and each other, thank God!”

“And their Lady of Comfort!” I added.

“Ah, I perceive Tom and George have been tattling! And what faithful souls they are,—they still talk of Saphronia, hers was the harder task, though we still have our troubles, of course . . . we lost our poor William, as you know. Yes, we still have our troubles, for this is life.”

“And pray where is Robin, my dear?”

“Out somewhere disguised as a bargeman. Tom and George dressed him in the most dreadful old clothes . . . and all so merry over it. Have they mentioned him to you?”

“Not a word.”

“No, Robin confided in them, too, so of course they would be dumb as so many stuffed images, bless them! And now, what does Robin mean by telling me Clia has jilted him, what is the trouble?”

“Nothing, Aunt. Some foolish squabble, no more.”

“Perhaps. For, Oliver, it will not surprise me if they never marry as seems to have been taken for granted. No, their colouring is too much alike, both so fair, themselves too utterly dissimilar in character. Robin, though splendidly handsome, is yet little more than a boy, while Clia has always been too grown up, almost,—a little woman so long as I can remember her and, my dear, of most tremendous will. . . . Gracious, there is half-past six striking! If you would see Mr. Shrig he should be here now. So off with you, dear, and leave me to my work. We sup at nine o’clock and you shall sleep in your own room, ‘the Bosun’ as usual.”

CHAPTER XXII

GIVES SOME DESCRIPTION OF A COMBAT

FOUR chairs were drawn up to the table whereon stood four brimming rummers, though we ourselves were but three. And looking at this empty chair and brimming glass, I wondered.

“S’Oliver,” quoth Tom, gesturing towards these, with powerful, hairy hand, though staring hard on me the while. “I says, now as ever, and likewise main-tain and declare as our messmate poor Willyum didn’t die accidental, eh George?”

“Not him, Tom, no!”

“Hows’ever, gone ’e is! Wherefore and therefore, sir, on con-vivial occasions such as this yere, our first drink is to our good messmate who, though gone aloft, bides here wi’ us in memory. And so,” said Tom, lifting his glass and turning now to nod at this vacant chair, “here’s to thee, Will old hearty—and cheerily. Up she goes!”

And thus, looking on Will’s empty chair, we honoured this toast very solemnly all three. Which done, George took up Will’s glass, sipped it, passed it to me. I did the same, handed it to Tom who emptied it at a gulp.

“Are you suggesting,” I enquired, when this ceremony was accomplished, “that poor William was murdered?”

Tom and George looked at each other, looked at me and nodded.

“Though,” said Tom, “me and George would rather put it down as ‘Killed in action’, for we believe as Will died fighting, and if so, why then it can’t nowise be called ‘murder’, I says, leastways—’ardly. Moreover us do know as Will went out that evening to run down, cut out and bring to close action a man as George and me had tackled afore, one at a time and both together! A man as can’t and won’t be beat! Six foot four! All beef and bone and Old Nick! And he’s Black John, the Fighting Bargeman and likewise Smashing Jack, the Terror!”

“Is he so very terrible?” I enquired.

“Ay, he is!” nodded Tom, gloomily. “Only more so, eh George?”

“Ah!” nodded George, despondently. “And more yet! He’s the terror of old Thames, sir, above and below bridge! He’s never been beat and never can be, eh Tom?”

“Never!” answered Tom, savouring the fragrance of his glass with a mournful relish. “I’ve tackled him as I say, S’Oliver, once! George likewise has took a go at ’im, we’ve run him aboard both together, starboard and larboard, sir, but—love my eyes! He finishes me with one wi’ his right,—I thought all my ribs was stove! He downs George wi’ his left, eh, George?”

“Ah!” sighed George. “A cannon ball couldn’t be no harder, S’Oliver!”

Now as I listened, I was filled with sudden, wildly joyous impulse to match myself against this prodigy for sake of law and order—perhaps, but certainly for the satisfaction of that primeval, fighting brute that is in all men to greater or less degree, as I suppose. I yearned to hark back ten years to my indomitable, unconquered youth,—a thousand years to the savage, fighting animal I then was, most likely,—joying in strife and danger for its own sake. . . .

“. . . And therefore, sir,” Tom was saying, “me and George, I say George and me is feeling a bit anxious like.”

“Why so, Tom?”

“Well, as I’m telling you, sir,—on account o’ your young Mr. Robin being out arter him at this yere very minute.”

“Eh . . . Robin?” I exclaimed, sitting up.

“Ay, sir, ’im! Since I’ve been and gone and give it away so careless I may as well own as Mr. Robin’s here at the ‘Waterman’. He come aboard of us last night, ay—and carrying a poor cove as the Smasher had just beat up pretty bad. So when we’d comforted this poor cove with a noggin or so o’ rum and got rid of him, we tells Mr. Robin all about this ’ere Black John. Bide a bit, sir, while I wets my whistle.” Here he took two or three sips from his glass with great apparent gusto.

“Well?” I enquired, rather impatiently.

“Well, S’Oliver, no sooner ’ave we told Mr. Robin all about this here Black John, than he clips his arms about the two on us, George and me, and, doing a kind o’ jig. ‘Old hearties,’ says he, ‘comrades and messmates,’ says ’e, ‘Black John’s my joy!’ says ’e. ‘I’ll smash this ‘Smasher’, says ’e. ‘I’ll drag wot’s left of ’im in here and drop ’im at your feet or be carried in myself on a shutter,’ says ’e,—eh George?”

“Them, Tom, was his very words!”

“So this evening, S’Oliver, a bit afore you come aboard, Mr. Robin gets us, George and me, to rig him out like a bargeman and bears away wi’ Cap’n Sim and Jacob, a-cruising for this here Smasher. And, well,—the Smasher being also Black John, I says as we’re nat’rally a bit anxious for young Mr. Robin, eh George?”

“We are, Tom, on-common!”

And now as time passed what wonder that I became anxious too?

Lamps and candles had been lit, for night had fallen, and I was still listening to further accounts of the terrific, man-shattering exploits of Black John, this Terror of the Thames, so that as time sped, my anxiety for young Robin increased almost beyond endurance.

Customers began to appear, rough-looking, hoarse-voiced fellows, my watch showed the hour of seven and still no sign of Robin.

“Where be you going, sir?” enquired George, for I had risen and put on my hat.

“To find Mr. Robin,” I answered, taking up my heavy riding-whip.

“Why then, sir, I’ll——”

A scream, the crash of splintering glass and in through shattered casement a man came flying, all arms and legs, who fell, groaned and lay still. A bellow of deep, fierce laughter . . . and beyond the broken lattice, backed by darkness, I glimpsed a face framed in wild, black hair, fierce, bright eyes, gleam of teeth; then this face was gone.

“‘The Smasher’ . . . again!” cried George. Then from the gloom without rose a voice, loud and threatening:

“Oho Black John! Hi, Smasher, I’m coming to smash you! So kill me—if you can. Come on and be damned!”

“Robin!” I exclaimed, and hastened to the door, for now, in the darkness outside was sound of sudden and furious combat.

So, with others about me, I came forth into the yard. And here, partly by light of the broken window and partly by flickering beams of three or four dim lanterns, I watched Robin fighting for his life—and making a terrible joy of it. For as he faced his gigantic opponent, as he ducked and smote, smote and side-stepped, he laughed and jeered; but as the conflict waxed

fiercer, closer and more deadly, he became grimly silent but seemed only to smite the harder and move the faster.

And now in this uncertain light, pushed and jostled by the eager crowd about me, I beheld two humans doing their best, or worst, to maim and kill each other; for both seemed equally ferocious and determined and equally fast, though Black John showed the bigger and stronger.

They fought without pause or respite, lithe, powerful shapes in fierce and desperate action; I glimpsed pale faces mottled with blood, eyes wide and mouths agape; whirl of long arms, flicker and flash of hard-driving fists; I heard the ceaseless stamp and slither of quick feet. It was a vicious duel between ferocious, untamed man and indomitable, relentless youth.

The Smasher, schooled by brutal experience, strove might and main, to close; Robin, taught and trained from his boyhood up by myself and that master of ring-craft and strategy Jessamy Todd, fought him off with blows and stabs of his long, punishing left.

Thus they fought, foot to foot, ducking, swaying to and fro, up and down, tireless for a while, like the giants they were, until—back went Robin, staggering, reeling; I heard his fierce, breathless laugh, a gasping roar of savage exultation, I saw the Smasher leap after him and closed my eyes though bracing myself for the rescue of Black John's latest victim. I heard a sighing groan from the awed crowd, and then . . . I saw the Smasher was down; he rose to his knees, he got to his legs, he crouched to meet his fierce young adversary's new onset, and then . . . a thunderbolt seemed to strike him,—another, and yet another, his mighty arms swung wide and helpless and, crashing over backwards, he lay inert.

So quick, so sudden was the end that the gaping watchers had scarcely begun to cheer than another fierce laugh silenced them, a breathless voice commanded them to stand clear, and, stooping above the prostrate giant, Robin began to drag him towards the door, a business wherein he found many willing helpers. So indoors again went I with others pushing all about me, there to behold Robin, a fearsome, blood-dabbled sight, smiling down on a sight yet more awful, for now Black John was red indeed, his face so cut, so bruised and battered as testified to his endurance and the might of Robin's fists.

Now as we stood thus, an awed and murmurous company, a voice spoke in accents gentle yet imperious:

"Please give me room!" The crowd instantly parted and I beheld my Aunt Rosamond, gently serene as ever, and behind her the maid Jemima

bearing water in a bowl with sponge and towels.

My Aunt Rosamond looked down upon the helpless, gory shape of Black John, she glanced up at his grim, relentless, young conqueror and putting him aside with one small hand, beckoned Jemima nearer; then kneeling beside the awful, groaning shape of this brutal fellow who had been so long her trouble and terror of all the riverside, she sponged and bathed his disfigured face until he ceased to groan and sighing instead, opened his swelling eyes and looked up at her.

“My poor Black John,” said she, gently. “I’m glad you have come to me at last,” then, stooping, she kissed his furrowed brow, his fierce, bright eyes; and the great room about her very hushed and still. “And now, John,” said she, “if you are able, come with me.”

Slowly the beaten giant rose, but so unsteady on his feet that she propped him with her own body.

“Help him, Oliver,” said she, “pray bring him into Unicorn.” And so I did; but she stayed me at the door with gentle word and smile and shut herself in with this monstrous fellow to my no small worry; insomuch that I paused there with my hand upon the draw-latch. But as I stood thus, came Tom to reassure me.

“Never you fear, sir, our Lady’s safe enough,—besides I’m here,—and yonder comes Master Robin.”

“Well, sir and Governor,” he demanded, frowning, “so you followed me, chased me—Yoicks, tantivy hark forrard and after me, eh? Guessed I should make for this place, back to Old London, my native gutter and the slime of old Father Thames, eh?”

“I’m in London to help you the best I may, Robin.”

“What—to gaol, sir?”

“To vindicate your innocence, because innocent I do certainly believe you now, Robin.”

“Innocent? Oh Noll . . . dear, old sir . . . Governor——” he exclaimed, then seized my hand and wrung it; his bloody face smiled, but he said no more. So I set my arm about him and urged him up the stair, saying:

“Come my boy and let me help get some of this blood off you.”

“It’s mostly John’s, sir,” he answered, cheerily. “I’m very well. A pretty fair go while it lasted, eh, dear old sir and Noll?”

“So good,” I answered as we entered that bedchamber named ‘Luff’, “that I hope never to see such another!”

“Jessamy would have been pleased, sir. Those two ‘finishers’ were Jessamy’s own—left and right with body-swing pivoting on the toes—but of course you know it. Indeed, sir, I owe as much to your lessons as to Jessamy’s fewer instructions. And the Smasher was pretty good too,—better than I expected, and though a brute he was a fair brute as brutes go, Governor, no boot-work as expected or other dirty tricks, no. Black John the Smasher is—a man.” So saying, and politely scornful of all assistance, my young Hercules, stripping to the waist, began to wash from himself the grim signs of conflict; and remarkable few they were, all things considered, an ugly graze beneath his left ear which he bathed tenderly, three or four angry, red splotches upon the white skin of his great chest that he splashed and rubbed with a cheery vigour that only displayed the lithe power of his splendid young body.

“Lord love us!” he exclaimed suddenly, pausing to look at me over the towel, “and she actually . . . kissed the brute! Ah, she kissed the Smasher, but not so much as a word for me!”

“This will doubtless be later, Robin.”

“She’s a grand person, sir! Yes, she’s a great lady—and wise! I mean she seems to know so much about a fellow by merely looking at a fellow—square in the eye—with those wonderful eyes of her own . . . marvellous! This is why I came to her, she has always been so kind to me whenever she visited us at Abbeymead. I used to confide in her as a boy and so I did last night. I told her everything . . . and she believed me, Noll old sir, on the spot, Governor!”

“And I didn’t. Forgive me, Robin.”

“Oh my blessed old sir and Noll, dear old Gov. I didn’t mean to reproach you, no no! And as for forgiveness, it is I should beg it of you for so damnably misjudging you and Clee, bless her sweet loveliness,—the memory of it shames me now, no end, sir, as you told me it would.”

“Then,” said I, “Robin, my dear boy, you proved yourself such a man to-night first with the Smasher and now with me that now, my Robin Goodfellow, let us shake hands, as men, and forgive each other.”

So indeed we did, and Robin’s eyes, that could be so inordinately fierce, now gentle as any woman’s and yet bright with a man’s tears. It was at this

moment Tom came knocking to tell me Jasper Shrig was below and would I go down?

“Will you go with me, Robin?” I enquired.

“No, sir, if you’ll excuse me,” he answered, muffled in the folds of the coarse, thick shirt he was half into, “not while all those fellows are in the tap to fuss over me and so on.”

“And,” said Tom, “quite right too, Mr. Robin, they’ll all be wanting to cheer and pour ale into ye. How if I bring Jasper up here to you, S’Oliver, and a bowl o’ the One and Only, nice and cosy?”

“And yourself also, Tom.”

“Honoured, sir, but me and George’ll be busy below, and dooty, sir, is dooty! But honoured all the same. I’ll go tell Jasper.” And off he went.

“Robin,” said I, watching him get into his bargeman’s clumsy coat somewhat torn and stained by combat, “what shall you do here, supposing you are not imprisoned, how pass your time?”

“Clean up this very promising neighbourhood, sir,” he answered, knotting a vivid belcher neckerchief about his throat, “tackle every fighting ragamuffin and roaring bully I can find. Oh Noll, dear old sir, it will be purest joy and good for all concerned. This is the place for me, Governor. It must have been hereabouts I was born, here I starved and thieved, cursed and swore—and worse! I should probably have been hanged before now but for you! Oh God bless you. Governor! Do you remember how, devilish urchin that I was, I led you into a trap to be robbed and half murdered if old Shrig hadn’t chanced to come along? Lord,—how Shrig was feared and hated! I wonder if he could recognise me for the little devil of misery I was then? They used to call me ‘Snod’ in those days, so did he. I wonder if he could possibly know me now?”

“We shall soon be sure,” I answered, “I think I hear him on the stair.”

So I opened the door; I glimpsed a shadowy form, heard a heavy step,—and then upon the threshold, hat in one hand, knobbed stick in the other stood Jasper Shrig, of Bow Street.

CHAPTER XXIII

MR. JASPER SHRIG OF BOW STREET

MR. SHRIG stood for a moment blinking in the candlelight and puffing a little after climbing the stairs for they are somewhat steep and narrow. A squat, powerfully built man, very trim as to person, with rosy face neither round nor square, a wide, humorous mouth and eyes somewhat deep set beneath pent of thick brows, bright eyes whose elusive glance roved hither and thither, then met one's own with a suddenness apt to be a little disconcerting; but these eyes were gazing at me now very steadfastly and these lips were curving in smile of welcome.

"Jasper!" said I, reaching out my hand.

"Mr. O, pal!" he answered, grasping it close. "Or rayther I should ought to say 'Sir Oliver,' old pal, you being both, sir,—this here is a J.O.Y j'y! Tom's a-coming with a jorum o' the Vun and Only, for, pal, this here is truly a o-ccasion as should and must be dooly honoured. Firstly because the ree-union of old pals varms the cockles of the heart, and secondly because us ha' been privileged to vitness a werry remarkable go, pal, for I never see a finer display o' The Noble Art in all my puff! And over there agin' the bed-post stands, I o-pine, the young David as downed Goliah vithout aty a pebble nor yet a sling."

Robin laughed and stepping from shadow of the bed-curtains, stood now in full light of the candles.

"Yes," he answered, smiling, "I am that David, Mr. Shrig, but who am I, beside? Who else? Have you ever seen me before? Look on me well."

Jasper Shrig looked; that is to say, his shrewd, keen gaze roved up and down and to and fro over Robin's powerful frame from curling auburn hair to heavy bargeman's boots, each individual button of his shabby coat, every rent and stain; finally Mr. Shrig's bullet head shook itself slowly as he answered:

"No, young master, no! Vith that hair and them there shoulders—vunce seen never forgot! Verefore and therefore I'm pretty sartin as my ogles has never took you in afore."

Robin sighed; then he did that which pleased me not a little; he went to Mr. Shrig, laid both hands on his wide shoulders and looking down into the face that is neither round nor square, smiled.

“Jasper, old friend,” said he, rather wistfully, “you knew me very well once. You often prophesied I should end on the gallows. To-day I am Robin Dale, accused of murder, but years ago I was called—Snod.”

Jasper Shrig blinked, as well indeed he might, and, a chair being near, he subsided thereon, still gazing up mutely into the comely, young face that smiled down on him. Then with gaze still thus fixed, Jasper drew a deep breath and enunciated the following original but wholly unintelligible observation:

“Blow . . . my . . . dickey!”

Robin laughed again and, seating himself nearby upon my bed, surveyed Mr. Shrig with an expression very like affection.

“Bless you, Jasper!” said he. “No wonder you are astounded, I am myself—when I trouble to remember. You behold in me an example of what a man’s loving care may do, the miracle it may work. Sir Oliver Dale is far more to me than any real father could be,—or mother! He has tried to make me a gentleman, rather unsuccessfully I’m afraid, also he has tried to teach me respect for all good and noble things, to honour all that is best in life, and with better result, because, Jasper, I do truly love and honour him. To-day I am accused of murdering a man I fought, and all things seem to prove that I must have done. But listen, Jasper, and I’ll tell you the exact truth of it.” And forthwith Robin did so, very clearly and in fewest possible words while Mr. Shrig, leaning back in his chair, watched him and listened nor moved until the tale was ended. Then, once again, he breathed deep, shook his head, rather mournfully and murmured:

“Dog . . . bite . . . me if this ain’t con-flummera-tion!” he sighed, he scratched his head, he looked from Robin to me quite dolefully. “Pal,” said he, and the word was a groan, “I axes you—vot now? Burn me—here’s young Snod growed up into a reg’lar heavy toddler, a tippy, a bang-up blood and corinthian as fights like champion o’ The Fancy and talks so like a man and honourable gen’leman as I can’t help but believe! And con-sequently here’s me totally flummoxed and con-flummerated! So I axes—vot now? And I axes it ’ole-’earted, pal?”

“And I answer, Jasper,” said I, “come back with me to Abbeymead and find the real murderer.”

“Can’t be!” sighed Mr. Shrig. “I’m up to my peepers in vork, likewise ’twould be most irreg’lar, and besides I’ve sent my Gimblet and he’s amazing sharp!”

“And,” said Robin, “should you want me, Jasper, you shall find me here, I promise on my honour.”

“Also,” I continued, “I ask your help because of the promise you made me ten years ago above the bodies of two dead men! You’ll remember, I think?”

“Ar!” he nodded. “I remember. But I’m a nofficer o’ The Law and as you know The Law is——”

“An ass!” quoted Robin.

“Should be just!” said I. “And, Jasper, for the last time I ask your aid because I am, and dare to think you are, certain my Robin is guiltless of this foul crime.”

“Ah—but——” began Jasper and paused, for at this moment came Tom bearing a tray whereon were glasses and a steaming bowl that filled the room with most delicious savour. Mr. Shrig sniffed this fragrance, and nodded. “Leming peel!” he murmured; he sniffed again and smiled. “Cloves!” he sighed. Tom nodded and filled the glasses.

“Ay ay, Jasper,” said he, beaming, “as in orders and all according to your own taste.”

And so presently we drank together, we talked frankly and openheartedly as old friends should; and the end of it was that Jasper promised so soon as present business allowed, in two days’ time, he would drive down with me to Abbeymead and do what he might, with the Gimlet’s able assistance, to come at the truth of this dark and troublous matter.

CHAPTER XXIV

TELLS OF A SURPRISING LETTER

A STRANGE, busy day this; in the morning I walked with my Aunt Rosamond to visit some of her poor folk in those dens and hovels, cellars and crowded rookeries which lie beyond her own properties and holdings where she has done so much clearing away and rebuilding.

I have heard her talk with weary, harassed mothers, hard-faced women, brutish men and savage, half-naked children. I have seen faces, haggard and woeful, light up at mere sight of her, fierce eyes grow kinder, evil looks abase themselves, and children come flocking about her like so many ragged, grimy London sparrows, chattering, whooping, shrieking in glad welcome. Sweetmeats and cakes she had in plenty for these children, but only smiles and gentle words for the men and women.

“Because,” she explained, “money for nothing only debases. There are three soup-kitchens if they hunger, the hospital yonder if they are sick, and work—for those who will. . . .”

In the afternoon I rode westwards for sight of this great and ever-changing city, and marvelling, as I always do, at its grandeur and grime, the thunderous surge of its ceaseless traffic, grind of numberless wheels on cobbled streets, tramp of its busy multitudes, and I yearned mightily for the quiet, gentle countryside and simpler joys of Abbeymead.

On my return, it being too early for tea, this so English and homely season, I took a walk among the busy wharves below bridge, where lay ships of all sizes and rigs, and was passing a large, sea-going barge when I heard someone hailing me and saw this was my old acquaintance Captain Sim Purvis.

“Come ye aboard, sir,” he cried, in that great bellowing voice that, in contrast to his small person, always astonishes me, “come ee, sir, gang-plank’s fast.”

Scarcely had my foot touched the deck than he was shaking my hand in vigorous welcome.

“Mighty glad for to see ee, sir, blast me if I ain’t!” quoth he. “Didn’t get no chance for a word last night—and wot a night! Jacob’s below, sir. Jacob

and me owns this here craft now and works her wi' three men and a b'y. Ho Jacob!" he roared, "rouse out! Shake a leg and come aloft, we got comp'ny!" A voice answered from the profundities underfoot and then up through a narrow aperture in the deck rose a battered old top-hat and beneath this the large, solemn visage of Captain Jacob Pell who ascended through this somewhat inadequate scuttle or gangway, foot by foot, until his whole large person stood revealed. Perceiving me, he smiled, the top-hat (perched unsecurely as usual) toppled, was removed just in time and thus bareheaded, he gripped my hand.

"Lord," said he, "Lord kindly bless us, here's a pleasure!"

"That's what I says, Jacob," beamed Captain Sim.

"No, Sim, oh no!" sighed Captain Jacob. "Wot you says was 'blast you', you says, and now I says as 'twere no way to greet a old friend——"

"Well but I says it from me 'eart, Jacob. So wot's the odds?"

"The odds, Sim, lays betwixt 'eaven and 'ell,—hell, messmate, crown o' glory or lake o' brimstone! Below there, Shag, a cheer for the gemman!" Ensued sundry bumps and bangs and up through the scuttle appeared a battered elbow-chair propelled by a freckled, shock-headed youth who grinned at me, thrust the chair upon me and vanished instantly. Scarcely had I taken this chair and my two hosts perched themselves upon an adjacent boom than back came this shaggy boy with a tray whereon stood a black, square bottle and three glasses, which Captain Sim filled, saying:

"Schnapps! Here's to all old friends!"

So on the trim deck of this stout vessel that had braved fierce winds, foaming seas, and the peril of our rock-bound coasts so often, I sat with these two hoary mariners and sipped and talked of past days, of the present and of Robin who, it seems, has won their honest hearts completely. From them I now learned that he had met and conquered three notoriously brutal ruffians before his encounter with Black John, which combat they now recounted almost blow by blow and with the nice judgment and discrimination of much and hard experience.

Now as we talked I noticed that Captain Jacob seemed gradually to lose interest like one pondering other and far graver matters, he became more and more silent whereat his small companion grew the more loquacious. At last, however, Captain Jacob sighed so gustily and shook his great head so portentously that off toppled the hat to be caught very dexterously by

Captain Sim who instantly rammed it back on his companion's head, and shook his own, saying:

"Better out wi' it, messmate, or shiver and blast me but you'll be a-shaking this dicer o' yourn overboard! For, sir, Jacob's 'ad a letter 's morning, by the mail, from his sister, a letter as troubles him, ay and me likewise and we been thinkin' as you'd better read it and say wot you think on 't. So out wi' it, Jacob, out wi' it."

"Ay, p'raps so, Sim. I think I'd better. Sir, I got a sister Martha Pell until she took and got spliced to a drover, a matter o' twenty-odd year ago named Ben Croft as died and left her a widder and now lives along o' you in the South Country at Abbeymead."

"Martha Croft, to be sure, I know her, Jacob."

"Then like enough you knows 'er son, Mart'n?"

"Yes."

"Then, sir, you'll know too as 'e ain't quite, well—all there, a bit weakish aloft, like?"

"Yes, I know this, poor lad."

"Well, she writes me as she's all took aback and on 'er beam-ends along of her son Mart'n being tarrified out o' his few poor wits and by reason of—oo do you suppose, sir?"

"I cannot suppose, Jacob."

"And no wonder, sir, for no more can we! How'sever Martha writes as poor Mart'n is tarrified b' reason of—your Mr. Robin!"

"But, good gracious," I exclaimed, greatly astonished, "he would never harm the poor lad! He is not the sort to bully or hurt a weakling."

"Ay ay, so says we, sir. But my sister Martha's writing says very plain as poor Mart'n be frighted nigh to death for fear Mr. Robin should kill him—like he done . . . Mr. George Ash. But here, sir, read it for ye'self." So saying, he drew forth the letter in question which he unfolded and tendered me.

And this is a copy of what I read:

"Dere bro Jake there has been offal doing down here bloody murder has been wrought on person of late Mr. George Ash as farms Barksteed, beat to death they say most shoking to ear and

laying all night long in his goar. So if anyone wants to know I know how and why Mr. Ash were so murdered and others know to who done it though nobody won't say only there was Rose Thorn and Mr. Robin was sweet that way hisself same as Mr. G. Ash as plenty do know but it don't do for to say. And my Martin be all of a quake therefor. Otherwise my poor dear boy Martin be happier than what he ever was or been since she come to drownd herself, he do sing all day and plays flute beautiful like angels on high sings. Only at nights Jacob e screams for fear as Master Rob will beat him to death like he done G Ash so savage and orid as they do tell. So if you know Sir Oliver D like you say tell im as the guilty one is known and so be warned. Hoping as this finds you Jacob as it leaves your loving sister,

“MRS. CROFT. MARTHA.”

“Jacob,” said I, puzzled and not a little troubled by this rambling yet terribly suggestive letter, “I must beg you to lend me this.”

“Ay, ay, sir, take it, take it. Wot it all means I dunno but I do 'ope as it means no manner o' harm to Mr. Robin, Lord love and bless 'im!”

“And,” quoth Captain Sim, earnestly, “if that's a prayer for Mr. Robin, messmate, blast my dead eyes if I don't ekker it from me very 'eart! For a finer-spirited, gayer, freer-'anded young gemman and sportsman never drawed breath, or drownd, scupper me and shiver me danged bones!”

“Which, Sim, I begs to say as sich langwidge don't and won't do no manner o' good to Mr. Robin and only blackens your own poor, miserable soul.”

“Well but damme,” cried Captain Sim, his small person stiff with indignation, “my soul's as clean as yourn, blast it!”

“Belay, Sim lad, belay!” sighed his old messmate. “Don't blast your poor, blasted soul no more than you've blasted it already by constant oaths and cursin's——”

“You leave my blasted soul alone, will ye?”

“Not me, Sim,—'tis a brand as I'd snatch from the fiery furniss, shipmet, 'tis a——”

“Oh, hell!” roared Captain Sim.

“Ay ay, old messmet, hell’s wot I mean, flamin’ hell, Sim, the fiery pit be a-yawnin’ and a-gapin’ for that sinful carkiss o’ yourn. . . . Wot, sir, are ye off?” he enquired as I rose. “Why then us’ll be along to the old ‘Waterman’ ’s evening.” So I shook their hands and left them to that fierce wrangling that means so little, knits them so close and will never end but with life itself.

Now as I made my way towards ‘The Jolly Young Waterman’ not a little disquieted by Mrs. Croft’s amazing letter, whom should I behold perched disconsolate upon a rusty bollard but Black John, The Smasher. Catching sight of me he scowled instinctively then, as if thinking better of it, touched the glazed hat he wore. So I stopped and now saw he was an even mightier fellow than I had thought, yet less evil-looking than he had seemed last night.

“Good evening, Black John!” said I.

“Evenin’!” he growled. “Tek a look at me danged figure-’ead, will ye!”

“I am,” I answered, “and find it better than I thought.”

“ ‘Ow d’ye mean, better?”

“Not so damaged as I expected and better-natured than it seemed.”

“Well, I ain’t all as they says o’ me, Guvnor, no—nothin’ like. A dog wi’ a bad name, that’s me.”

“A dog that lives only to fight deserves a bad name!” I retorted.

“Why a lonesome cove like me must do summat, skipper. Some drinks, I fights. I picks me the likeliest cove as chances ’andy and sails in, though never afore ’e’s set and ready. Ah—I’ve let coves tek first wallop at me afore now jest to encourage ’em. I’ve fought me way round the world, afloat and ashore and never took best from any man till . . . you know when. And then, b’ Jasper, I took a plenty! And, when I come to, I dreams I’m sayin’ my prayers alongside me mother like I used to do, me mother as has been dead and buried, Lord love her, these seven years, so it couldn’t ha’ been her,—so then I comes to and see as ’tis—well, you know oo she is!”

“Yes. They call her The Lady of Comfort.”

“Ay ay, and comfort she is! And puts me in mind o’ me own mother, dead this seven year . . . and dang me if they ain’t a-dying too!”

“What do you mean?”

“Why . . . these here, skipper!” And removing his glazed hat, he showed me lying in the crown of it a small and somewhat faded bunch of violets.

“Look at ’em, curse ’em!” quoth he, bitterly. “They was fresh as paint when I bought ’em.”

“Why did you buy them, Black John?”

“Well,” he answered with a deep growl, “don’t I tell ye as she minds me o’ me mother?”

“Then why not give them to her?”

“Why so I should if I’d fell in wi’ her alone. Rot me,—but I’ve been standin’ off and on, backin’ and fillin’, bowsin’ up and haulin’ me wind awaitin’ for to sight her, but—no luck! Then I thought o’ heavin’ ’em in through that winder as I broke, on the chance of her pickin’ of ’em up, but reckoned as they’d only be trod on. So here they be dyin’ on me,—might as well heave ’em into the river.”

“Don’t do that. Go with me and give them to her instead.”

“Nay, but wot’s a few faded flowers to the likes o’ her?”

“A great deal more than I can say, especially if you give them yourself.”

“Why then, p’raps, if you’ll convoy me, guvnor, and stand by . . . though, curse ’em, the danged things is fadin’ worse and worse!”

“Then the sooner she has them the better. Come!”

So into his hat went the flowers again and with them thus securely hidden and hat cocked at defiant angle, Black John went beside me scowling so murderously at all and any groups of idlers we met that they scattered with the utmost alacrity to give us way.

So we reached ‘The Jolly Young Waterman’ and there, unheeding Tom’s scowl and George’s stare, I brought Black John to my Aunt Rosamond in Unicorn. He had walked with a fine, free stride till now, but at sight of her he shambled and hung his black head; he took off the glazed hat so awkwardly that his flowery offering fell to the ground. But even then, while Black John shuffled his great feet and wriggled mighty shoulders, she had stooped, taken up his flowers and, inhaling their sweetness, kissed them.

“They . . . they ain’t wot they was, mam,” he muttered, “nor what they should ought to be . . . for you . . . ! Faded, mam, and not many on ’em . . .”

“Ah John,” she answered, smiling at him over them, “I would not have your flowers any different because they are telling me now, Black John, that in your great, strong body is a great, strong, clean heart. And so I shall love your flowers and keep them long after they are faded and dead, for sake of the giver.”

John gulped; he picked up his hat, put it on and instantly snatched it off again.

“Mam, I . . . Lady o’ Comfort, I’ll bring you more, ay and better tomorroy. And, lady, I’m a ship’s-carpenter and tomorroy I’ll bring me tools along and mend that there winder o’ yourn wot I broke last night . . . free and gratus, mam.”

“Thank you, John. This is kind . . . though I’d rather pay you——”

“No, mam! No, please! You paid me last night when you . . . prayed over me like me own mother used. Ay, lady, you paid me in a way as I ain’t agoing to forget f’rever. So . . . good evening, lady, and best respex. I’ll be along early for the winder, and . . . thankee kindly.”

Then Black John bowed himself out with a humility that was somehow very dignified, and striding into the taproom, halted before Tom who scowled and George who showed his teeth, and though John, this beaten man, did neither, he still showed quite unconquered for his head was carried high, indeed it very nearly touched the great oak beams above him. And thus they fronted each other, the One and the Two.

“Mates——” began the One.

{ “We ain’t!”
“None whatever!” said the Two, in a breath.

“Ay but lemme speak——”

{ “No!”
“Close your trap!” said the Two.

“Please!” I interpolated. “Fair is fair.”

{ “So ’tis, sir!”
“Ay, ay! Well, heave ahead, Smasher!”

“Well mates I know as I downed the two on ye, but only because I was so lonesome and low-spirited, so I axes your pardon both. Now can’t we let byegones be so?”

{ “We can’t and we won’t!”
“Not us!” answered the Two.

“Mates,” sighed the One, “I knows as folks don’t take kindly to me, it’s me size I reckon, but . . . she did, the Lady o’ Comfort, ay—and so now I’m wishing as . . . p’raps . . . you may likewise.”

{ “Can’t be!”
“Not never!” quoth the Two, with the utmost decision.

John’s great chest heaved with a sigh, he shook his black, shaggy head, glanced from the hostile Two round this neat, cosy taproom and espying the broken casement, nodded.

“That winder,” said he, “I’m a-goin’ to mend it; I’ll put it back good as ever it was.”

{ “There’s more than a winder atwixt us!”
“Ah, a sight more!” growled the Two.

“Wot then mates? Come, wot ’ave ye agin me? Out with it!”

{ “A dead man!”
“Ay, our murdered comrade, poor Will!” answered the Two.

“’Tweren’t none o’ my doing, mates. The only man as ever I killed was a mulatter in Rio as deserved it and my oath on it! Ay, me Bible oath as I’ve never killed any man since. So, mates, wot d’ye say now?”

{ “No! I don’t like your face, nor your looks, nor—you!”
“Nor me neither!” answered the Two, very fervently.

“Hows’ever, messmates, when I put back ’ere tomorry morning in matter o’ the winder, I’ll show ye me papers as’ll prove I was at sea in the *Thetis* brig, Cap’n Jonas Nye, when your mate was done for. And no man can’t do no fairer——”

It was now that the door opened and Jemima’s voice said:

“If you please, Sir Oliver, m’lady bid me say——” here, peeping round the door, she caught sight of Black John and uttered a strangled scream.

“Oh Lawks a mussy!” she exclaimed and, slamming the door, fled.

“Ay, there she goes!” nodded Black John. “Allus squeaks and runs, squeals and slips her cable at sight o’ me! Lonesome and likewise solingtary,

—a dog wi' a blasted bad name, that's me, mates!" Having said which, he sighed deeper than ever, shook his head again, squared his mighty shoulders and strode away.

CHAPTER XXV

PARTICULARS OF MY EXAMINATION BY JASPER SHRIG

THIS evening the old river had shrouded itself in a creeping, chilly mist that, with night, grew colder and denser, a mist wherein phantom shapes seemed to move and writhe, peeping through open doorways, peering in at windows; a clammy, choking, all-pervading unpleasantness.

But within these age-old walls of the 'Jolly Waterman' all was cheer and comfort, more especially in that cosy, inner chamber called 'Salamander', for here, remote from the somewhat noisy taproom, a red fire glowed, candles beamed and twinkled upon glasses and the bright buttons of Mr. Shrig's trim coat as he stirred the steaming contents of a bowl that gave forth a spicy aroma.

"Sir O, pal," quoth he, ladling out liquid fragrance into our two glasses with the utmost nicety and precision, "Old Father Thames is all fog and mystery to-night, verefore and therefore Willainy and Windictiveness, with capital Wees, is up and a-doing. Crime's on the prowl and Old Nick is up to all manner o' foul tricks and wanities."

"This," said I, drawing my easy-chair a little nearer the fire, "this is a very disturbing thought, Jasper."

"Ah, as disturbing as ever vas!" he answered, sipping at his glass with great apparent relish and gusto. "And here's another disturber, only more so! As us sits here so werry cosy and companionable,—someveres in this here modern Babbylon somebody's a-murdering somevun or other, you may take your oath—dark deeds is being wrought, The Fact is being commit, blood, pal, is a-flowing, hearts is a-breaking, the Old River is a-rolling its corpses to the sea, ay—life's a-coming and ditter's a-going, for so vags this here veary world. But—even so, there's compensations, pal, even for a nofficer o' The Law or a vorried gen'leman—like yourself, sir."

"Worried?" I repeated, setting down my glass on the table beside me and staring at him in some surprise.

"Vorried, pal, is the only vord for it. Life's a constant vorry and specially o' foggy nights. Yet, as I says, there's com-pensations. F'rinstance, if Trouble, with a capital T, has been a-snarling on a cove's 'eels all day and

Fortun' has downed said cove 'ard and frequent, that cove may find sich comfort in the company of a trusty friend and a spot o' summat in a glass, that this cove'll kick Trouble into a corner and square up to Fortun' ready and villing for more. So, Oliver old friend, drink hearty and then, if so inclined, tell your pal Jarsper vot's on your mind."

"Are you so sure I am worried, Jasper?"

"Ar!" he nodded. "As sure as—death!"

And after I had sipped the comfort in my glass and glanced from Jasper Shrig's rosy, good-natured face to the rosy comfort of the fire, I took forth Mrs. Croft's letter, smoothed it out upon my knee and answered:

"You are right, Jasper. I am a little worried but much more astonished by a very odd and surprising circumstance . . . as if a gentle ewe sheep had roared at me or a nesting dove attacked me with an eagle's beak and talons."

"Meaning that there letter, pal?"

"Yes. It is so utterly inexplicable, so amazing and unexpected . . . its purpose so damnable! Had it fallen into wrong hands it might have caused a terrible miscarriage of justice."

"Ah!" murmured Mr. Shrig, beaming at the fire. "Then 'twill be some noo evidence agin' Mr. Robin, o' course."

"Yes . . . of a sort. It at least shows the kind of gossip in and around Abbeymead."

"And are you a-going to trust that there letter to me, remembering as, though your old friend, I am also a nofficer o' The Law,—are you, pal?"

"Yes, Jasper . . . because I am perfectly convinced of Robin's innocence and your capabilities. Otherwise I should have destroyed it for the wickedly mischievous thing it is." Then, having briefly recounted how unexpectedly I had received it, I handed this troublesome letter to Jasper Shrig.

"Pal," said he, glancing at me sideways with his keen, bright eyes, "afore I reads a vord I'll tell you summat. You're a-thinking as how in showing me this letter you're placing in my daddle, or as you might say—'and, a werry powerful vepping agin your a-dopted son Robin or Robert Dale,—now ain't you?"

"Well," I answered, somewhat startled. "I suppose I am. Yes, in less skilled hands, perhaps. But properly used I believe it may lead to the solving of this mystery and Robin's complete vindication."

Jasper Shrig nodded, spread out the letter on the table; having read it through twice and very carefully, he whistled 'The British Grenadiers' at it beneath his breath, beamed and nodded at it but looked across at me with eyes almost unpleasantly keen.

"Sir," quoth he, in tone that matched his look, "this here is a dockyment o' prime importance vich, as officer in charge o' the case, I shall therefore dooly ap-propriate."

"Certainly!" said I, not a little troubled by his coldly official manner. "But what do you think of it?"

"Speaking as a nofficer, sir, I think as this letter being direct evidence—almost, the sooner as I'm at Abbeymead the better for all con-sarned."

"Yes," said I, heartily, "so I think. And now, Mr. Shrig, speaking as my friend Jasper, pray what do you think of it?"

"Pal," he answered, in tone less grim but staring down at the letter and shaking his head, "all as Jarsper can say is, as Shrig o' Bow Street shall do his best as your friend, but his dooty as a nofficer, votsoever it be."

"Of course!" said I, a little uncertainly. "But——"

"And now, sir, as Shrig o' Bow Street, I'll ax you a few questions as you're novise com-pelled to answer, not being under oath."

"Still I'll answer them, Mr. Shrig, truthfully, of course, and to the best of my ability."

"Werry good!" said he; here, after some varied contortions he extracted from the recesses of his person a large and bulbous note-book and pencil, he opened the one, licked the other and looked at me with eyes more keenly official than ever, or so I thought.

"Question Number Vun, sir,—'oo and vot is Mrs. Martha Croft?"

"One of my poorer tenants in Abbeymead village."

"Married or single, vidder or vife?"

"A widow with one son who——"

"Occupation, trade or perfession?"

"She keeps a little shop."

"Character, sir?"

“Extremely respectable, a very superior, honest woman,—and this is what mystifies——”

“Respectable!” repeated Mr. Shrig, beginning to write with surprising speed, “Respectable, consequently don’t gabble in pot-’ouses nor yet tattle at street corners. Sooperior,—edicated and can read and write. Honest,—therefore ain’t likely to tell lies nor yet bear false vitness agin her neighbour,—eh, sir?” he demanded, with sudden up-glance at me.

“No,” I answered, with sudden qualm, “at least I should never have thought so and therefore I’m the more amazed by her . . . well . . . insinuations.”

“Sir,” quoth Mr. Shrig, shaking his head at me, “I don’t ’ardly think as insinivation’s the vord, no—accusation’s nearer the mark,—eh?”

“Perhaps so,” I admitted, ruefully, “though such accusation can be based only on merest rumour.”

“But vich,” said Mr. Shrig, watching me beneath lowering brows, “vich nat’rally brings us to—Rose Thorn!”

“Why so?” I demanded, with another qualm.

“As being the Voman in the Case, sir. In most cases o’ the Capital Act if it ain’t money ’tis generally a fe-male. And this here misfort’nate fe-male went and drownded herself it seems. From vich I dee-dooce two fax, say if I’m wrong. Fact Vun,—she vas werry pretty! Fact Two,—she was young!”

“Yes,” said I, “she was young, poor child, and very beautiful.”

“You knowed same by sight then?”

“Quite well.”

“Then p’raps, sir, you can say the reason as she commit fellerdesee?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“No idea, sir, no suggestion nor yet ’int?”

“Plenty!” I answered. “The poor girl’s death caused much talk.”

“Ah, so I supposed. And I suppose again as this talk coupled her name with the name o’ some man or men, eh, sir?”

“Well . . . yes!” I answered and so unwillingly that he shook his head at me again.

“Might vun o’ these names be—George Ash?”

“Yes,” I answered again, and as unwillingly.

“And t’other un—Robin Dale?”

“No, Jasper! No, upon my honour I never heard anything of the kind.”

“Ah vell,” he sighed, “p’raps others did.”

“Shrig, what are you suggesting?”

“Now con-carning G. Ash——”

“Jasper, what are you suggesting?” I demanded. “Look at me, man, and answer!”

“Sir, I am follering a nat’ral line o’ thought,—the trail, sir, as other officers’ll be on too—if they’re sharp, my Gimblet, f’rinstance! So now, sir, lemme hear vot you know or can tell o’ George Ash the murderee as got hisself murdered on your land. You saw the corpus or ca-daver afore they moved same, I think?”

“Yes, but how do you know—so soon?”

“A despatch, sir, by special, werry express post. How vas the body laying, sir?”

“On its back.”

“And werry much disfigured.”

“Horribly!”

“Having been beat to death by some blunt vepping or instrument—say a v’ip?”

“No,” said I, “most certainly not.”

“Oh?” murmured Shrig, blinking at me. “V’y not, sir?”

“Because no whip would be heavy enough to inflict such terrible injuries.”

Mr. Shrig said Ha! twice, rubbed his smooth shaven chin very hard, consulted his note-book and glanced at me.

“But ’tis in ewidence as said v’ip is bloodstained!”

“It is,” said I. “But it was no whip killed George Ash.”

Again Mr. Shrig whistled the ghost of a melody while he scanned certain pages of his note-book, glanced at me again and enquired:

“Vas the grass around the body much trampled and tore?”

“I didn’t notice.”

“Much blood about, sir?”

“I hardly looked.”

“But you did see, or be’ old, said v’ip?”

“Yes.”

“And knowed it for property o’ Robin Dale?”

“I did.”

“Now, sir, tell me all you can o’ Mrs. Croft’s son, Martin, as screams o’ nights for fear o’ being beat to death by Mr. Robin Dale, according to written——”

“Shrig, you are making things look very black against my Robin!”

“Sir, I am jist a-going over fax as known so far. So now—o’ Mrs. Croft’s son Martin. Can you describe same?”

“He is, I suppose, about twenty-five years old but seems much younger, a very gentle, helpless creature crippled from birth, poor lad, and hobbles painfully on crutches. Also he is not quite sound in the head.”

“A bit veak in the intellects, eh, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Ha!” sighed Mr. Shrig, thoughtfully. “Goes . . . on . . . crutches! He likewise plays a flute . . . like angels sings on ’igh, eh, sir?”

“Yes, he plays surprisingly well.”

“Ha!” sighed Mr. Shrig, again. “Flutes by day, screams by night, goes on crutches, a cripple from birth and veak in the nob. And how,” he enquired, writing busily, “should you write crutches, sir, with a C or a K?”

“C,” I answered; then saw Mr. Shrig’s pencil was now rigid and still for he was staring at what he had written with eyes even rounder than usual, also he whistled again below his breath.

“What is it?” I enquired.

“Why, sir,” he answered, slowly, “every now and then I come up agin a vord as levels me, being no scholard, all as I knows I larned myself. You give me a C, I think, so—down it goes! . . . So you tells me as this here

young Martin—but no matter. Let's hear a bit more o' George Ash the murdered cove or as you might say, murderree. G. Ash vasn't a cripple, eh?"

"On the contrary, a vigorous fellow, tall and very strong."

"Ah! And 'tis in ewidence as your Mr. Robin used his v'ip on this here vigorous, tall and werry strong man! Agreed, sir?"

"Certainly! Robin told you so himself last night."

"Ay, so he did! And also as he vas that same young demon urchin vunce called—Snod!"

"Jasper," said I, in growing dismay, "you make me wish I had destroyed that letter."

"Hows'ever," he answered, folding it carefully into his pocket book, "it's werry safe—now!"

Then thrusting his book into the breast of his coat, he nodded at me and—smiled.

"Sir O, pal," said he, "I'll tell you summat!" Here he refilled my glass and his own and leaning back in his chair, chuckled.

"Well," I enquired, somewhat mystified, "what have you to tell me, Jasper?"

"Jest this, sir and old friend, if you 'adn't done the honourable by yourself, The Law, and me,—if you'd took and destroyed this letter and suppressed ewidence, a werry felonious act,—you'd ha' regretted and likewise repented it all your days. And now, sir, jest vun more question,—might Mrs. Martha Croft be a werry good, kind mother to her pore cripple son, werry loving—say . . . dewoted?"

"Wonderfully so, Jasper, his very infirmities seem only to make him the more precious and her love the more deep and tender. Such mother love is a beautiful thing, Jasper!"

"Ar!" he nodded. "Though the vord I should use is . . . terri-mendious!"

"Why?" I enquired. Jasper smiled, he up-ended his glass slowly upon his short, pugnacious nose, placed it carefully upon the table and answered:

"Since you ax me so p'inted, I'll tell you this much——"

But he told me nothing for, at this moment, rose sudden clamour in the taproom.

CHAPTER XXVI

TELLS HOW AND WHY ROLAND ACKNOWLEDGED HIS NEPHEW

THE long, low room was thronged with its usual company, mostly men of the better sort, wharfingers, deep-sea mariners, boatmen and riverside characters, in the air was a blue haze and reek of tobacco-smoke and fog though at this precise moment I think most men had forgotten to puff since every eye was turned where, straddling the open doorway backed by swirling fog and darkness, stood a bargeman, his wide shoulders bowed beneath the limp form of another man; this bargeman I knew at once was Robin, and then, with a shock,—in the pitiful, dishevelled figure on his back I recognized my dashing cousin Roland.

“Make . . . way, lads!” gasped Robin, hoarsely, and, the crowd obeying instantly, he stumbled forward and deposited his limp burden, somewhat heavily, in the nearest elbow-chair.

“Now . . . water, somebody . . .” panted Robin, drawing sleeve across moist brow, “then rum . . . and brandy——”

“Ale!” said Roland, rather indistinctly and lifting tousled, hatless head, showed his handsome features very pale and a little bloody. “Ale, nephew . . . dry as . . . confounded bone! Brandy later!” So ale was brought whereof he drank deep, then sighed and closed his eyes and so remained for a moment, gazed at by the dumb crowd; then, as if aware of these many watching eyes, he opened his own, glanced about rather vaguely, next down at his own torn and dusty person, got to his feet, tottered, supported himself by his chair-back, and lifting his tankard aloft, looked round upon the staring company with all his customary arrogant assurance and which, in some strange manner, dust, blood and torn garments seemed only to enhance.

“Friends and good fellows all,” said he, “I ask you to drink in honour of a paladin, a regular true blue Corinthian, the best and gamest two-fisted fighter inside the ring or out,—drink to my preserver, the man I am honoured to call nephew,—drink to Mr. Robin Dale, God bless him!”

The toast was honoured with vociferous acclaim; in the midst of which cheery uproar I was aware of my Aunt Rosamond who beckoned me, which

mute summons I obeyed instantly,—that is, I took Roland by one arm, Jasper Shrig grasped the other and with Robin and Tom behind in close converse, we followed whither Aunt Rosamond led—into that spacious well-remembered kitchen where all things seemed bright and orderly as ever.

“Gracious me!” exclaimed Aunt Rosamond. “Can this be you indeed, Roland? My dear nephew! Emma, a chair! Jemima, bring warm water and the largest sponge and clean linen. Mary, you and Tabby help me off with his things. My poor Roland!”

“My dear Aunt,” he moaned, “gaze on me with both your beautiful eyes, bright as ever, I perceive! You behold in this battered hulk that is myself, a martyr to dutifulness! A loving nephew visits his lovely aunt and meets with a deucedly warm welcome, since the aunt of this particular nephew inhabits a murder hole haunted by bloodthirsty ragamuffins, pirates and villains! Behold a bruised and shattered wreck, my dear Aunt, a bloodstained, foul and grimy tatterdemalion, yet kiss him, my dear, for he is indeed your nephew!”

“And nothing like so damaged as he shows, bless God!” she answered, kissing him almost shyly.

“Madam my Aunt,” said he, reprovingly, “I should now be extremely dead and unpleasant to contemplate, but for the heroical devotion of my nephew Robin,—where the deuce is he?”

“Here, sir!” said Robin, stepping forward. Roland looked him up and down, shook disparaging head at his clumsy garments, smiled at his comely face, and nodded.

“Nephew Robin,” said he, very solemnly, “before I suffer these angels of mercy to comfort my hurts or bind and staunch a single gory wound, give me your hand! So! Now, Robin, I humbly thank you for my life and at the same time, boldly affirm my steadfast faith in your complete innocence and honour! Such gallantry, such valour o’ soul, such foot and fist work proclaim you a man, sir, and a gentleman. To-day I live to ever remain a faithfully grateful uncle, thanks to you!”

“And to Black John, sir.”

“Never heard o’ the fellow!”

“Though you must have seen him, sir,—a very tall man with black hair and beard.”

“But he only appeared at the end, nephew.”

“Sir, there would have been a very different end but for him!”

“Then he shall be instantly rewarded! Pray, my coat, somebody—no! The rascals cleaned me out, purse and watch! Noll, lend me five guineas! Thankee, old fellow. Now where is this Black John? And you may call me Uncle Roland. Well, well, Rob, where is your man?”

“This, sir—uncle, is what I mean to find out,” answered Robin, thrusting the money into a pocket, “for John’s a fine fellow, a regular trump. I’m off to find him—now!”

“Then, sir,” quoth Mr. Shrig, “by your leave, I’ll step along vith you,—if agreeable.”

“Prime!” said Robin, crossing to the door.

Now having taken leave of the company Jasper Shrig winked and beckoned me very furtively.

“S’Oliver,” he murmured, “I think, all things took into con-sideration as us had better start for Abbeymead to-morry morning. I’ll pick you up here—say at nine o’clock sharp—if conwenient to you?”

To this I instantly consented for already I was yearning for the open countryside, especially one part of it, and the hush, the peaceful quiet and sweet seclusion of it all.

“To-morrow, then, at nine, Jasper!” said I, and having shaken his hand, went back where my Aunt Rosamond assisted by her four maids was busied to Roland’s comfort and he submitting with the grace of a wounded and very complacent hero.

CHAPTER XXVII

TELLS HOW, WITH JASPER SHRIG, I CAME HOME AGAIN

SHARP on the stroke of nine next morning Jasper Shrig drove into the yard throned aloft in a light curricule which was mounted upon two of the tallest wheels I have ever seen.

“Morning, all!” quoth he, cheerily, saluting us with his whip. “Going to be a prime day for travel, Sir O, pal, no vind to raise a dust and promise o’ sunshine.” Here he turned to beam down on George and Tom who were securing my two valises behind.

“I sees as you’re a-driving Mustard, Jarsper.”

“Ay, Tom, Mustard’s a precious good go-er, picks up his trotters clean and no wices.”

“But,” said George, viewing Jasper’s large and somewhat bony animal with appraising eye, “I’d ha’ thought as you’d have druv Vixen on sich a long journey, Jasper.”

“So I should, George, pal, only the Wixen, bein’ a mare, ain’t so dependable, being subjec’ to feminine vimseys, George. ’S morning ven I goes for her she lays back her listeners, rolls her ogles and shakes her tibby so werry con-wincing that, knowing her fee-male tantrums and veaknesses, I left her to ’em.”

“We hear,” said Tom, beckoning to his pot-boy who now appeared with four foaming tankards on a tray. “I says, Jarsper, as we hear there’s highwaymen pretty busy ’twixt here and Croydon.”

“Ay Tom, three on ’em. Bob Allen, Cap’n Dash and James Roach, but they ain’t werry likely to trouble us. Here’s happiness, vith a capital Haitch, to all on us and long life!” And when we had drunk thus to each other, I went indoors and upstairs to take leave of Roland who yawned me a sleepy farewell from his pillows; downstairs again to kiss my Aunt Rosamond and shake hands with Robin, both of whom came out to see us away.

Then up I clambered into Jasper Shrig’s lofty vehicle, and with hand and whip aflourish in farewell, off we drove.

Nor did it take me long to perceive that Jasper Shrig is a masterly whip; he swung his powerful, fast-trotting animal round corners, he wove a speedy though unerring course through the slower traffic; he shaved the hubs of smart gigs, lumbering waggons, resplendent chariots and dusty, long-distance coaches, sometimes so perilously near as to evoke haughty reprimands, hoarse invective or scurrilous abuse,—on which occasions his face, that is neither round nor square, beamed in quite cherubic manner and he twinkled at me from the corners of his eyes.

At last, as the thunderous traffic became less, he touched his horse to even speedier gait.

“Jasper,” said I, above the harsh grinding of our wheels, “I always wonder no better, smoother paving has been found than these rough cobblestones.”

“Ar!” he nodded. “But they lasts, pal, and they ain’t werry dusty. As regards them high toby-men, are you armed, sir?”

“No, Jasper.”

“Good! Not as I’m expecting any trouble, leastways not in London nor yet the vicinity. But pocket-pistols is orkard veppings as I’ve knowed go off in the wrong d’rections. You’re a-looking at my Mustard, pal. Sixteen hands, rising seven, that’s him! Not much of a looker p’raps as p’int’s go, but the best o’ Mustard you can’t see. He don’t put all his goods in the front vinder nor yet blow a trumpet. Mustard, though a bright bay as you see, is a werry dark hoss indeed vith more than meets the eye, ogle or peepers, and a turn o’ speed as’ll sap-rise you. Mustard can beat most things on four legs, as I’ll show you if occasion offers.”

“I never saw a curricule with wheels so large, Jasper.”

“No, pal, no. I had ’em built special,—the bigger the veels the easier she goes, and Mustard acts according.”

“He certainly moves well,” said I. “But Jasper, I’m curious to know why you are coming to Abbeymead a day earlier?”

“Pal, I’ll tell you,—I don’t ’ardly know myself. Only the sooner as I’m there the better. Now hosses, pal, is werry like huming beings, fee-males especially and more so if they’re mares. F’rinstance take my Wixen,—she’s as full o’ moods and fancies as any voman as ever vore a petticoat or con-flummerated man.”

“Were you ever married, Jasper?”

"No,—not 'ardly, pal, but werry near! Ay, 'twer a narrer squeak. Ye see I ver werry young and con-fiding in them days, but afore I could take the fatal step, she took several,—she run off vith a chimbley-sweep as later got hisself took and transported for a buzzman and prig, or, as you might say, a hook and a diver, if you twig."

"I don't," said I, smiling.

"A thief then and a pickpocket, pal. And I ain't been noways drawed to any fee-male since, no—never so much as a yearn, pal. Might you ha' knowed the late George Ash anyways familiar or sociable?"

"No!" I answered.

"Ah!" murmured Jasper. "So you didn't like and couldn't abide said Ash, eh, sir?"

"I didn't say so."

"Pal, you're a-telling me so werry plain at this i-dentical minute, it's wrote all over you werry large. And therefore, knowing you pretty vell, I dee-dooce as G. Ash vos p'raps a pretty bad lot, eh? Come, sir," said he, finding me dumb, "give it tongue and tell me jist how bad a lot he vos. V'y not out with it?"

"De mortuis nil nisi bonum, Jasper!"

"Oh!" quoth he. "If Mr. A. vos so bad as all that it don't sap-rise me as he got hisself snuffed out. Must ha' been plenty ready and villing to do it, eh, pal?"

"Jasper, the man has paid the penalty and I've no desire to blacken his memory."

"Can't do no manner o' harm now, sir, 'specially atwixt pals, and might do me and my case oceans o' good. G. Ash vas a fine, good-looking cove, eh?"

"Yes."

"And Rose Thorn goes and kills herself b'reason of him, eh?"

"I've heard it suggested."

"'Oo by?"

"Several people . . . it was general gossip."

"And Rose Thorn, being so pretty, it nat'rally follers as there was plenty o' spruce young coves as had their peepers on her besides G. Ash, eh, pal?"

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Any of oom might have took wengeance on said G. A. for her sake?”

“I can’t say, Jasper. I think I’ve told all I know.”

“Ah well,” he sighed, “in Abbeymead there’ll be folks as knows more—or thinks they do——”

At this moment, from the road behind us came the arrogant fanfare of a horn in brazen challenge and glancing back, I glimpsed, through our rolling dust-cloud, a coach-and-four bearing down on us at reckless speed for the way hereabouts was narrow and ditched. The horn brayed again and now I saw the coach close upon us and driven by a bewhiskered personage who, as I saw at a glance, was one of these amateur whips that ape the dress and manners of professionals; on he came, lashing his team, until the heads of his leaders were level with our wheels.

“Pull over!” roared this whiskered fury.

“Ditch!” shouted Jasper, whereat the coachman cut fiercely at Mustard with his long whip and with, to me, surprising effect,—a giant seemed to hurl me forward as down went Mustard’s great, bony head—and he was off at such unexpected and amazing speed as not only kept pace with the galloping four but slowly drew away and ahead of them so that they were blinded in our dust. Jasper chuckled happily.

“Pal,” he shouted above wind-rush and clatter, “Viskers is being converted into a miller rapid, and choked into the bargain!” Then he chuckled again and touched Mustard to such further effort as whirled us out of all chance of being overtaken, and the swaying, dim-seen coach soon completely out of sight.

“It’s ass-tonishing,” said Jasper, so soon as our pace moderated, “ah, ’tis a-mazing how you’ve altered, or as you might say, transmogrified a sinful young urchin into a reg’lar, bang-up, fine gen’leman! That demon b’y young Snod . . . Mr. Robin Dale, Esquire! Pal, it does you oceans o’ credit, and so does he. You’ll mind as ’twas him and his devilish tricks first brought us together, you and me, ten long years ago. Ten years is a goodish spell, friend O!”

“Yet you have changed very little, Jasper.”

“Sound vind and limb, pal, though a bit thinner on top and fuller below,—rounder in the veskit, p’raps. And you ain’t much altered neether, a bit grander in your manner, a bit more solemn like, though you vas always

pretty much so. Ten long years! In a world o' windictiveness friendship's a mighty good thing."

"It is!" said I. "And yonder is a likely inn where we will drink to friendship in good ale, Jasper."

"My werry own thought!" he nodded. "And they shall give Mustard a rub down and ven cooled off, a ssmaller of ale too."

So before this inn we pulled up and calling for ale, dismounted to stretch our legs while Mustard was hissed over and cherished by two zealous ostlers.

A pot-boy duly appearing with the ale, we pledged each other and drank deep; but scarcely had we drawn breath after this delectable refreshment than up rumbled an extremely dusty coach-and-four driven by a raging fury now white with dust to his very whiskers, who, espying us, tossed reins to his dusty companions, swung down from his lofty driving seat and shortening his whip, strode towards Jasper Shrig with such evident violent purpose that I made to interpose.

"Thankee, pal," sighed Jasper, "but gimme room, I'm used to tackling Wiciousness in all shapes."

Empty-handed he stood to meet his assailant who, wasting no words, struck; Jasper, bowing his head, took the blow upon his hat which gave forth a muffled clank, then he made a quick pace forward, out shot his right arm and pinning his aggressor by voluminous neck-cloth, he twisted and throttled him therein, shook him, tripped up his heels and laid him low and all with astonishing ease and despatch. Then he took off his hat, looked at it, smoothed its ruffled nap and bending to his fallen assailant, tapped him smartly on bare head with it.

"Iron, sir!" quoth he, nodding grimly. "I lines my dicer vith iron agin sich windictive coves as you. And now, sir, I dunno as it ain't my dooty to proceed agin you for assault and battery agin The King's Majesty in the person of a nofficer o' The Law. Look at this!" And from capacious pocket he drew a short baton surmounted by a small, brass crown; beholding which symbol of authority the fallen personage sat up, blinked and exclaimed:

"Damme . . . a redbreast! Ha—Wilks—Wilkins," he shouted, "come and apologise!" At this summons, down from the rumble clambered a grave being dight as a guard, boots, belt and horn, who now approaching, touched hat-brim, saying very solemnly:

"Sirs, as my lord's representative I beg to tender sincerest apologies."

“Vich,” answered Jasper, as solemnly, “is dooly accepted with a serious varning not to do same again.”

“Wilkins,” said the dusty personage, now sitting cross-legged like a Turk, “Brandy! Order brandy all round. At once!”

“Thankee, not for me,” said Jasper, setting by his empty tankard. “Dooty being dooty, not a drop! Now S’Oliver if you’re ready.”

So to the inn yard we went and there beheld Mustard, this very dark horse, looking almost sleek thanks to the ostlers’ zealous care.

And now away we went again by tree-shaded road, up hill and down, through the gentle loveliness of this dear English countryside, and no man ever more happily grateful for sight and scent of it than myself.

Wherever I looked—there was some beauty to lure the eye, lush fields, darkling coppice, placid pool or sparkling rill; borne upon the sunny air was a mingled fragrance, flower and herb, wood-smoke, and ripening fruit. Thus as we journeyed south through this ever-changing beauty, though we sped fast, my homing thoughts sped faster yet, to that particular stretch of country which is my very own and where every bush and tree, every stock and stone would have for me their welcome. Indeed so eager was I for these loved, familiar things, so strangely homesick that I marvelled at myself.

“Last night,” said Jasper, suddenly, “I had a good, long talk with Mr. Robin and a re-markable taking young gen’leman I found him, he looks and talks as proper as ’e fights,—I can’t hardly b’leeve as he vas ever that there wicious, young imp. . . . You’ve worked a stoo-pendious merrycele there, pal!”

“I’m glad to think you are convinced of his innocence, Jasper.”

“But, old friend and pal, I ain’t conwinned thereof.”

“Oh?” said I, in no little dismay.

“No!” he answered, “Werry certainly not! I may ’ave a sort o’ feeling, but—conwinned, oh no!”

“Just what do you mean, Shrig?”

“Sir, I mean as nothing ever conwincins me but fax, and fax is only fax when proved.”

“Then why,” I demanded, rather bitterly, “why haven’t you fettered and gaoled the boy on suspicion?”

“Because, though suspecting, I’ve took a better method.”

“May I ask how?”

“You may, friend, and I answer in a vord, observation!”

“Meaning, pray?”

“As two o’ my best men is ob-serving of him at this here i-dential minute! Versoever he goes he’s dooly observed—though he don’t know it.”

“Detestable!” said I.

“Ar, sir, as detestable as ever vos, but—werry sure! For thereby I keep four peepers on suspected party, constant, and gives suspected party enough rope to hang hisself if possible.”

“In English law, Shrig, every man is innocent until proved guilty.”

“True enough, S’Oliver, but nobody could ever be proved guilty if the innocent ain’t suspected o’ guilt—and wersey-wicey, sir. And here’s us getting so werry polite to each other as don’t seem ’ardly right ’twixt pals. So vot I says is—let’s take a sociable bite together at the werry first opportoony.”

The which we did, and Jasper Shrig so very much his most genial self that my anxieties concerning Robin were set at rest—for the time being.

Now since nothing particular befell us on this journey worthy of setting down here, I will hurry on to relate how next day and much earlier than I had hoped we reached my so longed-for Abbeymead but wrapped in a depressing sea-mist, showing dreary and very desolate. Arriving at the village park gates we found them closed and locked, to my great annoyance, for this was strictly against my orders; also James Marsh the lodge-keeper, when at last he appeared, seemed unduly slow and awkward in getting them open.

“Why are the gates shut?” I demanded.

“Miss Clia’s orders, sir.”

We drove on between dripping ghostly trees to the house—and not a soul to welcome or greet us except Nicholas who, bowing to my question, informed me ‘Miss Clia was out riding and Mr. M’Gregor away to Lewes Market.’ Then, to my joy, was sound of hoofs and presently Clia came in; but her greeting of me as chill and unseasonable as the day. Not so, however, her reception of Jasper Shrig when I presented him; she gave him her hand

almost eagerly, she smiled though gazing on him very earnestly and rather strangely, I thought. And now said she, to my surprise and annoyance:

“You won’t remember me of course, Mr. Shrig, but I am that poor, little, ragged creature you saw ten years ago at Mrs. Warmestro’s gipsy camp. My first name is Clia . . . but what other name is truly mine I . . . dread to think. And now, Sir Oliver, pray shall I ring for tea—though Mr. Shrig may desire something stronger?” Instead of answering I gazed at her, all bemused and quite at a loss to comprehend this strange and most disconcerting mood of hers that persisted all the evening and with no chance for an explanation because hardly was the evening meal ended than, pleading a headache, she retired,—and I more mystified and distressed than ever.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DESCRIBES TWO MINIATURES WITH A DREADFUL ECHO OF THE PAST

It is by reason, as I suppose, of our finite humanity that the dream is seldom or never realized; joys, long anticipated and so impatiently desired, are doomed to fall so far below our fervid expectation that often realization brings only disappointment and a bitterness the greater for the ruin of our hopes.

And thus indeed has it been with my home-coming. A disappointment so very bitter, an alteration in all things so unexpected that has been, and still is, my amazement as I sit here, penning these words.

The sun is high and bright, for it is morning, the mists of yesterday are gone, but over the house and all things else, especially myself, is a gloom that quite confounds and therefore greatly exasperates me.

Now having written thus far, I sat back in my chair to ponder and endeavour to find some cause, some or any reason for this strange distress; and the ultimate result of this profound meditation was that I tugged the bell; whereat, and very speedily, Nicholas presented himself, his usual dignity somewhat shaken by the fierce, unwanted clamour of the bell.

“You . . . you rang, sir?” he enquired rather breathlessly.

“Yes, fool, who else?” I demanded pettishly. “Tell Miss Clia I desire to speak with her at once.”

“Yessir! Certainly, sir!” he answered and bowed himself out more flurried than ever and myself scowling after him though in growing fury against myself. And after some delay she came; but instead of perching herself upon my knee or the arm of my chair, she stood aloof, staring out of the window.

“Clia,” said I, instantly voicing the thought that angered me, “how have I offended you,—was it my farewell kiss?” And she answered without so much as glancing towards me:

“No. You haven’t. I don’t think you ever would . . . or could.”

“Then why are you so changed? What is your trouble?”

She answered in the same toneless voice and still without glancing towards me:

“I have found out the truth of myself, who I really am . . . all about myself . . . so much that I am . . . terrified. I know I am a love-child, illegitimate. Yet this would not frighten me. But I know that my mother . . . killed herself because my father was . . . executed for murder! And this . . . this does shame and frighten me.”

Now here, because speech was beyond me, I rose, went to her, caught her up in my arms and despite her struggles, carried her back to my chair and sat down with her upon my knees; at first she made some efforts to escape but finding herself quite helpless, lay still. And then I found words.

“My dear, I am your father, I, remember! No matter what you have heard or learned to the contrary. You are still my daughter and always will be the loved child of my adoption.”

“No!” she cried, wildly. “No!”

“Yes!” said I, holding her close, for she was struggling again, “And so, dear child, instead of kicking and striving, lie on your father’s heart, have a good cry and then tell me all about it.”

“I’m . . . beyond the consolation of tears,” she answered (and in weeping tone), “horror and shame have dried them up. I feel . . . half dead. . . . Oh, it is all too unbelievably dreadful!”

“And of course, nonsense!” I added. “So don’t believe it.”

“Oh . . . my Oliver,” she whispered, hiding her face against me, “how I should thank God if it only could be so. But . . . I have proof!”

“Where?” I demanded. “And how?”

“Here!” she answered, and sitting up, drew from her bosom a battered, silver locket, a poor, trumpery thing; but when she opened it I stared amazed to see it contained two miniatures exquisitely wrought,—the one of a young man, dark, bold-eyed and with a gipsy wildness about him; the other showed a woman’s face, very girlish and yet of a sad loveliness, framed in glossy ringlets of bright auburn hair.

“You see, Oliver, you see how very much I resemble her, you see?”

“No I do not! For one thing this face is too long, of quite different cast of feature.”

“But the same coloured hair, Oliver, just the same! Red,—ah yes, red as—sin! And there is something more. Look,—read this!” Turning these miniatures, she pointed to writing on the back of each; upon that of the girl, traced in a fine Italianate hand, I saw:

Anticlea Venner 1808.
For my love.

And upon that of the man, in writing bold though ill-formed, I read:

Jasper Boswell 1808.
To my adored Clea.

“There!” said Clia, with gasping sigh, “My childish memory was right! I bear her name . . . she must have called me Anticlea after herself. . . . He called her Clea. You call me Clia . . . only one letter wrong.”

“But,” said I, to distract her, “Boswell is a gipsy name, a Romany clan.”

“He was a gipsy fiddler, Oliver, but master of music . . . she a lady of quality . . . they eloped. But he was wild and vicious . . . he stabbed a man in drunken quarrel and was hanged for it . . . and after her baby was born,—me, Oliver,—she killed herself for shame and grief.”

“And who told you this fantastic tale?”

“The one man in all the world who could know the truth of me . . . Mumping Joe!” And as she uttered the name I felt her shudder. “Yes, Mumping Joe,” she repeated, “the man you found beating me in the wood as he often did, the man you fought, the brute beast I fled from . . . I see you remember him.”

“Of course,” said I. “Where is he?”

“Gone!” she answered, but in such tone and with look of such wild despair as appalled me. “Gone,” she repeated, “but left me to shame and horror and . . . fear! This body of mine . . . I loathe and fear it now! I am child of Murder, hateful to myself. In me runs the blood of Murder. Should I ever dare to marry I must pass on this dreadful strain to my children! Oh God, what fearful, ghastly thought! To breed Murder! For in me is the seed of Murder! To marry any man would be a sin now, for I am . . . unclean!”

“Never!” said I, fiercely. “Never will I believe it!”

“Ah but,” she answered, miserably, “only because you don’t want to.”

“Well,” I answered, “even were all this true, yet you are your own sweet self and still the daughter of my love.”

“Oh . . . bless you . . . Oliver!” she murmured, then, breaking from my clasp, stood staring down on me with that same look of terror and despair. “Ah, but you . . . don’t know,” she panted. “You have never guessed . . . nobody ever has . . . how wicked I could be! What hypocrite and sham. When I am really angry I could claw and bite! Deep in me is a demon . . . a devil that urges me to kill . . . just like Jasper Boswell!”

“Nonsense, child——”

“But it’s . . . Oh Oliver, it’s true! Had I been able I should have killed George Ash!”

“And few would have blamed you, Clia, surely not I. For, my dear, we all of us have our demons. Being merely human we are each part devil, part angel. That which you miscall hypocrisy is the self-restraint dictated by Reason and Decency and the Civilization that has lifted Humanity above the Brute. So be comforted, dear, silly girl, forget these imagined horrors and let us talk reasonably,—here close beside me on the arm of my chair—so! Now let us talk, as I say, reasonably and calmly, with no least hysteria or ex——”

“I’m not hysterical, I never am! I don’t swoon, twitter, swim, palpitate or have the megrims,—you know I don’t.”

“Never!” I answered. “At least never more than the occasion warrants.” At this she became so much more her usual fiery, high-spirited self I expected her to pull my hair, as I think she nearly did then, checking the impulse, sighed instead.

“Well?” I enquired, tilting my head invitingly near and now, glancing up, saw her looking down on me through gleam of tears that she instantly winked away.

“Oh, my Oliver,” she murmured, “what a comfort you are! I’m very nearly crying in gratitude for your dear Nollish sanity. There! Now I’ll be sane too and tell you the rest of this miserable business, though I shall greatly shock you—as I shock myself when I remember how I longed and yearned to . . . kill!”

“However,” said I, taking her nearest hand that had turned itself into small, quivering fist and opening it, finger by finger, “I am a difficult man to shock, so try your best, my dear. This rascal Mumping Joe wanted money, of course. How much did you give him?”

“All I had by me, ninety-odd pounds.”

“Quite a sum. Yet I wonder he parted with this locket for so little.”

“But he didn’t, Noll, he wouldn’t. He said it was worth ten thousand pounds to me to keep the matter dark, but that he would sell the locket and hold his tongue for five thousand.”

“Well, my dear?”

“I told him he should have the money in three days. But so soon as he had gone, I took one of your pistols from the gun-room and went after him. . . . And this is the awful part of it, Oliver, that I’m . . . trembling now to remember.”

“Go on, child.”

“I overtook him in the spinney . . . he heard me running and he stopped and turned round . . . and then he knew I’d come to kill him . . . and, Oh God forgive me! I wanted to, I . . . nearly did. I levelled the pistol at his face, and then I saw he was standing where George Ash was killed. . . . I crept a pace nearer. . . . Then Mumping Joe cried out because he knew I should kill him . . . he begged and pleaded . . . I crept nearer . . . and then he tossed the locket to my feet and ran away because he saw Murder in my eyes.”

“Dear girl,” said I, smiling, “that pistol was not loaded. No weapons are ever kept loaded in this house.”

“Ah, Noll . . . Oh Oliver . . . I loaded the thing myself, loaded and primed it too, as I’ve often done for Uncle Roly when he practises. I meant to kill because, I tell you . . . Murder is in my blood!”

CHAPTER XXIX

A CHAPTER BY THE WAY

“BUT now, miss,” said I, rising and with compelling arm about her, “you are coming out into the good air and sunshine. You are going to take me a long walk, a regular leg-stretcher. So get yourself a hat or bonnet and we’ll be off.”

“But . . . haven’t I shocked you, Oliver?”

“Oh dear no.”

“But, ah my dear, the wish to . . . kill anyone is a frightful thing.”

“It is,” I answered, “and so extremely human that I suppose everyone has yearned to slaughter someone at some time or other.”

“Then . . . Oh Oliver, have you?”

“Many a time and oft, girl.”

“Don’t say it so cheerfully or I shall think you are only trying to comfort me . . . as you are, of course! Are you?”

“Yes and no, Clia, for as I say we are all merely human, especially myself. Now, your bonnet, madam.” So presently out we went together into a fragrant air and with sunshine all about us that was in itself a blessing.

“Ah, my dear one,” sighed she, slipping her hand within my arm. “You make the very loveliest of fathers!”

“Good!” said I, giving her arm a squeeze.

“It is,” she answered, “because you show and are so very, very—unlike one.”

“Oh, indeed, miss?”

“Indeed, sir, yes!”

“Well,” I began, “I have tried very earnestly——”

“You have, sir, and you do,” sighed she, “this is what makes you so pathetic and—dear.”

“Which reminds me that you have made no enquiry of Robin.”

“I had no chance last night.”

“No, my dear, you bundled off to bed with scarce a word——”

“Sir, Mistress Clia Everard never ‘bundles’ anywhere, instead she moves with the gracious ease, the effortless poise of—— Oh, my dear, what is the use of pretending I can ever be again what I dreamed I was,—knowing myself at last for what I truly am . . . a child of shame, a creature marked with the curse of Cain, a miserable——”

Here I seized and shook her until her bonnet slid askew, a coquettish affair all brim and ribbons, which she instantly righted, gazing on me the while with eyes very beautifully wide.

“Clia,” said I, angrily. “I’ll have no more of this damnable folly, d’you hear?”

“Yes,—you positively . . . swore! And . . . at me!”

“And I’m telling you,” said I, with unwonted vehemence, “that you are the pure and lovely thing God made you and so cannot possibly be child of shame. As for the ‘mark of Cain’—let me hear any more of such arrant nonsense and, by heavens, I’ll mark you myself!”

“You have!” she wailed, “My poor arms! I’ll show you the bruises just so soon as they appear.”

“Such devilish folly!” I fumed. “No more of it or . . . or I’ll lay you across my knee as a father should do.”

“Then why have you never done so . . . father dear?”

“However, I will this time, miss, if needful.”

“And then—what, pray?”

“Castigate you.”

“This would be an adventure . . . Noll dear.” I merely frowned. “Because,” she continued, “you have always been too gentle with me, never a smack or so much as a slap in all my life.”

“Because you never deserved it.”

“But you think I do—now?”

“Thoroughly! To so decry your own womanhood, to suspect yourself of such evils, to vilify and defame that sweet body, your very nature,—this is a blasphemy I’ll not permit.”

“Oh!” she murmured, slipping her hand within my arm again, “Now, if you were not so . . . frightfully furious and detestably big and strong and might shake and bruise me again,—for this, dearest father, I would give you the most undaughterly kiss possible.”

It was now that we entered the spinney and here whom should we meet ambling pensively but Jasper Shrig; he gave us hoarse but hearty greeting and turning back upon his own footsteps, went on beside us. And now as we strolled thus together in the glad sunlight, what must he talk of but—ghosts.

CHAPTER XXX

IN WHICH MR. SHRIG DISCUSSES CRIME AND MURDER IN PARTICULAR

“BUT surely,” said Clia, “surely you do not believe in ghosts, Mr. Shrig?”

“Miss Clia, mam, it all depends. I do, p’raps and then again, p’raps I don’t,” he answered, ambling a little slower. “Y’see they occurs now and then in my line o’ business, bless you, I’ve met apparations afore now. Ar, I’ve arrested a phanitem ven dooty called, and vunce I took a speckiter by means o’ black cotting, ar—a length o’ black cotting as, being black, no ghost, speckiter, apparation or phanitem could see in the dark.”

“Then your ghosts and spectres couldn’t have been real, Mr. Shrig.”

“So, werry real, Miss Clia, that vun o’ them nigh throttled me and another on ’em let out at me wi’ a gulley. Ar, my speckiters has generally proved that amazing windictive t’would sap-rise you! But,” continued Jasper, edging deeper into the woods, “though my experience is pretty varied, I never afore now come across a phanitem as—sings.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “You mean . . . Pray, what do you mean?” Instead of answering, Jasper halted suddenly and pointing to a certain patch of grass with his knotted stick, beamed on me and said:

“The werry i-dential spot, I think, eh, Sir O, pal?” Now glancing about I saw to my displeasure that he was indeed pointing to the exact place where once had sprawled that poor shape of mortality so hideously dead.

“The scene o’ The Act, eh sir?”

“Yes,” I answered. “But why in the world have you brought us here . . . and with Miss Clia?”

“Ax your parding, miss!” said he, lifting his hat an inch or so. “Werry humblest apologies, ma’m.”

“No, no, dear Mr. Shrig,” she answered, loosing my arm and taking his, “murder and bloodshed cannot shock me.”

“Lord love your pretty eyes and limbs!” he exclaimed. “That there obseruation draws me to you a-mazing! Ar, and makes my work a J.-O.-Y., j’y, Miss Clia! And sir, I’ve brought you here for co-robberation o’ detail as supplied by your gamekeepers. F’rinstance,—the wictim, or murderee, lay here vith his ’ead, or as you might say, tibby—in line wi’ yonder big tree,—ay or no, sir?”

“Yes, Jasper, so far as I remember.”

“Said tree being exackly seven foot two inches from wictim’s aforementioned tibby. Now, do either o’ you notice anything about this here tree? Come a bit closer.”

“No,” I answered, peering, “I don’t.”

“Nor I,” said Clia, “except that one or two small twigs and branches are broken and withered.”

“Lord love them pretty eyes o’ yourn again!” quoth Jasper Shrig, beaming quite joyously. “For so they are, Miss Clia, as vithered as ever vas! And then—look here, and here!” and he pointed aloft with his stick. “Do ye see anything as I sees?”

“The bark,” said I, “shows a little scratched and bruised.”

“Ar!” he nodded. “And that should tell us wollums o’ noos, eh pal?”

“Well hardly, Jasper. Though it is quite evident someone has climbed this tree recently.”

“Ha!” quoth Jasper, rubbing shaven chin. “P’raps so, pal, and again—p’raps not. Only I’m vishing from the bottom o’ my ’eart, or throbbor, as I’d stood here alongside the wictim, the grass might ha’ told me all about it then,—but now ’tis so trampled and trod ’tis dumb, pal, as—dumb as the wictim hisself!”

“But,” said Clia, as we turned away from this gruesome place, “about your singing ghost, Mr. Shrig, I have heard tell of one also.”

“Lor’ bless you, Miss Clia!” quoth he, beaming at her quite affectionately as they walked on arm in arm, “You and me shall come at the truth of it yet, ar—me and you. Y’see I’m sending my Gimblet back to London pretty soon to keep an ogle on—things. So I’ll be alone, but then, though London born I loves the country, the sniff of an ’aystack, the carolling bird, a ripplesome brook, fair varms my ’eart, or, as you might say, throbbor, to that degree as there’s no telling. I’ve often thought as if pore Jarsper, as has dodged Windictiveness so often from chimbley-pots and

paving stones to the needle-p'int of a stiletta, is to become a wictim o' Dooty at last and perish by The Capital Act, I do 'ope as his blood or gore may be shed in the blessed country, say in a little green wale or leafy walley vith birds to sing his last good-bye, bless their little beaks and feathers!"

"Why Mr. Shrig, you sound quite poetic."

"And, Miss Clia, I likes po'try—in a song as goes vith a swing. To sit in my own cottage gardin, puffing my steamer and vatching my own carrots and peas a-sprouting instead o' keeping my ogles on crime, vith a Capital C _____"

"Have you met a great many criminals . . . murderers?" she enquired, a little eagerly, I thought.

"Ar!" he nodded, "Huming Natur' being vot it is and murder so werry human, I have. Yes, I've knowed murder in every shape, by choking, shooting, stabbing, pizen and vunce—by nail, a tenpenny nail."

"Horrible!" murmured Clia.

"Ar!" he nodded. "But then 'twas done or drove by a lady o' degree."

"Of very hatefully terrible degree, Mr. Shrig."

"Them, Miss Clia, is the only vords for it. And a rare handsome lady she vas,—purty as any picter."

"And did she . . . was she——?"

"No, ma'm, she dodged me and cheated The Law by means o' drownind—fellerdesee."

"Have you known many—women murderers?"

"Five or six and generally pizeners, though some on 'em preferred knife or pistol—and a occasional stay-lace."

"Mr. Shrig," she enquired, after brief silence, as we walked these peaceful, leafy ways, "do you think murder runs in families? Can it be handed down from one generation to another or from father to son . . . or . . . daughter?"

"No, Miss Clia, leastways not unless there's a strain o' madness in said family. Murder ain't catching like small-pox or I'd ha' been a murderer frequent afore now. And there's a scene to bless the peepers and varm the 'eart!" he exclaimed, halting suddenly, for we had come where we might look down on Abbeymead village, thatched cottages clustered about the

wide green, bowery with trees and sheltered by grassy uplands beyond which is the sea.

“Ah!” breathed Jasper Shrig, resting powerful hands upon his formidable knobbed stick and beaming upon this prospect. “There’s comfort! There’s peace! There’s Old England! A green for sporting Innocence, a inn and a tavern and a church,—comfort o’ body and elewation o’ soul! And oo could ask for more?”

And now Clia uttered that question I had been expecting with an indefinable dread:

“Mr. Shrig, did you ever meet . . . or see . . . or hear of a murderer named . . . Jasper Boswell?”

“Boswell . . . Jarsper?” he repeated, pondering. “Boswell? Lemme take a peep at my little reader,” and tucking stick beneath arm, he reached into breast-pocket and drew thence his note-book.

“He was . . . executed about fifteen years ago!” said Clia, watching him rather dreadfully.

Jasper shook his head and thrust the book away again.

“Fifteen years!” he repeated. “That’ll be about thirty-two note-books ago, Miss Clia.”

“But you . . . you ought to remember him,” said she, breathlessly, “because his name was the same as your own—Jasper!”

“And it ain’t a werry common name, neether,” he nodded. “Lemme think again—Boswell, Jarsper, fifteen year ago, The Capital Act . . .”

“He was a gipsy and played the violin very well, I believe——”

“Domino!” exclaimed Jasper, rapping himself smartly on the crown of his hat, “A gipsy gen’leman as played the wiolin,—ay I minds him for sure. Died werry game he did. Played jigs to himself in the condemned hold, ah and fiddled himself to the gallers, then, jest afore he vas turned off, he snaps his bow and kicks his fiddle into the crowd.”

“Oh—dreadful!” gasped Clia, shrinking.

“But werry game, Miss Clia.”

“And did . . . you ever see a . . . a lady with him, Mr. Shrig, oh—did you?”

“Ar—frequent, and generally with a babby in her arms, poor, young creeter.”

We had been walking slowly on again, but now Clia stopped suddenly, stumbled and would have fallen but for Jasper’s arm.

“Oliver . . . Oh . . . you hear?” said she, with gasping laugh that hurt me more than a blow. “Ah, Jasper . . . Jasper Shrig,” she cried, clasping his arm in both hands and shaking it, “I . . . I was that baby!” Jasper stared at her with very round eyes, opened his mouth yet was dumb, glanced at me, and, clasping his arm about her, drew her down beside him on the grassy bank nearby.

“Lord!” he muttered, “Lord . . . love us . . . all!”

“Oh, is there a God?” said she, wringing her hands. “Is there a kind Lord of Mercy to love us?” Then, with trembling fingers, she took out and showed Jasper Shrig the two miniatures, which he seemed to recognize, and recounted the tragic and dreadful story, much as she had told it to me. After which, we sat silent all three and I, for one, extremely disquieted and anxious because of Clia’s wild gestures and growing haggardness of look. Then, to my wonder, she laughed, sprang up and reached a hand to each of us, fingers that clasped mine in hot, fierce grip.

“Come,” said she, “now that I have made you both surprised and miserable, come home and I’ll cherish and comfort you with tea—though you may desire something a little more potent, dear Jasper Shrig?”

“Thankee, Miss Clia ma’m, no. A cup o’ tea drawed medium strong, milked and sugared to taste, can’t do a man no manner of harm if took werry occasional, eh, Sir O, pal?”

“Which reminds me, Mr. Shrig, pray why do you call Sir Oliver ‘pal’, such strange, odd word?”

“So it is, ma’m, ’tis a Romany vord meaning ‘brother’. In this here Wale o’ Sorrer and Walley o’ Tears there’s a precious lot o’ folks,—good, a werry few,—bad, a plenty, and indifferent, too many. So, if I meets a man as is a good un, or, as you might say, a reg’lar out-and-outer, that man I makes my pal, ’specially if he’s saved my life into the bargain, like S’Oliver.”

“Saved your life. Oh, tell me, at once!”

“Ar, from a vindictive cove as tried to blow off my napper with a pistol-ball.”

“Oliver, you never told me of this,” said she, reproachfully.

“Because there was really nothing to tell, my dear.”

“Was this before . . . I found you, my Oliver?”

“No. You were fast asleep in bed behind me. You remember Susan and ‘The Wheatsheaf’ inn.”

“Yes,” she murmured. “Yes, of course. It was there you taught me to say my forgotten, childish prayers . . . ‘Gentle Jesus, meek and mild . . .’ Oh, that was the real beginning of life for me, Oliver, of safety and comfort and unspeakable joy . . . ten happy years ago . . .” Here her eyes grew bright with tears and I was reaching for my handkerchief when, to my relief Gregor M’Gregor came striding towards us.

“Gregor,” said I, beckoning, “here is my good friend Jasper Shrig of Bow Street. If you haven’t met him before you have heard me tell of him.”

“Ay, I have that,” answered Gregor, shaking hands. “Prood and happy tae meet ye again, Mr. Shrig, for I fancy we did meet in toon, years syne.”

And now while they went on together housewards, Clia and I followed after.

“Yes, my Oliver,” said she, smiling up at me though her lashes were heavy with tears. “I sniffed . . . because I’m weeping—which I seldom do. And I’m doing it now for joy of all these ten happy, happy years, and for grief because . . . such perfect happiness could not last——”

“But it can!” said I, vehemently, “It must—and shall!”

“Yes—in heaven!” sighed she, “For my happiness here with you was too perfect, too unearthly to endure in this poor world.”

“Silly child,” said I, somewhat harshly because I was moved, “to be happy is the birthright of us all.”

“However,” said she, nestling closer against me, for I had stopped the better to admonish her, “whatever happens, I . . . want you to know . . . to remember how happy you have made me since you lifted me from misery to joy ten years ago . . . So wonderfully happy that now my poor heart is almost bursting with gratitude for all your tender care and——”

“Dear child,” said I, “don’t trouble to speak of it, I know . . . And besides you have made these years such a blessing to me that now I . . . Oh, come along, my dearest, I’m yearning for—tea!”

CHAPTER XXXI

HOW WE HEARD A SONG OF THE DEAD

THE TERROR of Happiness.

Having written these four words I dipped my quill to blot them out but fell to a muse and pondered them instead—and so I shall leave them, thinking as did that much troubled and harassed man Pontius Pilate, ‘what I have written I have written.’

For true it is, and in my own case most certainly, that at the heart of all human happiness lies Fear, a haunting dread that such blessed state shall melt away and leave only a dream behind, a sad and plaintive memory.

Where is the man of any sensibility who, beholding the griefs and woes of his fellows, the miseries and suffering of this sorely troubled world, but must needs tremble for his own immunity and wonder, with an ever-growing fear, why he should be so blest and the many others so accursed? And thus, in the dark of some sleepless night, Doubt comes to plague him, and after Doubt looms Terror like a nightmare, like a giant bestriding the universe to thunder that all human happiness is but an idle dream, a deluding fancy,—until he, that was the happy man, begins to dread the dawn, fearing this new day shall bring the shock of sudden trouble, grief and heartbreak because, like his fellow sufferers, he is but human, after all.

Now as I sit here writing these lines, I think back over my nearly forty years of life and am aware now that I have always been hounded by this hidden terror, more especially at those times when life has seemed most peaceful and myself most happy and nearest to a perfect content; for who am I indeed to be thus exempt? Small worries and everyday cares I have met serenely enough, nay rather welcomed them, hoping that by enduring so little, I may escape the greater ill.

All of the foregoing, I suppose, is the outcome of what Clia said to me yesterday,—how that ‘perfect happiness is too unearthly for endurance in this world.’ Yet for ten years happiness has been with us, through her sweet childhood and lovely girlhood, so why should we doubt and dread its continuance?

She retired very early again to-night, leaving the three of us, Jasper Shrig, Gregor and myself before a cheery fire, for there is a chill wind abroad; we sat, between fire-glow and candlelight, in cosy angle of the wide, old hearth, grouped about a small table whereon stood glasses and bowl of a fragrant decoction brewed by Jasper Shrig and called 'The One and Only'. And yet notwithstanding this comfort of home, of friendship and general wellbeing, I was troubled with vague premonition of approaching evil and sat huddled in my chair, staring on the fire and listening, through and above the murmurous converse of my two companions, listening tensely for—I know not precisely what, and hearing instead only the mournful voices of the fugitive night-wind behind the curtained windows.

I had told Gregor of the rascal Mumping Joe's monstrous tale and had been greatly heartened when he had answered with rather more than his usual Highland fervour:

"Man Oliver, I'll no believe it! Sic' a wheen o' sculduddery nonsense!"

But now I sat hearing the moan of this rising wind though listening and waiting for—whatever was to be.

"Sir O, pal, I notices as you ain't drinking. Don't it soot?"

"Yes," I answered, taking up my neglected glass and then instead of setting it to my lips I put it down again and spoke one of the many thoughts that troubled me: "I must learn all about this case of Jasper Boswell. . . . I must know everything about Anticlea Venner, poor girl, and especially . . . the sex of her baby."

"Ar!" quoth Shrig, nodding at me over his glass. "And you're hoping, vith a Capital Haitch, as said babby, if alive, is a man child. And no vonder, pal, under the carcumstances, I'm a-hoping ditto. And, vot's more, I'd like a vord, or say a couple, vith this here Mumping Joseph."

"And myself likewise!" growled Gregor, scowling. "Ay I'd like it fine, I would that! And ye tell me, Noll, our Clia, the puir, distracted lassie, gave the villain . . . ninety-odd pounds? Yon's blackmail and the rogue should hang——"

"No sir, ah—no!" sighed Jasper, mournfully. "Only transportation nowadays! The Law has been per-werted and mootilated to sich werry shocking degree there's no more topping, or as you'd say, hanging, scragging and jibbeting, these days—except for The Act, murder. I dunno vot pore, old England's a-coming to, that I don't."

"Talking of murder," said Gregor, "how are you progressing with our own particular, vile mystery? Though mebbe it'll be fu' early to enquire?"

"Early, sir," answered Jasper, setting down his empty glass with gesture of finality, "early is the only vord for it, sir."

"By the way," quoth Gregor, glancing at the clock in adjacent corner, "it seems young Martin Croft is ill again, Oliver."

"Ar!" nodded Jasper. "So werry ill he's took to his bed, sir—so his ma tells me."

"You've met her then, Shrig,—a vera decent body, well-spoken and unco' intelligent, ay and a good mother."

"De-woted is the vord, sir. And werry like an oyster——"

"An oyster?" Gregor repeated. "You mean——?"

"Dumb, sir! Ah, dumb as any dead fish,—on occasion. 'S arternoon I steps into her little shop, and all so neat and trig, and buys me some tobaccy. And, as you says, a sap-rising personal voman she is, intelligent and a dewoted ma. And now sirs, with your permission, I'll get me to roost, for I shall be abroad early to-morry morning."

"I too," said Gregor, pulling the bell-rope. "Are you coming, Noll?"

"Not yet," I answered as Nicholas appeared bearing a silver candlestick in each hand to light them majestically up to their chambers. Thus alone, I came into the library, poked up the fire and sat down to write more of this narrative, setting forth what I might and to the best of my ability as you that read may see.

Thus, the clock in the hall had chimed midnight and I was locking away this manuscript for the night when the door opened and Clia entered . . . and with the first glimpse of her pale, set face I knew that the vague trouble I had expected was upon me. She had evidently just risen from bed for her slim, naked feet were thrust into furred slippers and she was swathed in a voluminous garment all fluffs and frills and ribands. Closing the door very carefully as I rose, and in no little surprise, she came to me, pushed me gently back into my chair, perched herself upon the arm, set one hand about my neck and ruffled my hair with the other.

"Don't," said she, gazing at and very intent upon this hair she was endeavouring to set on end, "my dear one, do not look so amazed and ridiculously awkward at mere sight of me . . . papa! Surely a daughter may seek counsel with her father at midnight and in her night-rail, especially if it

be as completely and decorously hidden as mine? Though, of course, you are no more my father than I am your daughter! However, being the poor, haunted creature I am these days, I no longer sleep well at night . . . especially this night and the wind calling to me so plaintively one minute and threatening me the next with all imaginable horrors . . . so to escape from all this, and my wretched self, I have stolen down to my dear, sane, most commonsense papa.”

“And quite rightly!” said I, wondering apprehensively what this new mood might portend.

“First, talking of myself,” she continued, “I wish that instead of tall and large-made I had been truly petite, a dear, little, timid, dainty creature who could feel more your daughter than your mother, as I do, as I have always felt and—especially to-night.”

“Silly child!” said I, setting my arm about her which she, gently though instantly, removed.

“And so, Oliver, since I am not, never was or ever can be or even feel like your daughter, I am going now to talk like your mother. So, dear son, listen while I tell of this poor child Clia who has always been a woman older than her years . . . and is now ever more aged than she thought,—what are we going to do with her?”

“Well, my dear——” I began, but my lips were closed by one slim finger, and having thus silenced me she went on again:

“You know, of course, how Clia worshipped you when she was a child, adored you, when a girl, and now, as a woman, loves you, worships and adores you far more than ever——”

“Clia,” said I, rather breathlessly, “what are you saying?”

“The truth, dear son, oh—the very truth at last! No no, sit still and listen to your mother—hush! As a young miss, our Clia, believing it your wish, allowed herself to contemplate marriage with poor Robin, but this was only because she so loved and wished to please you. But, being a woman, she saw the folly of this and instead, began to dream, to hope and yearn that you, my dear, self-forgetful son, might listen at last to the love-cry of your great heart and grow selfish enough to want her for your own . . . yes, to make Clia your wife and crown her with happiness. This, my dear, has been our poor Clia’s dream and dearest hope, but now . . . the dream is ended, the hope is dead and buried in her aching heart—Does this sound silly, I

wonder? However, it's true every word, so true that when she asks you, as she will, you must let her—go away.”

“Go?” I stammered. “Go where . . . why . . . Clia, what in heaven's name is all this? What do you mean?”

“This,” she answered, and rising suddenly, stood to look down on me with that expression of resolute determination I knew of old, “this is what I mean, Oliver, that loving you as I do body and soul and knowing as I always have, the great, unselfish love you have for me I must run away from you because I could not, will not—must not marry you though you besought me on your knees, no—I vow to God I would rather die! Indeed it would be well for our love were I dead and buried.”

“Why?” I questioned, stupidly, well knowing her answer.

“Because I'm—tainted and will never mix my vile murderer's blood with yours that is so pure and good, never! As I told you before, I know at last who and what I am . . . a creature unfit to wifehood, a thing—unclean——”

I leapt from the chair and swung her up in my arms.

“Now,” said I, holding her thus prisoned upon my breast, “hear me!”

“Yes, Oliver,” she sighed, “I must,—though you need not bruise my body like my poor heart. You are very strong but my will is much stronger because I am a woman very sure and determined and know what I must do for your dear sake and——”

“Be silent,” said I, “and hear me.”

“Yes, Oliver.”

“Now,” said I, “with you here on my heart, I say what you have guessed, that I love you far beyond life, yet have been dumb because I'm almost double your age and believed youth must to youth. But I want you, need you and will have you, Clia . . . you shall wed me soon as possible——”

“No, Oliver, no! This is why I must leave you——”

“Never!” said I, crushing her to me, “Never!”

“Then,” sighed she, and very terribly because so gently, “I must kill myself, Oliver, like my poor mother——”

“Clia! Ah, great God what horrible, what terrible thing to say!”

“Yes,” she murmured with the same appalling gentleness, “it will be horrible to do, yet I shall not flinch,—suicide is in my blood as well as murder!”

Dumbstruck by the horror of her words and look, I set her down and striding to the window, swung back the curtains and threw the lattice wide upon a stirring darkness, breathing deep of the cool wind that swept about me; and presently she came to lean on the opposite side of the window, gazing out into this midnight darkness where a fitful wind moaned to blown leafage.

“So now I’ve shocked you, Oliver,” she murmured, her fair, young face haggard with the dreadful resolution that seemed to be ageing her even as I looked. “Have I shocked you so terribly?”

“Beyond expression, Clia.”

“Because I would rather . . . because I will die rather than breed Murder?”

“Because you are allowing a mere suspicion to poison your mind, cloud your reason and because in this mood of panic you are out of my reach, beyond my help . . . you that I have known . . . so cherished and . . . loved all these happy years, you dare to speak of . . . self-murder. . . .”

At this she turned to answer but, instead, stood rigid and dumb; then, as if struck by an invisible hand, she was down, huddled on her knees, staring up at me with wide, awful eyes for out there in the windswept darkness faint yet frightful to hear at such moment, a voice began to sing this dreadfully familiar Song of the Willow, a woman’s voice high-pitched, wailing, indescribably woeful and desolate:

“Oh, willow! willow! willow!

And oh, the green willow my garland must be . . .”

Clia was clinging to me with shaking hands:

“It’s Rose!” she gasped, “Rose Thorn . . . come back from her grave . . . she’s out there for me . . . in the dreadful darkness . . . waiting . . . for me. . . .”

CHAPTER XXXII

WHICH, AMONG OTHER MATTERS, TELLS SOMETHING OF A GHOST THAT SANG

So terrible and sudden was this, that, for a moment, I too was rigid with a ghastly dread; and yet so altogether unbelievable was it that calm sanity reasserted itself and instead of chilling fear I grew hot with fury of anger.

“Oliver . . . Oh Oliver, what dreadful thing is . . . out there in the awful dark . . . ?”

“Vile foolery!” I answered. “A cruel and wicked hoax. Some rascal is playing a trick, mocking the dead! And by heaven he shall suffer for it if I ever find who could be such villain.”

“But it . . . sounded like a woman . . . so fearfully like poor Rose.”

“It did!” I answered, savagely. “But I’m sure it was a man singing falsetto.”

“How can you . . . be so sure?”

“Because I cannot think it was a woman and I do not believe in ghosts. So it must have been some rascally fellow, probably half drunk. So, my dear, be comforted. Sit down in my big chair, this cushion to your head—so! And now,” said I, pouring out a dose of brandy, “drink this, you need it . . . every drop!” Meekly she obeyed, gasped, shuddered, pulled a face and leaning back, looked up at me with faint smile.

“I see you are going to lecture me and I’m quite ready. Pray what have you to tell me?”

“First of all, my dear, I am going to blot out all we have said to-night, every word and look and gesture.”

“Oh? Why, Oliver?”

“Because it was all the outcome of hysteria and therefore best forgotten. . . No, don’t frown, my dear, or interrupt, you have had your say and now I shall have mine and—like a father. You wish to go away,—you shall and at once—and to my Aunt Rosamond if you wish for hard work, which I think will do you good, or to Saphronia if you desire to rest and

enjoy yourself, she has the entrée everywhere, as you know,—this shall be your own choice——”

“But Oliver, suppose I change my mind and decide to . . . remain with you?”

“Quite impossible, my dear.”

“Of course it is,” she answered with her faint smile. “I’m glad you see this, but what has altered and so decided you, pray?”

“Yourself, my dear. You need a complete change. So to-morrow, or soon as may be, you will leave Abbeymead, in the four-horsed chariot taking both your maids if you desire.”

“Yes, Oliver. And for . . . how long?”

“Indefinitely.”

“What does that mean?”

“Until you are cured.”

“Of what, I demand to be informed?”

“Your ridiculous feeling of unworthiness and—very wicked condemnation of your sweet self.”

“If I am born a murderer’s base daughter can I help it?”

“No, you can try to forget it or, at least, refrain from obtruding it so wantonly on all in general.”

“Wantonly?” she repeated, sitting erect the better to flare and frown at me almost like her true self. “Wantonly, sir?”

“That was the word, my dear. And pray do not attempt any tantrums, for henceforth I shall be your father not only in word but deed and shall exact from you the dutiful respect and obedience of a daughter, this is quite understood, I hope?”

“Yes, quite!” she answered, with her new and unnatural meekness. “Also I shall be a long way from you and this dear, old house of Abbeymead. So you need not seem so harsh with me now. You have never looked so coldly or spoken me so in all these happy years.”

“I have always been too lenient——”

“You have always been kind and gentle, Oliver, because you are so strong,—a will of iron, a body of steel, a heart all tenderness and mercy. . . .

But now, Oh I believe you wish to be rid of me! Do you, Oliver, do you?"

"Under the circumstances, my dear, yes I do."

"Ah, don't," she cried, "don't say it in that hard, icy voice as if I were a . . . a stranger!"

"That," said I, "that is it exactly!" Here, seeing how her sensitive lips began to quiver, I turned and busied myself to close the lattice. "Yes," I continued, "the Clia of my deep affection, lovely girl and deep-souled woman, has vanished—leaving a stranger in her place."

"A . . . stranger?" she repeated. "Yes, you are right, for indeed I am a stranger to myself! In such little time all the world is changed and myself and my remaining life with it."

"Oh no," said I, fussing with the window curtains, "all is precisely the same except for your sickly and unworthy imaginings. This is why I am sending you away in the fervent hope you shall regain the true and natural perspective——"

"Yes, I'll go, dear Oliver, I must, and . . . forever!"

"Not forever, silly child, just until you are your sweet, natural self again."

"That will be . . . never!" she murmured.

"However," said I, taking up the nearest candlestick, "it is long past midnight so, my dear, get you to bed again, I'll light you upstairs."

And, mutely submissive, she followed me; reaching her chamber door, I bade her "Good-night" and turned to go, but she stayed me with gentle hand.

"Won't you kiss me good-night, Oliver," she whispered.

"No," I answered, averting my head.

"Just . . . once more!" she pleaded; so I kissed her bright hair, her smooth brow and then went hastening down the stair and back to my library.

And here sat I plunged in unhappy meditation; raging and troubled for Clia and furious with myself that a momentary weakness should have betrayed me into speaking that which shamed me now to think upon.

Thus mentally harassed I knew bed would be a place of wakeful torment; therefore to relieve my troubled mind by action violent as possible, I determined to seek and if possible confront and thrash the rascal who had aped the woeful singing of a dead girl, and incidentally so terrified Clia and

myself,—though indeed I had small hope of finding him now. Nevertheless I donned hat and coat, armed myself with serviceable ash stick and left the house silently as possible.

The wind, it seemed, had died away except for an occasional gust, and the night intensely dark as I went surefooted by familiar paths, led by instinct towards that wide stretch of dense woodland where of late had been so much of evil and whence now, as I approached, came a stealthy rustling, ever and anon, like the stirring of some great beast. Scarcely was I amid this whispering leafage than a light flashed out before me and as I stood blinded by this sudden glare, a hoarse voice exclaimed:

“Con-flummeration!”

“Shrig!” said I, greatly relieved. “Jasper, what on earth is it now?”

“Dog bite me, pal, but you’ve diddled me!” he answered, shutting off the beam of his dark lanthorn. “I hoped as you vas this here singing speckiter.”

“Then you heard it also?”

“Ay, I did, sir, it led me here to find jest prezackly O-U-G-H-T—nothing, and now—you.”

“I thought you were in bed hours ago.”

“Ar, but then, being of a nat’rally enquiring turn o’ mind, I thinks I’ll have a look round afore I closes my peepers.”

“And you saw no one?”

“Nary soul, pal, and never a glimp. When I gets here the singing ghost has wanished com-plete. How d’ye think of it, sir?”

“Some village hobbledehoy or drunken oaf.”

“P’raps, though I—think not.”

“Then how do you explain it, Jasper?”

“Pal Oliver, I don’t.”

“Have you no least idea?”

“Oceans, pal! Sir, my suspicions is agrowing—constant! But suspicion’s vun thing and proof’s another, so—Jarsper’s mum.”

“Well,” said I, wearily, “whoever it was has got away long since, so the sooner we get to bed the better. I heard two o’clock strike some time ago and there’s no sense wandering about in this darkness.”

“Ah!” sighed Jasper. “I never see a darker night. . . Though I could take you and show ye the werry place vere this here ghost or goblin stood for to sing his, or her, doleful ditty. For I did ’appen to notice summat, come and see vot you make of it, pal.”

So, amid unseen leafage that rustled dismally, now and then, to a chilly, furtive wind, I followed Jasper in among the vague loom of trees and undergrowth until, at last he halted suddenly and opening his lanthorn, flashed its light downwards and from the grass at our feet across and up at a certain tall and hatefully familiar tree.

“Good heavens!” I exclaimed, rather peevishly, “this is where Ash was killed.”

“Ar!” nodded Jasper. “The tree yonder—look! More broke twigs! And down here again, vot d’ye say to this?” And playing his light on the ground at our feet, he showed me the grass and mould broken and torn. “How o’ this here, pal?”

“Someone has been kicking up the ground recently.”

“Ar! But—all in the same place!”

“What may this signify?”

“Pal, ’tis the werry i-dentical spot whereon lay the tibby or, as you might say, napper or nob o’ G. Ash!”

“Well?” I enquired.

“No, werry ill, pal, werry ugly and windictive!”

“Jasper, what are you driving at?”

“Murder, pal! The Act! This here ghost or goblin has been committing his murder all over again! Ar, and—singing as he did it, singing vith J-O-Y, j’y, pal, singing as he struck! And vot d’ye say to this?”

“That your suggestion is quite too horrible for belief, Jasper, or much too cryptic——”

“Eh,—cryptic?” he repeated, closing his lanthorn and thus plunging us in a darkness the more profound. “This here’s a vord as I ain’t run my nob agin afore. Do it spell itself with a K or a C?”

“A C. And now if you will explain——”

“And vot prezackly may it mean, pal, this here ‘cryptic’?”

“Secret, puzzling, hidden,—so pray speak more plainly.”

“Sir,” he answered in his most official voice as he stumbled on beside me in the pervading darkness, “in two days, no—say vun, I’ll lay my proofs afore you and answer every question as you can ax me, but——”

“Meaning you will have discovered the murderer?”

“Ar. But, till suspicions is proved into fax, my chaffer, or, as you might say, tongue sir, lays dumb. And now, about this here vord ‘cryptic’——”

“No!” said I. “Listen to me, Jasper Shrig! Just so soon as your business here is done, I want to engage you on another matter and regardless of all expense . . . find out everything possible about the case of Jasper Boswell and that unfortunate lady Anticlea Venner . . . but, and this most especially, I must know . . . must be assured of the sex of the child she bore and . . . if a girl . . . what became of it . . . I must know, I must be assured of this . . . I’ll spend a fortune to know the truth!”

“Ar-r!” drawled Jasper. “For Miss Clia’s sake?”

“Yes! Just how much do you recall of the Boswell case, Jasper?”

“Not much, pal, not much. Y’see I’ve had so many cases since,—Murder being such a werry human failing. Look,—yonder comes the dawn!”

Nevertheless we continued to walk on slowly and quite heedless of direction, so far as I was concerned, while in the east, beyond the vague loom of swelling Downs, the dayspring glimmered.

“Jasper,” said I, viewing this bright promise of coming day and no least joy in it, “she is quite distracted, believing herself a murderer’s child . . . she is in such desperate mood, such dreadful state of mind . . .”

“Meaning Miss Clia, eh pal Oliver?”

“Yes. She is quite beyond my help and therefore I am . . . very greatly troubled.”

“How desp’rate is she, sir? Has she threatened . . . suicide yet?”

“Yes, Jasper! How did you guess? Yes, by God, she has . . . and she’d do it, Jasper, she’d do it!”

“Ay, so I think!” he muttered. “Same like young Rose Thorn, though for better reason . . . Pal, you must get her out o’ Abbeymead, and the vord is—immejit!”

“I am! She leaves soon as possible.”

“Good!”

"I'm sending her to my Aunt, Lady Rosamond. But how then, Jasper? When she is away . . . beyond my sight and reach . . . how then?"

"Vork, Oliver pal! Vork and plenty on it!"

"This shall be arranged. . . And yet I am . . . strangely uneasy, Jasper
—"

"Then think o' summat else," said he, halting suddenly and gripping me by the arm, "f'rinstance,—look yonder!" Now glancing about in the half-light I saw we stood on that grassy upland whence we looked down upon Abbeymead village where it seemed night yet lingered.

"D'ye notice aught, sir?"

"A dim light, Jasper."

"Ar. And vere is that light, should you say?"

"It seems to be coming from . . . yes, from Mrs. Croft's cottage."

"Upstairs or down, sir?"

"Upstairs, I judge. And we know poor Martin is ill again."

"Ay . . . and with a werry . . . dewoted . . . mother!" said Jasper, slowly.

"Yes," I answered, peering at him in the dusk, "but why do you stress the fact so often?"

"P'raps because I never had a mother to remember or to . . . dewote herself to me. And Lord love us,—there's four o'clock a-striking! And there again—up and out o' the sea comes the sun, and werry pretty too! So now, old pal Sir Oliver, I reckon as the vord for us is—the downy, kip, pal, or as you might say, bed."

Thus it was in a rosy dawn, through a world gemmed with dewdrops and glad with birdsong, that we reached the silent house and went our silent ways to bed. I lay down dressed as I was and, not expecting to sleep because of harassing anxiety, sank almost at once to the blessed unconsciousness of dreamless slumber. Nor did I wake until roused by a hand on my shoulder, I opened dazzled eyes to behold a late noon sun flooding my room with glory and Gregor looking down on me.

"What is it?" I asked, blinking drowsily.

"Oh man," he groaned, "our lassie's awa'! Oliver, whiles I was busy and you asleep, she ordered the chariot and is gone, bag and baggage! And what d'ye say to this?"

“Thank God!” I exclaimed, fervently.

“Oh?” said he, staring his amazement. “Are ye so glad of it? Well, here’s a letter she left for ye. Mebbe ye’ll be sae guid to explain what it a’ means, later on.” Saying which, he stalked majestically out of my chamber, closing the door behind him. Then I opened Clia’s letter and read this:

“Good-bye Oliver. I loved to think you would be quite lost and desolate without me your Clia to bother and fuss over you. But this was only part of the happy, happy dream. To-day I am wide awake in a strange world I find rather dreadful and so pray God to bless and keep you and to help poor me. I have gone to work with Aunt Rosamond at the ‘Jolly Waterman’ where no chamber, no stick or stone of the dear, old place but will call up memories of the you and me of happier days years ago. Perhaps we shall meet there but, if we do, it will be this changed, new Clia, this grown and troubled woman who will greet you, because your joyous child is no more,—she who writes this farewell, with resolute hand and tearless eyes, is this new woman creature,

“ANTICLEA.”

So Clia has gone indeed and nothing left to me of her sweet self, her strong vivid personality but this letter written in her bold, firm script,—this and the vase of flowers I found upon my writing-table, lovely, fragrant things that somehow touched me more than her written words, filling me with sense of loss indescribable.

CHAPTER XXXIII

WHICH IS A CHAPTER VARIOUS

IT has become for me, these days, a very vexed question whether or no the gift of Memory be a comfort and blessing to be cherished or a heartbreak and a curse.

To recall bye-gone events, making the past live again; to summon the vanished presence before our mental vision that sees at last with such painful clearness; to hear in fancy the dear, familiar voice, surely this must bring more of sadness than joy since these are but dreams of that which, being past, is beyond actual recall and which, experienced now once again but in truer perspective, may pain us with the realization of how blind and unresponsive we were to proffered opportunities now for ever lost and joys that might have been. Things we said and did then, now take on a strange and utterly new significance,—a look disregarded, a sigh, the gesture of a hand we let pass unheeded, these become causes for grieving and remorse; had we but answered that sigh kindly, responded to that eloquent glance, taken that mutely pleading hand, how much happier the remembrance now. Memory indeed, so far as I am concerned, is more haunting curse than blessed, kindly solace.

And all this because, on coming down this morning, I find the flowers upon my desk are drooping, fading rapidly and must soon wither quite away because the loving hands, that culled and placed them here, are gone these two days.

Since her childhood it has been her joy to bring me posies and flowery garlands and of late she has made it her duty to order my littered writing-table and garnish it with this vase of the season's blossoms; and I, becoming used to this, have taken it all as matter of course—until now! For now indeed, looking upon these faded flowers, I must needs remember so very many other gracious, loving acts wrought by these same hands for me; and in this moment the sense of her once-joyous comradeship and my present loneliness—all this fills me with such deep sense of loss and passionate yearning that it is a pain. So of this, and for the present, I will write no more. Instead, I will out and walk until weary, or mount my fleetest horse and gallop through this sweet, windswept morning.

So here I end a while, making a cross thus:

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This day has sped apace, for I have ridden pretty far and talked much, so that it is now past nine of the clock and I have somewhat to write about. And this I shall do in order of precedence and under their several heads, as: No. 1. Viscount Ragworth. No. 2. Roland. No. 3. Mrs. Croft. No. 4. Jasper Shrig. Here then I begin thus:

VISCOUNT RAGWORTH

Getting me into spurred boots I ordered my horse Midnight to be saddled for I needed violent distraction and speed; so astride this fiery animal away I galloped, by shady lane and winding track and so, more slowly, up to the far-flung, rolling summit of the Downs where on the calmest day a fragrant wind greets one like the welcome of a friend. Here I touched spurs to Midnight, gave him his head and away we went at stretching, headlong gallop with creak of saddle leather and muffled thunder of fleet hoofs, across springy turf, old as England itself, where a myriad tiny flowerets bloom, scabious flowers dance, and wild thyme spices the air ascending from kind Mother Earth like a blessing; up grassy slopes and down again we raced, overleaping yellow gorse and tangled briar, on and yet on until before us lay the wide stretch of distant ocean all flicker and sparkle to the high, unclouded sun, and nestling below us, the little, sleepy hamlet of the East Bourne. But on we sped across these noble Downs, high above the busy world of bustling towns and noisy cities, through an all-pervading silence and blessed, restful peace until, hearing a faint shout behind me, I glanced back and saw another solitary horseman making after me in such hot pursuit that I checked my snorting, eager animal and turning, beheld young Viscount Ragworth.

“Lord, sir,” cried he, wheeling to a masterly stand, “you ride like the dev—no no, I mean, of course, a—a regular—what’s-a-name . . . ‘shod with lightning’ and so forth, ‘the roaring blast’ and so on . . . though what I chased you for and what I’ve been wishing to tell you about is . . . well, it’s about poor, old Robin . . . to inform you, sir, as indeed I’m telling everyone else, that I don’t believe a dam’ word of it and never shall . . . all these lies that are going about, everywhere one goes.”

“What particular lies, Viscount?”

“Devilish ugly lies, sir, about him and George Ash . . . and . . . yes, the Thorn girl, poor Rose Thorn.”

“Pray go on, Viscount.”

“Well, sir, the gossip is that they were both her . . . her lovers and . . . so on, that they quarrelled over her and that Robin smashes Ash, runs off and so proves his guilt. . . . And . . . well, lots more of such vile stuff! Sir, I want you to know that I do not, could not and never shall believe a single word of it against Robin. I’m here to say he is still my friend and that I am his, yes, more than ever,—as I’m telling everybody on every possible opportunity.”

“Thank you, Rags!” said I, reining nearer. “Pray give me your hand.” He did so, with a flushed and impetuous eagerness that warmed my heart and comforted me. “You are, indeed, a loyal friend, Viscount, and I am proud and glad to declare your faith in Robin is justified, he is, of course, innocent of this crime as ourselves, as will be proved to the world very shortly.”

The Viscount tossed up his smart hat, caught it deftly, saluted me therewith and put it on again all in a moment.

“Sir,” said he, with his usual diffidence, “may I ride with you a little way?”

“It will be my pleasure,” I answered.

“Though not, sir, not at such breakneck pace, if you please, first because though my Toby here is pretty good he’s no match for this black demon of yours, and secondly because I . . . I want to talk a bit.”

“Then talk away and welcome!” said I, as we moved on together.

“Why then, sir, a few days ago I . . . I did myself the honour of calling at Abbeymead though was so unfortunate to find you away in London and . . . nobody at home.”

“Meaning Clia was out also?”

“Yes, sir,—though my visit was to you regarding a letter I had received from Robin and written the night before he . . . vanished. I have it here, sir, if you’d care to see it?”

“Thank you!” said I, and, pulling up again, I took this letter, unfolded it and read this:

“MY DEAR, OLD RAGS,

"I am become the victim of Base Injustice also the Gest of Fait and Sport of damned Circumstance, so am lightly hopping my twig, ducking fetters, handcuffs and prison sell that I may be at liberty to prove my innocence in the skowling mug of Black Injustice aforesaid and vizzage of outrageous and accursed Fortune. The reasons for all this you will know soon enough so no more of it here. This hasty letter I write for your behoof, to tell you Clia is free and myself completely floored. I have taken a toss and am forever out of the running for the Matrimonial Stakes, so the field is now clear for thee, old fellow. Ride to win, Rags, and good luck, though I fear you are somewhat of a late starter. Whatever you hear of me and this murder, you have my word here and now that I am innocent as wailing babe. So thus, in spite of injustice, disbelief of those who should believe and idel suspicion, I can yet sign myself in all honour,

"Yours as ever, my old Rags,

"ROBIN."

"You'll notice, sir," said the Viscount, taking back the letter and refolding it with a particular care, "that in all his haste and trouble he could still think of me and find time to write."

"Yes," said I, as we rode on again. "Robin also is a faithful friend, thank God, for such friendship is surely one of the loftiest of human emotions because less selfish than love of man for woman or parent for child . . . while such noble sentiments endure, this old world is none so bad a place." Here I rode in a deep abstraction until I became aware my young companion was addressing me and rather more diffidently than usual:

". . . and therefore, Sir Oliver, I beg you'll tell me also if this . . . this engagement is indeed . . . broken off?"

"Well," I answered, slowly, "it is, yes—for the present."

"Oh!" said he, with sigh very like a groan, "you think it possible they . . . they will make it up, sir?"

"Quite possible, Viscount."

"Yes, yes of course," said he hurriedly. "I . . . I guessed as much, sir, he is such a splendid fellow and . . . she——" here he paused to take off his hat, look at it vaguely and put it on again. "Sir," said he, rather jerkily, "if I . . . pray believe that . . . if I can be . . . of any least service to . . . to old Robin or . . . help to you in this vile business I shall be . . . most happy. And now, sir,

by your leave I think I'll . . . be off. Good-day, sir. Good-day!" And off he went, leaving me not a little sorry for him since the more I saw of this clean-hearted young fellow the better I liked him.

ROLAND

Once again I rode deep in meditation, therefore haphazard and for some time until, feeling Midnight start, I glanced up and was surprised to see Roland approaching on steed that pranced and progressed sideways, lifting slim legs ridiculously high and with a suddenness as though the grass had been red hot. And my cousin looked, as always, extremely trig and well turned-out from rakish hat to spurs and his high-bred, arrogant face quite its handsome self again.

"Well met, Noll, well met!" cried he, before I could speak. "For, though infernally busy, I was on my way to you."

"Kind of you——" I began.

"Yes, I was coming to plead with you, Noll, old fellow, and very dashed earnestly. Yes, and with the most absolute humility."

"Plead?" I repeated. "You? What in the world for, Roland?"

"My nephew, old fellow."

"Who?"

"Why, Robin, of course, who else? Yes, though confoundedly busy on my own affairs, as I say, I come seeking you on poor Robin's behalf."

"Oh?" I enquired, reining to a halt, so that he must do likewise, whereat his nervous animal instantly shivered violently, kicked fiercely at nothing, reared, plunged and, being checked in masterly fashion, capered and danced so that conversation was quite impossible.

"What the devil——" cried Roland, only avoiding a fall by consummate horsemanship, "—must you laugh?"

"I don't, Roly. I merely—smile."

"Well, dammit——" he roared, "instead of leering and jeering in such . . . curst ungentlemanly fashion . . . why don't you ride on? Can't you see my . . . young demon won't stand?"

"Then why not," I enquired, as we moved on, "why not ride something that will,—a horse, say?"

“Eh,—a horse?” he demanded, flushed and angry. “Good God, man, what d’you call this?”

“I won’t,” said I.

“Won’t—what?”

“Call it what I think, you’d become more peevish. And I’m glad to see you so well recovered of your . . . desperate wounds. Not a scar! How was my Aunt Rosamond when you left, and all at the old ‘Waterman’—and when did you leave?”

“Oliver,” said he, riding close as his highly neurotic animal would permit, “I did not delay my own very important affairs and pressing engagements to be derided and put off with asides, though I expected it.”

“Indeed?” said I.

“Certainly!” said he, “well knowing your confounded contrary nature.”

“Really?” said I.

“And truly!” he nodded.

“Roland, do I understand that you are here to plead with me?”

“As I told you!”

“And with a ‘most absolute humility’, Roland.”

“Certainly!”

“Have you begun yet?”

“No, damme—no! Ye gods, what a tom-fool question!”

“Then pray warn me when you are ready to begin. Meanwhile I hope you found all well at home,—the children and Deborah?”

“Thank you, quite! Though I am not here to talk of them either, but for Robin’s welfare and happiness and here you are making it as infernally difficult for me as you possibly can! Yes, begad here you are at loggerheads with me as usual, and both of us enraging each other over nothing at all!”

“Are we, Roland?”

“Of course we are! And there’s the dashed, infernal perversity of it, for how the devil can I plead with any least humility or eloquence under the circumstances?”

“I’m amazed you should try.”

“Well, I amaze myself, Oliver. That I should be willing to sink my own pride and supplicate anyone,—ha and least of all you, this perfectly astounds me.”

“And no wonder!” quoth I and no longer able to repress a smile. “Is that fierce scowl your idea of humility, Roland?”

“However,” he snarled, “humble I am . . . as possible, and all for sake of the dear fellow who saved me alive, my Robin.”

“Yours?”

“Certainly! Is he not my nephew and by me so publicly proclaimed? You heard me at the ‘Waterman’!”

“Roly, I did.”

“Well then?”

“I’m happy to know this so lately adopted relationship has endured thus long.”

“Ha—damnation! Now con-found everything!” he exclaimed rather wildly. “By heavens there’s no man breathing can rouse the devil in me so soon as you!”

“And,” I retorted, “there’s no man breathing who cherishes and pampers his own particular devil more assiduously than yourself!”

And after we had ridden thus side by side without a word and scowling on each other, for no small distance, said he, reproachfully and as one more in sorrow than anger:

“I’m deuced unfortunate to find you in such a particularly black and ugly temper to-day, Noll. However, I am determined to do my best with you for the dear boy, hoping I may be able to wake in you, somehow, that sense of right and justice that is usually so dormant in your nature. Firstly then,—it seems you have forbidden poor Robin the house, and secondly——”

“Firstly,” said I, “did he tell you so?”

“Not exactly in so many words, but it comes to the same, and so——”

“What were his words exactly or so near as you remember?”

“Well, he informed me,—by the way, he has been most dutifully attentive at my bedside,—he informed me that, by your expressed wish, he was to leave Abbeymead.”

“Did he hold this as grievance against me?”

“Oh no. I confess he showed rather the reverse, vowed he’d be a good farmer especially as regards horses and cattle, but——”

“Good!” said I. “Robin is sterling through and through, he always was.”

“He is, Noll, he is indeed! Knows a horse too! And has real hands! Sits well, beside, neither short nor long. A grand, young fellow and much too good for mere farmer! And this brings me to the other matter—the matter, Noll!”

“Which and what?”

“The poor, dear fellow’s love affair, his adoration, his very deep and real devotion to our Clia, and—ha yes, your own confounded grim and totally inimical attitude——”

“Did he so describe it, Roland?”

“Certainly not!”

“Then how do you know?”

“By simple deduction from the little he did say.”

“Which was——?”

“That you had forbidden the marriage, and that she——”

“For a year, Roland, until he is man enough and able to earn and maintain his wife suitably.”

“Absurd, Oliver! Bosh and dam’ fiddlesticks! People in our position don’t have to earn.”

“Therefore, Roland, we should at least do something useful because of such exemption.”

“Oho!” he exclaimed, scornfully. “Well now damme,—for here are you one of the wealthiest landowners in all this South Country!”

“Though not an idle one, I hope. As for Robin——”

“Yes, for Robin you have more than enough of this world’s goods to set him up handsomely for the rest of his life, as you should and, begad, as you ought!”

“And make him a mere life pensioner on my bounty?”

“Well, and why not?”

“For his own sake, and especially his . . . wife’s sake.”

“Again I demand—why not?”

“Because she would be . . . Lia.”

“And, damme, there we are again! It seems she’s changed ‘yes’ for ‘no’,—cold-shouldered the poor boy,—thrown him over most heartlessly,—and all by reason of—you!”

“Did Robin say so?”

“No. But to me, knowing you as I do, this is of course perfectly evident! Yes, all her life she has been under your dominating influence, her beloved and all potent guardian, eh Oliver?”

“Maybe,” I sighed. “Perhaps this is why she is in London with Robin and Aunt Rosamond at this moment.”

Roland’s surprise was so great that it affected his horse, apparently, for this all too sensitive steed endeavoured to stand on its head, it reared, plunged, capered, and danced all over again, whereupon Roland began to call out, alternately addressing me and vituperating his horse, much like this:

“Noll, my dear fellow . . . curse your hide, stand still! Oliver, it seems I misjudged you and so . . . damn you for a four-legged fool . . . so I’m all humble apology . . . when this brute of mine gentles . . . you see, he’s young . . . first time I’ve taken him out . . . I’ll shake your old fist and crave forgiveness——”

“No need,” said I.

“Oh yes!” quoth he. “There is, and I shall.” The which he presently contrived to do, though with some difficulty and on we rode again, and Roland now all smiling good fellowship.

“You’re devilish good at heart, Noll, true blue, faithful, stout and . . . whatnot,—though a trifle morose, yes, a trifle too chilly and stand-offish, and yet a regular out-and-outer! So then, I take it, I can write to my poor Robin telling him I have won your agreement and full consent to this marriage,—eh Noll, old fellow?”

“Yes, Roland, a year hence!”

“Great Jove and Jupiter! A year? What the devil do you mean?”

“Twelve months, Roly.”

“Then dammit,—I’m done! I’ve only wasted my confounded time! It’s just as I say,—you’re hard, Oliver, you’re hard as a devilish flint and, begad,

as impressionable as a lump of pig-iron, cold as an infernal iceberg and about as companionable——”

“Well,” said I, reining up again, “suppose you seek a warmer atmosphere?”

“An amazing good suggestion,—I will!” he retorted and, with threatening flourish of whip but no other farewell, he wheeled his restive animal; and it was with strange sense of added loneliness and growing despondency that I watched him gallop away.

MRS. CROFT

In this mood of dejection I turned from these lonely Downs and by familiar bridle-paths descended to the white, tree-shaded road only to find here solitude also, with the addition of dust, therefore I checked Midnight’s eagerness and so at easy pace came I into Abbeymead village where happy children ceased their play to curtsy or touch hat to me as I rode by, as did their elders, and all, thank God, with a smile!

I was passing Mrs. Croft’s small, corner shop when she came out and with such evident desire of speech with me that, baring my head to her, I pulled Midnight to unwilling stand.

Mrs. Croft is tall and of a handsome, strangely youthful appearance for though her abundant hair is snow-white, her bearing is graciously upright, and her smoothly regular features lit by wonderful eyes of a hot brown such as are but rarely seen, compelling eyes with steadfast, resolute expression like her shapely mouth and chin.

“If you please, sir,” said she in her soft, pleasant voice, “may I have a word wi’ you?”

“Of course, Mrs. Croft. Martin is better, I hope?”

“Would you be so kind to step in shop, sir?”

“I would with pleasure, but I’m afraid my horse won’t stand.” As I spoke, out from his smithy hardby, strode Charles Over, the smith, teeth very white in sooty visage as he saluted me, saying:

“T’ll ’old en for ee, Squire. Midnight knows I.”

So, thanking him, I dismounted and followed Mrs. Croft into her trim, little shop where everything is always neat and orderly as herself.

She closed the door, set a chair for me, curtsayed and standing behind her small, neat counter, hands clasped there, fixed me with her eyes, these strange, red-brown eyes of hers that seemed to watch whatsoever they looked at, as—myself, the two doors, the shop windows, the quiet road beyond and in manner disconcerting as her first words:

“’Tis this ghost, sir, this creeping haunt as sings o’ nights.”

“Ghost?” I repeated. “But Mrs. Croft you are too wise to heed this foolish tale, surely?”

“Sir, I can only say as I’ve seen . . . something . . . a-peering at me from the dark o’ your woods where George Ash was . . . done to death. I’ve heered it sing, ah, time and again, like Rose Thorn used for to sing and the same words, poor maid,—ah, time and again, I have! And so has others, sir, folk aplenty hereabouts as shall tell ee the same.”

Now as she spoke, her great, bright eyes, now on me, the doors, the windows and the road, seemed more keenly watchful, more apprehensive and disturbing than ever.

“And, sir,” she went on, before I could make answer, “there be Miss Clia herself, Lord bless her,—she’s heered it too! Do ee ask her yourself, sir, but no—you can’t, she be fled away and out of it, and no wonder!”

“How do you mean, Mrs. Croft?”

“She’s run away for terror of it, sir, like I would,—to-day, this hour, ay—this very moment if I only could! For there be evil here in Abbeymead, death and the dread of it . . . somebody else be a-going to die soon . . . I feel it, sir, I know it and I be wondering who and when and . . . how! I don’t fear death, ah no, only the . . . way of it . . . and him as be forever a-lurking and a-prying . . . looking, creeping, spying on folks . . . him in the top-boots and buckled hat . . . him as be short yet looks so big and strong . . . he’s took to haunting and prowling too! I be forever a-coming on him and always unexpected——”

“My dear soul,” said I, as she paused for breath and her whole form shaken seemingly by some deep emotion, “surely you cannot mean——”

“Oh sir, I don’t know what I mean or who . . . a stranger . . . Last night I’m a-sitting in the back room yonder and my poor boy asleep upstairs, and I see something flit beyond the casement and thinking ’twas this ghost, I cried God’s comfort on me and looked out and sees . . . him again . . . this same man a-peering in at me. He takes off his hat, he nods and becks at me,

smiling so wicked I claps to the shutters agin him and crept away upstairs to—Lord God . . . there he be . . . now!”

Startled by her gesture and look of terror, I glanced whither she pointed, and saw beaming in at us through the window the face of

JASPER SHRIG

“Now bless your heart, Mrs. Croft,” said I with reassuring smile, “yonder is no man to fear or distress you, he is friend of mine and yours, a famous officer here for the protection of us all and to vindicate innocence. So do pray be comforted.” Speaking, I laid my hand upon hers that were still tightly clasped, and was shocked to feel them cold as ice and quivering very oddly. And then Jasper Shrig entered the little shop. He took off his hat, placed it beside mine upon the counter and resting both hands upon his knotted stick, smiled from Mrs. Croft to me and back again with such extreme benevolence I wondered to see her form so rigid, her strong and comely face so stern and deathly pale.

“Arternoon, mam!” quoth he. “’Appening to see S’Oliver here I jest dropped in too, and now, being here, I’ll take two penn’orth o’ your bull’s-eyes, mam.”

“Mrs. Croft,” said I, seeing she remained rather dreadfully motionless and silent, “this is my friend Mr. Jasper Shrig of——”

“Bull’s-eyes, mam, if you please!” he repeated, gentle of tone and beaming of visage, “I finds bull’s-eyes is varming and grateful to the innards, mam, so ’stead o’ tuppence let’s make it six penn’orth.” Slowly and almost as if against her will, she began to weigh out the sweetmeats while Jasper’s glance went roving, much as hers had done, though less apprehensively, to the doors, the floor, the raftered ceiling, the windows and the road beyond, while he talked, in tone of warm friendliness and in the country idiom—almost:

“Now, marm, I’ll make a guess, ay I’ll tell ee what,—I’ll lay ee another sixpence as ee was a-talking o’ this yere haunt, this singin’ ghost, eh marm?”

“Yes,” I answered, seeing she had no will to speak, “oddly enough, we were.”

“Not ‘oddly’, sir, ho no,—‘nat’rally’ is the vord, eh Mrs. Croft? Everybody be a-talkin’ on it, and no vonder! Across yonder at the ‘Matravers Arms’ they’re fuller of it than ale. For it seems as last night this here ghost was up to its tricks and playing its games again, singin’ its Willer

Song in the dark, ar—plain as plain! And some folk do say as likewise it—vistled——”

A stifled moan, clatter of falling objects, and Mrs. Croft staring wildly upwards, both hands clenched upon her bosom; then, before I could move, Jasper’s voice cheery and jovial as ever:

“Lord, marm,—there’s half o’ my bull’s-eyes on the dogshelf!” For indeed Mrs. Croft’s movement had been so sudden that some of the sweetmeats had fallen to the floor.

“What . . . do you mean by . . . whistled?” she demanded, speaking with visible effort. “There . . . was no whistling last night.”

“Ar! That’s wot most o’ they folks say, marm, though others again tells different,—and now you says ‘no vistling’ too, eh marm?”

“Yes . . . yes, I do—there was no whistling.”

“Then you must have heered werry plain, eh Mrs. Croft?”

“No—yes, yes of course I heard, how could I help but hear?”

“Ay marm, how indeed! And you heard also werry plain indeed?”

“No plainer than . . . other folk.”

“And wheer might you ha’ been, mam, to hear so werry plain?”

“In my bed, of course,—where else should I be at such time o’ night?”

“Ay, marm, that’s the question! You didn’t ’appen to be, say,—taking a bit of a ramble like?”

“No! Why should I?”

“Vich, marm, is another question. How’s sever, you heered the singing?”

“It woke me in a fright, so I . . . I dressed and came downstairs and . . . and——”

“Me, mam, you saw me.”

“Yes, sir, and be you friend o’ Squire or no, I’ll ask you not to come a-creeping and spying, and peeping through honest folks’ casements o’ nights.”

“Mrs. Croft, you do me a injustice,” he sighed. “I jest ’appened to pass by and sees a light, mam, a face peeping out o’ your vinder and a werry pale and troubled face it looked. So, naturally I peered back to ax if any help or, as you might say, ass-istance is needed, and then I sees it’s you, mam, fully

dressed and a shawl over your head! And now, Mrs. Croft, not talking o' this singing ghost,—how is your pore son Martin?"

There happened to be a chair behind her and into this Mrs. Croft sank, or rather, fell as if forced down there by some brutal, invisible hand. When at last she spoke it was in voice so pitifully unlike her usual firm, pleasant tones as troubled me:

"Ill . . . sick . . . very ill. . . ."

Jasper's voice sounded the more jovial by contrast to these faltering tones, when he said, leaning suddenly towards her:

"Could us, Sir Oliver and me, just take a peep at him, Mrs. Croft——?" She was afoot, fronting her questioner, hands clenched, eyes wide, a desperate creature become suddenly formidable, though when she answered it was in breathless whisper:

"No . . . no, neither of you. . . . Nobody shall!"

So for a moment she glared dumbly on Jasper Shrig, then, without moving her rigid body, turned her head to look on me and now in her strange eyes I read such unutterable suffering, such pleading and despair as went so far beyond my endurance that I caught up my hat and rose, saying abruptly:

"Come, Jasper, take your purchase and let us go. Mrs. Croft, if there is anything your Martin craves or you think he needs, jellies or wine or such, do pray send to the house. Good-afternoon and . . . take comfort." Then, grasping Jasper by the arm I led him away.

"In heaven's name," I demanded, so soon as we were out of earshot, "why must you so badger and browbeat the poor creature?"

"And a re-markable fine creeter—as vomen go!" he murmured, scowling at the dusty road.

"She was faint, almost swooning! You saw this?"

"Ar, I did, and as expected and all by reason o'—you know what!"

"But I don't," said I, rather sharply. "What do you mean?"

"De-wotion, sir! You'll mind as I told you in London she was a ma or mother oo's dewotion was stoo-pendious!"

"This tells me nothing, Jasper."

"Pal, I didn't 'ardly expect as it could. And now, if you'd speak to Gimblet afore he rides for London and on your partick'lar business, step

along o' Jarsper."

So, leaving Midnight at the smithy with Charles, I stepped.

We crossed the wide green with its noble trees to the "Matravers Arms," this cosy, old inn hushed and drowsy at this time of day, and in chamber above, found the saturnine Gimblet in the act of strapping his valise.

"Good-day t'ye, Sir Oliver!" said he, gripping my extended hand, then, turning to Jasper Shrig enquired, and with unexpected look of affection: "How goes it, old High Cockalorum?"

"Pretty nigh finished, lad, to-night shall see the end—wi' luck and if my fish is there to bite. You got 'em—the bait, Gimblet?"

"Here, Guv!" he answered, pointing at a misshapen, bulbous parcel on the bed.

"Boots to dicer, Gimblet?" enquired Jasper, poking this parcel with blunt, exploring finger.

"Ay, everything complete, Guv."

"Right, lad, right! Now o' this here other matter as I mentioned afore, my pal S'Oliver Dale's enquiry con-sarnin the case o' Jarsper Boswell took and dooly topped for The Act ten to fifteen years ago, vich should be . . . say . . . thirty o' my little readers back. You'll go through them readers, cases marked B, till you finds Boswell, Jarsper,—and set a brace of my sharpest men onto it. Then you, Gimblet, set yourself a tracing the lady in said case, Anticlea Venner, finding oo she vas, vere from, day o' death, fellerdesee, vot become of her babby, if same is alive or dead and, Gimblet—most important of all sex of said babby, if male or female. Right, S'Oliver, pal?"

"Precisely!" I answered. "And pray remember, Gimblet, no matter how far or how long this search takes you, don't give up! Expense is no matter, I must know of this child . . . and soon as possible."

"Very good, sir. I'm riding post, seven changes so should be in London to-morrow early—with luck. Any further instructions, Guv?"

"No, Gimblet, no, except,—mind your eyes. I've boasted to my pal here o' your sharpness, so—make it be true again!"

"I'll do my best, Jasper, and no man can do more. And now, good-bye, Sir Oliver, and you, Guv,—I'll be off." So saying, he swung the heavy valise to his shoulder, shook hands again, nodded and was gone.

Now, as I turned to go too, I paused in the act, arrested by the odd-shaped bundle on the bed, which now, as when I had first glimpsed it and for no evident reason, struck me as sinister.

“Jasper,” said I, my gaze upon this, “when you told Gimblet ‘pretty nigh finished’ you were referring to the murder, of course?”

“Of course, pal.”

“So then you actually know who did it?”

“Pal—of course! I’ve suspected it ever since you give me the office or, as you might say, cloo——”

“I? I gave it you?”

“Ar! In London. So I follers this here cloo and—the case ends to-night . . . p’raps! To be sure, Oliver’s in town.”

“Oliver——?” I repeated, quite confused.

“Flash for the moon, pal, thieves’ flash patter meaning as the moon’s werry bright, and if so, this should help.”

“Do I understand you will arrest the murderer to-night?”

“Ar! Or—wersy-wicey.”

“Jasper, what on earth do you mean?”

“That I ’opes,—and a capital H.-O.-P.-E. it is,—as the murderer is a-going to do this for me,—if you gets my meaning, pal.”

“Not in the least!”

“No, it couldn’t ’ardly be expected.”

“Then suppose you explain, Jasper?”

“Sir,” he answered, assuming his official look, “I don’t!”

“Don’t what, man?”

“Explain Jarsper. No man ever did yet, sir, least of all—me.”

“You’re provokingly mysterious, Jasper.”

“And no help for it, pal, things being as they be. But I’ll tell you all as I can—that there bundle now, could you make a guess con-sarnin’ it?”

“No,—except that it is of an ugly shape and very badly packed.”

“Agreed! My Gimblet ain’t much of a hand at parcels. Ye see, it’s garments,—it’s boots, gaiters, breeches, shirt and everything to neckercher and dicer, or, as you might say, cady, garments as the murdereer had on ven the Fact was committed upon him, the clothes of G. Ash——”

“Good heavens!” I exclaimed, recoiling. “But why, what is your purpose _____”

“Sir,” said he, becoming now quite grimly official, “dooty calls, werry sharp and per-sistent, so I must ax you to leave me for the doing thereof.”

At this, and seeing him about to unwrap this bundle, away I went,—downstairs and across the sunny green and mighty glad of the fresh, sweet wind and merry clamour of these children in their rosy innocence.

And so, having talked awhile with smiling, grimy Charles the blacksmith, I mounted and rode home,—or rather, to this stately desolation that shelters me, for all true sense of home has vanished with that lovely, vital presence that once filled it with such joyous stir and the all-pervading gladness of her warm, sweet womanhood . . . instead of which nothing is left me—except a poor, sad handful of withered flowers.

So, here ends this chapter at last, which, though over long, I trust the reader shall not find too diffuse or wordy, of which I entertain some doubt, yet in this hope, I lay down my pen a while.

CHAPTER XXXIV

OF MUMPING JOE, HIS STORY

HOME! WHAT marvellous, thrice blessed word is this, conjuring up by its mere sound all that is most intimate and sacred in life. What other word may so instantly waken memory, summoning back our vanished youth and innocence, making the lonely heart swell to the recollection of joyous scenes long past and the gentle, loving faces we so loved and have lost a while.

Home! It is a word of power, a word indeed of such potent magic in its beautiful written shape and murmured utterance that it may summon us and sanctify, lifting our thoughts above all baser things, like bells faint-chiming across wide distances, or voices, sweetly familiar, calling to us through forgotten years. To the exile a wistful, sacred memory; to the weary traveller an inspiration to boldly adventure and endure all perils and hardships of the long road that is to end in such assured joy of loving welcome at last.

And—here in our Old England, thanks to the merciful God of our valiant ancestors, a man's home is a haven inviolate, a peaceful security sacred to those we love and to ourselves.

Oh, Spirit of Home, thou ministering angel of new and eager life, of childish joys and sorrows and happy innocence, thou art indeed man's true joy and shall be his ultimate salvation!

Here, leaning back in my chair to look upon the empty luxury around me, I know that the poorest cottage, a shed or tumble-down barn might be more truly my home were it brightened and sanctified by that one so needed presence, this blessed Spirit of the Hearth, whose other names are Love and Faith and Understanding.

It being now four o'clock, appeared my stately Nicholas Jenks bearing before him, like some badge of high office, a silver teaspoon and behind him the Second Footman burdened with large, heavy-laden tray; this safely deposited on table nearby, he bowed and withdrew, under the sternly critical eye of Nicholas who began to perform upon the tea-pot, a superbly dignified personage as usual, though unduly solemn, I thought; and so, when he had languished over the sugar, sighed profoundly over the milk-jug and as heavily over the spouting tea:

“Nicholas,” said I, “what is it?”

“Your pardon, sir, but—it?” he enquired.

“Yes. Your trouble, you sighed—twice!”

“Then, sir, I beg you will excuse such lamentable, extreme culpable exhibition.”

“But, Nicholas, why did you?”

“Sir, she . . . she . . . kissed me!”

“Who did?”

“Mistress Clia . . .”

“Oh? Has she never done so before?”

“Not, sir, ah—not since she was a sweet innocent in childish bib and tuckers.”

“And she did so, recently?”

“Just before she stepped into the chariot, sir . . . and sir, it is an abiding, though acutely plaintive, memory!”

“Why, Nick?”

“Because in that brief embrace, sir, I experienced a sense of such finality as troubles me,—even yet! It was indeed, sir, as though she bade me a long, oh me,—an eternal farewell! Life, sir, life is so fleeting and London—so far!”

“Nonsense!” said I, chilling with instant apprehension. “Miss Clia is merely on a visit, quite safe and well, and happy . . . I hope.” But Nicholas only sighed more dolorously, shook his head and went silently from the room, leaving me with so little appetite for tea that after perfunctory sip or two, I rose and wandered out into the fresh air; but I had not walked the length of the terrace when a voice called my name and glancing up, I beheld the Reverend Septimus approaching.

“Come in,” said I, grasping his outstretched hand, “come in and have tea with a lonely man.”

“Lonely?” he repeated, as we turned to enter the house. “Ah, yes, Miss Clia is away, I understand, left for London three weeks ago.”

“A fortnight,” I answered, “only—fourteen days! But sit down, tea is just made. You shall have Gregor’s cup, he isn’t in yet.”

"Talking of Clia, they say, in the village, she fled away because she was afraid of this . . . well, this ghost," said he, sinking wearily into the deep arm-chair I proffered, "though, knowing Clia so well, I cannot credit this."

"And rightly!" said I, pouring the tea. "She is on a visit to Aunt Rosamond or Saphronia."

"Have you seen anything of this alleged ghost, Oliver, this apparition that sings?"

"I heard something the other night, vicar, but——"

"So did I!" he exclaimed, nearly upsetting his tea. "Yes, I heard and, my dear Oliver, I'll frankly confess it made my flesh creep . . . knowing what I do!"

"Pray go on," said I, when he had sipped thirstily.

"Well, it was no longer since than last night, Oliver, I had been visiting the sick and was returning home late, very late, indeed it was past midnight, for I heard the church clock strike, and by the way, I have to thank you for the new dial and chime! Yes, and while I think of it, the cow you insisted upon selling me at such ridiculous figure, is happily delivered of a calf—splendid creature! Pray where was I——?"

"Striking twelve o'clock . . ."

"Oh yes, yes! Scarcely had these midnight reverberations died away than . . . I heard it—Oliver, upon my soul, the ghost began wailing at me from the black darkness of your woods! And then—I nearly fell out of my saddle, for, as sure as God's above, it seemed the dead was alive again, and that . . . sweet Rose Thorn, unhappy child, was singing her Song of the Willow."

"Yes," said I, "it was indeed very dreadful!"

"Ah, then you heard it too?"

"Yes, and was quite horrified."

"It was ghastly, Oliver! Unbelievably terrible,—her own voice, her very tone——"

"No," said I, "a cruel mockery of it. Some evil wretch is going about aping the dead."

"But . . . who? Who—and why?"

"God alone knows. But who can it possibly be except some poor madman or half-drunken rogue intent on terrifying my poor folk?"

“Who indeed?” murmured the Reverend Septimus, munching bread and butter hungrily. “And they are terrified, Oliver, your village folk, especially Mrs. Croft, which surprises me, for she is a fine woman, strong, capable, not the kind to be easily frightened,—and yet her terror is abject, in fact quite pitiful! And her poor lad so very ill.”

“Is he, Septimus? I hoped he was better.”

“He will never be better, Oliver, except when in God’s heaven. Doctor Purdy tells me his condition is so critical—one shock and he is—gone! So precarious he can never live the year out. Which, all things considered, may be a blessing in disguise, a merciful dispensation. Poor Martin’s condition, mental and physical, has declined rapidly since Rose Thorn died,—indeed he may be said to be dying of a broken heart.”

“Did he love her so truly, Septimus?”

“Most truly, and very pitifully considering his sad infirmities and her vivid health and rich beauty. He loved her from his heart and soul, Oliver, humbly, reverently,—and she, poor child, used to mock and laugh at him, as did all the children, how cruel Nature can be. So Rose used to mock him—’til her dark hour came, with desertion, shame, so many to condemn, so very few to pity and none to love her or shelter her . . . only poor Martin and his brave mother. Martin was her champion then, God bless him, his mother took her in. God love her for it! Martin defended her with sharp tongue ay and all his puny strength . . . actually felled one lewd-spoken hobbledehoy with his crutch! Yes, Martin was her adoring, faithful knight-at-arms, to . . . the end! And now, according to Purdy, his own end draws near.”

“Does his mother know this,—does Martin?”

“Oh yes. I was there when Purdy broke it to them, and—Oliver, if ever I saw heavenly joy on human face I saw it then on poor, doomed Martin’s . . . and his cry of gladness rings in my ears yet: ‘Mother, I’m going—to her, and in death, God, being kind and just, will make me strong and beautiful and . . . she will love me at last’. And, Oliver, I have prayed earnestly and shall again, that God so may indeed. . . . And Martin’s poor, thin face so bright, so radiant with gladness, I . . . I couldn’t bear to look . . . besides I was crying. . . . As I could now, Oliver,—but, instead, will take another cup of tea and more of this delicious bread and butter, for it happened I had no time for dinner.”

“Then, my dear fellow,” said I, ringing the bell, “you need something more sustaining than bread and butter——”

“No no, Oliver, I enjoy bread and butter, in fact it is quite a . . . a habit of mine——”

“Nicholas,” said I, as he opened the door, “what do you suggest for a hungry man and to be eaten at once?”

And instantly Nicholas answered:

“The liver-wing of a chicken, sir, ham and a salad duly dressed.”

“Right—as usual!” said I. “Let it appear forthwith.”

Now at this moment came Finch, our goggle-eyed young second footman and rather more so than usual, carrying a large silver tray in the exact middle of which lay a small, crumpled, disreputable-looking missive, heavily and clumsily sealed and directed in sprawling, ungainly characters to:

MISS CLIA EVERARD
(A. Venner)
By hand. Strickly privat.

“Who brought this?” I demanded, rising so suddenly that Finch recoiled.

“A . . . a lad, sir . . . from the village . . . Toby Day, sir——”

“Is he still here?”

“No, sir, gone . . . run off, sir.”

“Then bring him back—no, never mind.”

“Nothing wrong, I hope?” enquired the Reverend Septimus as the door closed upon Finch’s hurrying form.

“No,” I answered, crossing to the window, “right, I hope.” Then breaking the seal of this letter, I opened it and read these words scrawled in the same heavy, untutored hand:

“Clia im waiting same place for my money arf past 3 so bring my money an dont keep me waiting an im armed so no more trix you no me Jo.”

The clock showed ten minutes past four, none the less I caught up my hat from the settle where I had tossed it, and bidding the Reverend Septimus to make himself at home, hurried out and away, hoping to meet or find this

rascal Mumping Joe and force the truth from him if such might be of such ruffian.

On I strode at furious pace but had not gone very far when I met a procession of two,—first came a burly, respectably-dressed person who limped painfully and, behind him, Jasper Shrig who urged him forward with frequent and most ungentle prods of his knotted stick.

“S’Oliver,” quoth he, sternly official, “report arrest of de-linkwent for trespass and assault. Ar,—here’s a two-legged wermin as I think you should ought to remember! Show the gen’leman your blackmailing chevvy, you hunk o’ Wiciousness!” But already, and despite his almost genteel appearance, I had recognized this man.

“Follow me, Mumping Joe,” said I.

“Oh, I will, sir, and with pleasure, I will indeed,” he answered, with such fawning servility I yearned to kick him, “yes, Sir Oliver, I’ll be that honoured, and ’umbly crave your kind pertection agin this brutalious man as tried to murder of me in the wood.”

“You’d be a werry ugly corpse or ca-daver if I had,” retorted Jasper, “but since you’re ugly but still alive, shut your trap till told the rewerse.”

I brought them into the gun-room and here, window closed and door locked against chance intrusion, I sat down and faced this man who might tell me so much or—nothing at all.

“Sit down, Mumping Joe,” said I, “sit down, man. I want you to answer two or three questions.”

“Ay, sir,” said he, in odious wheedling tone. “I guessed as mebbe you would,” he answered, with leering smile, “and me so ready and willing to oblige ye with all me ’eart, sir——”

“He don’t want your black ’eart!” growled Jasper. “Nothing so wicious, ’tis the truth S’Oliver’s arter, so tell it and—mind your eye!”

“Well, I’m a-going to ain’t I,—all truth and nothin’ but, s’welp me! Sir Oliver, here’s me a pore though truthful cove fair yearnin’ for to please and oblige ye and tell you all as you can ax me, all as I wants fur sich sarvice is as you’ll mind I’m a poor man and you so very rich to pay for it as a rich and noble gen’leman should ought. But sir, afore you axes the questions as I be going to answer so prompt and true, I axes yore pertection, you being a magistrate and justice o’ the peace and me a law-abiding person as has come up in the world agin adverse circumstances, sir, yore pertection from this

here f'rocious cove as has tried to kill me a'ready,—look at me pore 'ead, sir, a lump 'ere like a hegg! Look at the knees o' me noo breeches, stained wi' grass when he downs me! And me coat—all ripped, sir, tore and ruined by this yere blood——”

“Siddown and stow your chaffer!” said Jasper, with tone and gesture so threatening that Mumping Joe snarled, beast-like, but obeyed. Then, becoming his most official self, Jasper turned to me and explained:

“First, sir, this!” said he, laying a short-barrelled pistol before me. “A lethal vepping, sir, primed and loaded, being ewidence of assault vith intent. The fax being these: at prezackly fifteen minutes p.m. I am in your voods busied on con-sarn o' The Law, when I hears two woices tother side of a bush. As here follers. Says woice Number Vun: ‘You’ll ax for the young lady, Miss Clia, the young lady mind. You know her, my lad?’ Answers Woice Number Two: ‘Oh yes, sir,’ says Number Vun: ‘Then, me lad, you’ll say to she, Joe’s a-vaiting you’ll say, just them vords, Joe’s a-vaiting. But if so be you can’t see her, then you leaves this here writing for her, you comes back to me here and I pays you a tanner, sixpence. You understand?’ ‘Yes, sir,’ says the lad and cuts off. Then, round the bush I steps and con-fronts this here perishing lump o’ windictiveness. ‘Are you called Mumping Joe?’ I axes him. ‘Ar,’ says he, ‘vot of it?’ he says. ‘You’ll step along ’o me,’ says I. ‘Vere to?’ says he. ‘The house,’ says I. ‘Not me!’ says he, blustering werry fierce, vereat I shows him my stick, vereupon he attempts, vith firearm now in ewidence afore you, assault upon the body, so I acts prompt and I acts pretty rough——”

“Rough?” wailed Joe, “you tries to murder me!”

“Not me!” answered Jasper. “If so you’d now be werry dead,—and so much the better. No, I ain’t give it you like you deserve—yet! Now attend to the bench and—talk.”

“This afternoon,” said I, “you came here to see Miss Clia, as you did once before?”

“Ay, sir, may the kind Lord love and bless ’er,—I did come ’ere for to see ’er—my li’l maid, the purty li’l pet as I was fayther and mother to, years ago and kep’, from ’arm and starvation, the innercent lamb as was took or stole from me; I did come for to see ’er, ah and proud to say so! I follered me loving ’eart——”

“You also wrote her this letter.”

“Ay, sir, I did, I don’t deny. Yes indeed I did an’ no wonder. Ye see ’tis like this, sir——”

“In this letter you bid her bring money, your money, pray what do you mean? How can her money be yours? What right have you to a penny of hers?”

“Ah, sir, that’s it,” he answered becoming more wheedling and servile and therefore the more loathsome. “‘Wot right?’ says you. ‘Why no right’, says I, ‘no right at all, no not a bit—except the best and greatest right in this here world,—the right o’ ’uman natur’, the right of a grateful ’eart, the right o’ love, sir, love and gratitood for benefits received,—all them years as I slaved for ’er, my li’l orphan Clia, and me a pore, friendless cove,—fed ’er, sharing me pore crusts, cherished ’er——’ ”

“And beat her!” said I, disgust getting the better of discretion.

“Oh, sir!” he exclaimed, widening his sly eyes on me. “Oh, sir, yore pore soul! Don’t you never open or read yore Bible, them blessed Gospels? ‘Spare the rod,’ says ’Oly Writ, ‘and you spiles the li’l child,’ it says. Find a Bible, if you ’ave one, and read them most sacred, ’oly commands for yourself, sir. Oh do now—do!”

“Joe,” said I, staring into his bright, cunning eyes, “I liked you better as a grimy ruffian. Now, tell me all you know of the lady, Anticlea Venner, tell me the truth and you shall suffer less.”

“Suffer? Oo—me?” he demanded, clenching his great fists yet cowering beneath my look. “Wot d’ye mean? I ain’t never done no manner of ’arm. You can’t make me suffer,—I’ll ’ave the law on you, I will——”

“No, I shall have it on you, Joe, for blackmail.”

“Ah!” sighed Jasper. “And only a few years ago he’d ha’ kicked his nasty life out on the gallers! Now ’tis only transportation, but it can be made pretty bad, and, scrag me, but I’ll see as it is! Now go on talking.”

“Tell me,” I repeated, “all you know about Anticlea Venner. What do you know about her?”

“Everything, o’ course, sir. All as took place nineteen-odd year ago! Same as I knows all about Jasper Boswell the flash, fiddling Romany. That’s wot makes my noos so precious and vallyble. I can tell o’ Boswell afore and after the killin’ ah,—and ’ow ’e run off wi’ her from school—over the wall one night and in a fine chaise and pair!”

“The poor child!” I murmured.

"Ah, poor indeed, sir, seduced, deserted,—and 'twere me again as took 'er in when so deserted by Jasper. There was she and 'er maid a fine red-'eaded mort as 'ad follered 'er pore, young mistress, the babby wasn't born then. I took 'em both, sheltered 'em, fed 'em—could any man do more? I axes. No, they couldn't, I says! So I kept 'em both till she goes away to 'ave 'er babby, and Sara along of her,—ay, Sara,—I used for to call her Sal arterwards. Flamin' Sal! You ain't forgot 'er, sir—eh, sir? No, I sees you ain't. Ah, a fine mort she was—until she got took that religious she left me in sorrer and I do 'ope as she's found the Lord. You'll mind poor Sal, sir?"

"I remember. Pray go on."

"So I will, sir, faithful and true, but, Oh sir, I be that parched and dry ____?"

"Remain so, but go on! What happened after the child was born?"

"Well then listen, me noble gentleman," said he, venturing to sneer ferociously, "listen to the truth and never no lies, chokin' wi' thirst—I'll tell ye! Flamin' Sal, Miss Venner's maid, comes back with 'er babby an' tells me as her mistus is dead an' buried. Then she shows me the hinfant and, like the kind-'earted cove I am, I agrees to father an' mother it." Here he sat back in his chair, gazing up at the ceiling with an evil twinkle in his eyes.

"Well?" I demanded, at last.

"Yes, sir, it was!" he answered, gaze still uplifted. "It was very well done to take in a pore motherless child and me so pore. I 'ope as you'll set it to me credit, sir."

"Then continue your story!" said I, and serenely enough though my every nerve quivered with impatience and a dreadful expectancy.

"Well . . . no, sir," he answered slowly. "I ain't sure as I can, for, d'ye see, my tale must end here . . . I think!" And now instead of the ceiling, he glanced at me, slyly and askance, with expression of such evil cunning I could have struck him. And thus, for a long moment we surveyed each other, then Jasper smote the table so suddenly it startled me.

"S'Oliver," he exclaimed, "I knowed it and sees it now,—this here babby's a man child arter all, like I said——"

"Then you're wrong," cried Mumping Joe in fierce triumph, "dead wrong, dam' wrong for 'twas a female! We called her Clia after her mother and Clia she is and——" he checked suddenly, and realizing how Jasper had

trapped him into this admission before he might gain money by delaying its disclosure, he scowled and was dumb.

“Easy to say,” Jasper scoffed, “but precious hard to make me believe, so prove it—if ye can!”

Scowling ferociously upon his questioner, Joe turned to me and contrived to smile.

“Well sir,” said he, “I said as I’d tell you all and so I ’ave, sir, and so I will, the ’ole truth and nothin’ but——”

“I think you’d better!” said I.

“Don’t threaten me, sir. Oh, don’t threaten a pore person as is doin’ his best for ye.”

“Then, do it!” said I.

“Sir, I am and will, so—listen!” he answered and between shut teeth. “This infant being a gell child like I say and a orphan, ’er pore mother ’aving gone mad and pizened of ’erself, I ’dopted of ’er and we called ’er Clia, arter her unfor’trate mother. So we gets along pretty well and the years roll until one day you comes along, sir, and it ends by you ’dopting of ’er likewise. So now, Sir Oliver, speaking truth and no lies, I takes pleasure to tell you as yore ’dopted daughter, this fine lady, is reely and truly the child of a mad woman as killed ’erself and a—gipsy murderer’s brat!” He spat the word at me with look so evil that clenching passionate fists, I rose; but Mumping Joe was huddled back in his chair, his wide gaze now on Jasper Shrig’s knotted stick held close before his startled eyes, and Jasper Shrig was speaking:

“Nobs, Wiciousness,” said he, “lots o’ nobs, and werry hard as you’ll remember! So mind your manners and speak dooly respectful.”

“Well, but,” Joe expostulated, savagely as he dared, “oo ain’t respectful? Besides I ain’t a-speakin’ to you, not me! Blind me if I ever see sich a f’rocious, bloodsome cove as you and——”

“Co-rect!” nodded Jasper. “Bloodsome as ever vas, only more so, that’s me—bloodsome! Now, ven S’Oliver speaks, you answer prompt and werry ’umble and a cap’tal H.A.I.C.H.”

But I did not speak, for I felt I had learned too much; Clia’s horror and dread was justified, it seemed, and myself in such state of mind I could but sink back in my chair, staring dumbly on the pistol before me. Then I became aware of Jasper’s stern, official tones:

“How d’ye know as this child you called Clia to be the child of Anticlea Wenner?”

“Because Flaming Sal she tells me so.”

“Then you can’t swear this o’ your own knowledge?”

“No. I can’t, but——”

“And vere is she now, this Flaming Sal?”

“I dunno. Somewheers in London, if she ain’t dead.”

“And where,” demanded Jasper, with careful distinctness as he took forth that large pocketbook he called his ‘little reader’, “where was Anticlea Wenner’s baby born?”

“I ain’t sure.”

“I knows you ain’t, but make a guess.”

“Well,” answered Joe, sullenly, “I ’ears Sal mention some place called Brighthelmston where she’d been at school.”

“And where, likewise when, did you last see or hear anything of Sara, called Flaming Sal?”

“Five year, about, in London, down by the river.”

“D’ye know a inn or tavern called the ‘Jolly Young Waterman’?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Where was it you saw or heard o’ Sara, called Sal?”

“Lime’us ’ole.”

“Gimme her full name, and say it slow.”

“Sara Noakes.”

“Her age to-day—about?” enquired Jasper, writing busily.

“ ’Ow should I know?”

“Make a guess, and do it sharp!”

“Well, she’d be about twenty-odd when I knowed ’er fust.”

“And thirty-five—to-day—about!” quoth Jasper, writing it down. “Dark or fair?”

“Gor luv us! ’Ow much more and me so crool parched wi’ thirst?”

“Fair or dark—you slippery, black vermin?”

“Well now blind me if——”

“I’ll have a go if you don’t answer! Were she fair or was she dark?”

“Red as carrots.”

“Now,” said Jasper, putting away his book, “tell us how you become possessed o’ them two minney-toors.”

“I never in all me life ’ad no sich things, lemme die if I did! Never on me oath, never——”

“Picters, then. Two on ’em, painted into oval frames,—how did you get ’em?”

“Oh—them? Sal give ’em to me.”

“And where did she get ’em?”

“Why from Miss Anticlea Venner, Clia’s pore, dead mother as goes mad and kills ’erself, like I says afore. So I comes along ’ere and brings ’em to Miss Clia, gives ’em to ’er for sake of her pore——”

“Ar!” nodded Jasper. “And for ninety-odd pounds, and, atop o’ that, you demands another five thousand more to keep your ugly trap shut,—and that’s blackmail! So, if Sir Oliver do now charge ye vith the fact, I’ll dooly arrest ye—vith J.O.Y. j’y! How of it, sir, wot’s your vord?”

“No!” I answered. “Let him go.”

“Well now, thankee kindly, sir, I’m sure,” said Joe, making to rise and yet remaining seated to lean across the table and address me in his most wheedling manner, though keeping a wary eye on Jasper. “But, Sir Oliver, afore I takes me leave o’ your noble self and goes forth of yore stately mansion,—remembering all this precious hinformation as I’ve give you so free, so truthful and willing from the bottom o’ me very ’eart, sir, I makes bold to expect summat therefore. Say—fifty pound, sir,—say twenty-five——”

“Say Hookey Walker!” quoth Jasper, edging nearer.

“Why then,” said Joe, edging away, “if ’tis no more than five pound, sir, for me expenses.”

I shook my head; Jasper spoke:

“Nary a penny nor yet farden, so take your wicious carkiss out o’ here and be dooly grateful as S’Oliver so allows.”

“Why then I’ll take me own property!” said Joe, defiantly and reached for the pistol, but Jasper’s stick whizzed and Joe snatched back his smitten fingers, snarling like a wounded beast.

“Nobs!” Jasper nodded. “Lots o’ nobs! Comes a bit sharpish, don’t they? Now trip ’ence or there’ll be more.”

And so, with strangled curse and glare of baffled ferocity, Mumping Joe lurched to his feet and shambled away with Jasper close on his heels, while I sat, chin on breast, in state of mind bordering on despair; I heard the impact of a blow, a hoarse cry, hasty footsteps, but I never stirred, until back came Jasper, beaming and cheery.

“Pal,” said he, “I’m glad to inform you as there ain’t a cloud in the sky and to-night a full moon or werry near. And my trap is set, my hook is baited, my tvig is limed! Also Windictiveness has dooly took himself off.”

“You hastened his departure, Jasper, I think.”

“Jest a rap on the tibby, sir, as a reminder.”

“What do you think of his story?”

“That he told it truthful as the likes of him could. But as ewidence o’ Miss C.’s parentage,—it ain’t, being, as I says, all hearsay, which ain’t ewidence and never can be.”

“But it all hangs together, Jasper, and is so very plausible that . . . she will believe it . . . does believe it . . . and it is this so troubles me.”

“Sir and pal, ’tis only fax as counts and strike me sky-blue, ah—lemme die, but fax you shall have or I’ll throw up the sponge, dance on my dicer, break my staff and fade into re-tirement.”

“Oh Jasper,” said I, rather impulsively, and rising to lay my hands on his powerful shoulders, “if only you can disprove this dreadful parentage she will come back again . . . her old, joyous self . . . it will truly be new life to her. Should you fail or . . . prove all this true . . . why then, Jasper . . . only God can help her.”

“And you,” he answered softly, “you, pal, believe in God, I know, for I ain’t forgot all you says to me, years ago, looking down on two dead men in Bill Bartrum’s boat. . . . In my rum life I’ve never had much chance to think such things out proper, but the older I gets, the more sarten sure I feels as mebbe you’re right. For there must be summat or . . . Some One . . . up above there, or round about us, or somewhere or other . . . some power great and good vith a sense o’ right and justice as goes further, reaches deeper and

rises higher than even The Law and our English Justice—vich I’ve ever regarded as the truest, fairest, cleanest thing in life. Yet even this makes mistakes,—testimony can be perjured and judges can misdirect juries. But this here Power, as I begins to be aware of, this Power o’ Good, or, as you might say, God, being of us, in us, above and all around us, sees all, knows all, and judges according, I reckon. . . . Though how I come to be a-saying all this here, dogbite me if I know! P’raps because, having seen you at family prayers, you and your friends and servants all on your knees, so reverent, makes a man like me as sees so much o’ windictiveness, think on better things. So, pal, ven next you go to prayer, if you can con-trive to slip in summat on Miss C.’s account and, p’raps a vord for me, it might help us a bit and things generally, ah—and lift that dog’s look from your own eyes.”

“Dog’s look?” I enquired.

“Ay, pal, the eyes of a dog in pain. . . . Eh, is that six o’clock striking a’ready? Love my limbs,—and Dooty a-shouting and bellerin’——” So saying, he caught up hat and stick and strode away with uncommon haste, leaving behind him a despondent yet grateful man.

CHAPTER XXXV

TELLS HOW THE GHOST WAS LAID

“OH, man,” quoth Gregor M’Gregor, leaning back from the dinner-table that he might better glimpse the candlelight through the ruby wine in his glass, “man Oliver, it touches me vera sensibly that ye should have ordered up a bottle o’ this quite priceless port in honour o’ my nateevity. God bless thee, Noll! But at the same time, looking now at you and me alone, marooned here at this big table in this vast chamber and all the empty rooms o’ this great house stretching away beyond us and above us,—and all wi’ no light tread o’ womanly foot, no rustle o’ feminine draperies, no pretty whisper o’ dainty petticoats,—frills, furbelows, flounces and laces,—to break for us this awesome silence.—Oh man, I’m saying we sit here, cheek by jowl, in the abomination o’ desolation! Agreed?”

“Yes!” I answered, sighing.

“Ay!” said he, sighing also. “Wherefore, Noll, I’m minded tae plague ye wi’ a question or so,—and ye’ll be pleased tae no forget ’tis still ma birthday!”

“Then I’ll drink health to you, Greg, and long life, my dear fellow, for the third—or is it the fourth time?”

“Nae matter for that. My first question is,—when is she coming back home to wake this great house to glad life again,—when?”

“Greg, I don’t know.”

“Eh, ye don’t?”

“No. She will decide.”

“Why did you send her away, Oliver?”

“Because of fear, Gregor. Yes, a . . . horrible dread!”

“God save us, man! What d’ye mean?”

“Suicide.”

Gregor dropped his glass to shiver on the floor, and the spreading wine made a dreadfully suggestive stain.

“Like . . . blood, Greg!” said I, pointing.

He recoiled so violently that his chair creaked.

“Oliver,” said he, in gasping whisper, “you never mean she . . . thought . . . of . . . that?”

“She spoke of it! And more than once! Oh Gregor, this belief that she is a murderer’s child is driving her frantic, out of her sweet sanity and reason! My terror is that she may . . . go mad!”

It was out at last and the dread horror of the mere, spoken words so wrought on me that I bowed my face between clutching hands to hide my agony. Then Gregor was beside me, the dear fellow, and like a father, had clasped protecting arms about me.

“Oh man, be strong!” he murmured. “Strong yet in courage and faith. I guessed something was amiss by the look in your eyes, the way you read the lesson the night in family prayers, your special mention of our dear maid, ay and Shrig . . . ay, but I never guessed at anything sae terrible! Ah, but no—no! God would never let such frightful thing be——”

“He has in the past . . . to others, Greg, and why . . . why should we be immune?”

“Oh, Oliver, what can we do?”

“Nothing, Greg, nothing! This is the bitterness of it—we are helpless! I have set enquiries afoot, Jasper Shrig and his officers, but I am helpless and can but wait. And it is this goes almost beyond my endurance . . . and yet I must . . . and will!” So saying, I sat up and uncovered my face, to Gregor’s relief, for at my bidding, he drew his chair nearer and sat down.

“Now,” said I, “listen to what I learned to-day!” And forthwith I told him Mumping Joe’s story, though in far less detail than I have written it in this narration. “And, Gregor, what do you think of this?” I ended.

For a long moment he sat staring down at that hideously suggestive wine-stain on the floor and I saw his eyes slowly widen, his bony hands clench as if he looked upon some dreadful thing.

“Madness! Suicide!” he whispered harshly. “Ha, merciful God forbid it! . . . Our child of joy and innocence . . . our laughing maid . . . our lovely keen-witted woman. . . . Oh, dear Lord, look down and save. . . .”

“Amen!” said I, fervently.

After this we were silent some while, two solitary, fearful men dreaming of past happiness and dreading the future, the remorseless march of oncoming events we might nowise resist or evade. Thus sat we and nothing to hear except the slow beat of the clock nearby that sounded—now like a weary heart that soon must stop, and then like the slow, plodding footsteps of approaching Destiny bringing for us—what?

On the stroke of nine came Nicholas, high-priest of the table, with his two acolytes, and for the second time, to remove the cloth; so we arose, Gregor and I, and went wandering out into the stately hall with its trophies of ancient weapons and seven grim effigies flashing back dim light from polished armour, to the long gallery where so many pictured faces stared down in the half-light and all vaguely threatening, or so it seemed to me; and so at last to the library where candles glowed and still in their vase my flowers, that no one must touch, quite faded now and withered all.

“Gregory,” said I, sinking wearily into the chair at my desk, “should she never come back, I shall close this damned place for good and end my days at Deepdene.”

At this he merely shook his head and groaned; but presently to rouse me, as I think, from this despondency, he changed his note and began to work up a quarrel with me and on the one topic he knew would rouse me.

“And who’s to blame for a’ this? Why yourself, Oliver! Ay, ever syne she’s been o’ marriageable age ye’ve played the stately sire, the grave parent and done it vera badly. . . . ‘My child,’ you’ve said wi’ your tongue, but ‘my beloved,’ with your looks, ay ‘my love, my own, my darling’ wi’ your looks, they’ve shouted it, ah, they have so! And if I could hear and see and know this, how much better could she, loving ye as she does——”

“You know my reasons,” said I, wearily.

“Hoot—awa’ wi’ sic’ fule reasons! Love is love and Nature is Nature! So, when she comes back as she surely will, for I feel it in ma vera banes, then mebbe you’ll be wise enough to be natural, to forget your age or pride or—what not and stoop to marry the sweet soul——”

“Stoop?” I repeated, angrily.

“Ay—stoop! If she kneels t’ ye and sues wi’ sufficient humeelity. And, what’s more, I—save us a’!” he exclaimed, starting up from his chair. “What’s yon?” For, upon the curtained window was sudden, soft, insistent tapping.

We reached this window together, we swung back the heavy curtains to see a pale, ghostly face looking in at us. . . .

“Good Heavens, Jasper!” I exclaimed, opening the lattice, “what is it now?”

“Ghost hunting, sir. And I never see a finer night for same,—look at that theer horb!” and he pointed up at the radiant moon with his stick.

“Eh,—ghost hunting?” Gregor repeated. “But——”

“Ar!” nodded Jasper, “for sir, my trap is set, my hook is baited and my twig is dooly limed.”

“Mr. Shrig, I’ll be asking what you mean precisely?”

“Sir, I am a-going, with luck, to ketch this here ghost or phanitem, this speckitater or, as you might say, apparation as sings. And I need a vitness, or say a couple, so—how of it, sirs? Do ye go?”

“Indeed I will!” said Gregor, fiercely. “Ay, with infinite pleasure.”

“And you, S’Oliver?”

“Yes!” said I, and, not troubling for a hat, clambered out through the window, followed, more slowly, by Gregor.

“Then,” quoth Jasper, glancing from us up to the high-riding moon and back again, “I must first ax or demand as you’ll look, hark, say nothing, and be silent as the dead,—vord of honour! Is this agreed, sirs both?”

“Certainly!” answered Gregor.

“Yes!” said I, again.

“Werry good!” nodded Jasper, taking out his large watch and consulting it by the light of this great, placid moon. “Lacks nineteen minutes to twelve, sirs, midnight—the ghost hour. Let’s hope as my partick’lar ghost flits to-night, for I’ve took some trouble on account o’ same. Nineteen minutes,—oceans o’ time, so us’ll take it easy.”

“But,” said Gregor, “suppose you catch this . . . ghost or whatever it is—will it resist, ought we to be armed?”

“No, sir, oh no! I’m hoping, and a capital Haitch, as this partick’lar apparation shan’t need us to so much as lay finger on same, but’ll pass ’ence of its werry own accord, ay and flit safely . . . aloft, pore ghost!” Now at this, I peered closer at the speaker and saw his face unwontedly grave, also he took off his hat and gazed up at the serene heavens again; and in this

moment I began vaguely to understand, and, though the night was warm, I shivered.

“Now, if you’ m ready, sirs, toddle along o’ Jarsper, and remember—the vord is silence!”

We crossed lawn, gardens, and a corner of the park, all so familiar yet strangely transfigured beneath the moon; then, as I had expected, Jasper led us towards the woods. And now he went slower, and yet slower as if for some reason, unwilling to enter these leafy shadows flecked and fretted by pallid shafts of ghostly light. Thus, at pace that was little more than a saunter, and very silently, we stepped into this checkered shade.

On we went at this same laggard pace and always in a deadly silence, until before us I saw again that tall tree I had come to know so well whose wide-flung branches had once sheltered the body of a dead man . . . as, God help me,—they were doing now! For there in broad beam of moonlight and hideously plain to see, sprawled the body of George Ash.

I gasped and recoiled so violently as to collide with Gregor and I heard the hiss and whistle of his breath close by my ear. And now as if to cap this horror,—sudden and high and dreadfully near, a wailing voice began to sing:

“Oh, willow, willow, willow!

And oh the green willow my garland must be . . .”

This dreadful singing drew nearer accompanied now by a strange, muffled thump.

“Now!” whispered Jasper Shrig; and as he spoke, the leaves some distance before us parted suddenly and towards us came—no village oaf or drunken roisterer, but poor Martin Croft, his shrunken form swinging slowly between his crutches, singing high and clear in that voice called falsetto,—and indeed it was as if the dead girl sang again in her woeful despair.

All at once the song choked to silence for, crouched between his crutches, Martin was gazing dumbly at that dreadful shape outstretched before him in the moonlight; then he began to speak:

“George! George . . . oh, George, it was you killed her . . . broke her heart,—you, George, you! And God has answered my prayers! Oh—murderer, for my Rose . . . her broken heart—this! This! This!” He was propped against the tree whirling heavy crutch in both hands, smiting . . . smiting,—wild, murderous blows beneath which that sprawling body

seemed to writhe and leap. And as he struck, he sang, gasping, "Willow . . . willow . . . willow" with every dreadful blow.

"Jasper, stop him—for God's sake——!"

A powerful arm was restraining me, a hoarse whisper in my ear.

"Let be . . . let be! 'Tis God must stop him for his mother's sake . . . dewotion. . . Ha, look—God has!"

The terrible, uplifted crutch fell but the hands that had wielded it with such frantic strength, remained aloft, they clasped each other as if in prayer and between these eager, up-reaching arms, a pale, thin face streaked with sweat and tears; and then a broken, pleading voice:

"Lord . . . reach down . . . lift me out o' this crooked body . . . make me strong . . . beautiful! Oh Merciful lift me . . . to her——"

The arms sank, the face vanished and huddled in the shadow beneath the moonbeam was a shapeless blot silent and very still.

"And I hope," said Jasper, releasing me, "I do 'ope as the pore lad's dead! Come,—come along o' Jarsper, and the vord is—forget!"

"Man, ye never mean tae leave him so?"

"Ay, I do."

"But he's—in a fit!"

"Good! Better a fit than fetters and the gallers! Come, sir!"

"Not I!" quoth Gregor, indignantly, and going forward he knelt in that place of shadow, a dim shape bending above a motionless blur.

"Shrig, he's—dead!"

"Good again! He's safe from me and—the Law!"

"Ay," said Gregor, rising, "poor Martin is risen to the Higher Tribunal and the Great Judge, knowing all, is all merciful. . . . And what now, Shrig?"

"Leave him to be found. Go on ahead o' me, sirs, whiles I strip my dummy o' Mr. A's garments. And if, sirs, if 'twas shock o' said dummy as killed Martin Croft, I never did better night's vork."

CHAPTER XXXVI

SARA NOAKES, WHERE BORN?

ALL this morning I have remained indoors adding to this narrative which becomes more like a diary or private journal rather than the novel I hoped and meant it to be. However, I find in its writing such distraction from my present anxieties that I was still thus closely engaged when in strode Gregor to say tea was waiting.

“Tea?” I repeated, “so early?”

“Man,” he answered, shaking his head at me, “ ’tis past four o’clock!”

“Surprising!” said I.

“Ay, ’tis that!” he snorted. “And vera disconcairting.”

“Ah, what is it now?” I enquired in quick apprehension.

“Yourself, Oliver! Losh man, you’ve eaten nothing a’ this day!”

“Yes, Gregor, I believe I had an egg for breakfast——”

“An egg!” he exclaimed. “Damme, what’s an egg to man o’ your inches? Come and eat,—unless you’ve given up the habit.”

“I’ll take a cup of tea here, Greg.”

“Ye’ll drink a pint o’ strong ale and devour the ham and ox tongue I’ve cut for ye.”

“Sounds repulsive, Gregor——”

“But’ll taste better. So, come and eat.”

“But I’ve no least hunger——”

“ ’Twill come, mebbe. But eat ye must, Noll, or famish. So come, I say!”

Sighing, I arose and presently contrived to eat and drink, though with small appetite, while Gregor gulped tea and champed bread and butter with an enviable gusto.

“I hear there has been great concern in the village, Gregor—the discovery of poor Martin’s body.”

“Ay, there has that.”

“How did Mrs. Croft take the news?”

“Like the fine, strong soul she is, Noll, wi’ few worrds and fewer tears, but her eyes were woefu’, ay! The story is that the puir, daft laddie stole out to look for Rose Thorn and summon her frae the grave by singing her song in her voice, ay,—and what wi’ the effort, going so far, the night air, exposure and a’ that, his puir, weary heart just stoppit,—like a clock run down.”

“Did you hear or see anything of Jasper Shrig, to-day?”

“Neither, Oliver. Eh, but ’tis rare downy bird, yon, a cool customer and uncommonly sharp file.”

“Yes, Gregor.”

“And I’m fain to learn just how he came at the truth, Noll.”

“He may explain if you ask,—perhaps. But since Robin’s innocence is proved, thank God, I’m greatly minded to ride back with Shrig to London and break the good news personally instead of by letter.”

“An unco’ judeecious and vera wise suggestion, Oliver! Ay, and here’s a better,—do not come back here without our bonny lass and she your bride, ay—your ain sweet wife. Eh—but ye’re no’ eating.”

“I’ve had enough, Greg.”

“Ay, enough for a wee bairn!”

“Yet, sufficient,” said I, rising.

“Why then, Oliver, for your health’s sake don’t go and sit cramped over your pen as you have been, go out, man, out into the air, take a walk and find yoursel’ an appetite for supper.”

So forth went I into the early evening sunshine and the air so heavy with fragrance from the rose garden, which has ever been Clia’s care and joy, that I turned in the opposite direction, for this perfume reminded me all too vividly of past happiness. So I rambled aimlessly too busied with my thoughts for heed of whither I went, for beside me flitted the grim spectre that has haunted me so persistently of late, this spectral demon of Dread to whisper me these two fearful words:

‘Madness . . . Suicide!’

It was as I approached the coppice, and quite unwittingly, that I heard a squeal of pain and, hurrying towards this doleful sound, beheld Mumping Joe cowering against a tree beneath the imminent threat of a certain familiar, knotted stick.

“Knobs!” quoth Jasper Shrig, with the utmost ferocity of look and tone. “Lots o’ knobs and a crack on your wicious carkiss vith all on ’em if ye don’t give tongue, so—answer me, dogs-breakfast!”

“Well, wot d’ye want for to know . . . sir?”

“Sara Noakes, vere born.”

“Me not knowin’ I can’t say, so it ain’t no good——”

Jasper Shrig’s stick whizzed and smote, Mumping Joe squealed again and cowered lower.

“Bloodsome,—that’s me!” nodded Jasper. “You tells me so and so I am, only—more so, ye ugly lump o’ blackmailing windictiveness. So I axes you again werry calm and patient,—Sara Noakes, vere born? And you answers prompt or howls by reason o’ knobs. So, Sara Noakes, vere born?”

“London,” snarled Joe between yellow teeth.

“London and—vereabouts?”

“’Ow should I know?”

“How shouldn’t ye? So think werry ’ard and remember as these here knobs is harder.”

“Well, I am a-thinkin’ and . . . I . . . don’t . . . know—yes, yes, I do! Stop a-murderin’ of me and I’ll tell ye all as I knows. . . . Blind me, if I ain’t all of a bruise! Keep that murdersome stick away——”

“Tell then.”

“Islington.”

“Vereabouts in Islington?”

“Sal’s fayther kept a saddler’s shop in Islington ’igh Street. And that’s all and everything as I knows, on me dying oath——”

“It’s a pity,” sighed Jasper, shaking his head, “ar,—’tis a almighty stoopendious pity as you ain’t!”

“Ain’t wot?”

“Dying. You’ll make sich a much better corpse, or, as you might say, cadaver than a man, ye slimy wermin! I dunno as I shouldn’t ought to corpse ye here, nice and quiet, for the good of all con-sarned——”

“No . . . no! Ye wouldn’t . . . Gawd a’mighty—don’t!” And indeed so murderous was Jasper’s look that instinctively I broke cover.

“Jasper . . . Shrig!” said I, advancing.

“Oh sir,” cried Mumping Joe, “now for the good, kind Lord’s sake, don’t . . . don’t see a pore, defenceless cove killed . . . ’e’s got a barker in ’is pocket besides ’is bruteous stick! Sir, for the love o’ Gawd lemme go afore I’m beat to death or shot and murdered.”

Jasper turned to glance at me and I saw his nearest eyelid flicker.

“Sir,” quoth he, “sometimes killing’s no murder,—so how about it? Trespassing, S’Oliver, vith intent to blackmail! Do you charge him, sir?”

“No,” I answered. “But Joe, mark this, if you are ever found here again or anywhere on my land you shall be imprisoned and transported.”

“Ar!” nodded Jasper. “And mind this, if I run across ye again, remember the vord is—bloodsome! Now—crawl!”

And so, uttering no word, but with scowl of baffled hatred, Mumping Joe shambled away.

“A vorm,” quoth Jasper, thoughtfully, “a vorm has its uses as I’ve heered but never hardly believed till now, pal, for yonder goes a vormy wriggler as is a-going to be so useful to you and me ’twill astonish you.”

“Meaning as regards Sara Noakes?”

“That i-dentical, sir! Say ten days, say a veek and I’ll have my daddle on said Sara, if alive, and know the truth—vun way or tother.”

“One way or the other!” I repeated, drearily. “But—which?”

CHAPTER XXXVII

A SMALLISH, GRIM WINDOW

SUPPER was over and Jasper Shrig, waited upon hand and foot by Nicholas himself (no less!), had brewed that mysterious decoction he called One and Only; he had tasted it (also with the assistance of Nicholas) for together they sipped,—then Jasper nodded at Nicholas who bowed profoundly, as to a master, and departed pensive.

“Eh but man I’m asking ye,” said Gregor, repeating his former question as Jasper now performed dexterously with the punch-ladle, “I say I’m asking how ye came at the truth o’ this ugly business o’ George Ash?”

“Taste that, sir!” quoth Jasper, handing him a brimming glass, “taste, sir, and pro-nounce!”

So Gregor sipped and nodded in his turn, he also smiled.

“Excellent!” he nodded. “Now o’ this killing——”

“Ah!” sighed Jasper, inhaling the steaming, liquid fragrance in his own glass with expression akin to rapture, “A clove too many, nutmeg grated a scrape too heavy, or leming peel too light and—perfection ain’t! But in the present case I’m bold to af-firm as perfection—is! Eh, S’Oliver, pal?”

“It is!” I answered.

“Well but,” Gregor persisted doggedly, “regarding this killing, Shrig, I’m congratulating you on your astute handling of this unlovely business and vera curious to know how ye came on the truth of it.”

“Sir,” answered Jasper, shaking his head, “it didn’t take werry much astootness con-sidering as S’Oliver good as told me all about it,—ah, and by oom the fatal deed was done, or, as you might say, commit.”

“Indeed?” I enquired, sitting up. “Then, Jasper, pray tell me how I did, for I’ve no recollection of it.”

“At the ‘Vateman’, sir,” he chuckled. “‘Jarsper’, says you, werry impressive to me, ‘no vip ever could ha’ done it,’ says you. And then you tells me o’ George Ash the murderree, Mr. Robin’s fight wi’ same, Rose Thorn, Martin Croft, and mentions—crutches. You also gives me a letter writ by his

mother as told me wollums con-sarnin her dewotion and—fear! Now dewotion is nat’ral to a mother,—fear ain’t. So down I comes to Abbeymead along o’ this here letter. I dooly takes a peep at corpse o’ deceased, sees as no vip could ha’ done the deed so werry complete, and, minding the vord ‘crutches’, I looks about and finds ’em. I examines fatal spot, be’olds a tree growed special for a cripple to lean against to swing crutch, spies the broken twigs and bruised bark o’ said tree, made by up-swing o’ same crutch and de-dooes therefrom the following conclusions, namely: On day and spot of murder, Mr. Robin meets G. Ash, thrashes and leaves same pretty nigh onconscious. Along comes Death in form o’ young Martin who sees his chance agin this big, strong man as has caused the death of his love, Rose T., he leans him against tree aforesaid, up vith crutch and G. Ash is killed by the first blow. But Martin, being mad by love and grief, ain’t content vith killing, no—he strikes and strikes and pants and sings for j’y. So there’s the case as I sees it, werry nice and plain, all as I needs is proof. So I schemes to get that proof and, as you know, I gets it, sirs, and—there y’are!”

It was, as I think, just about now that Finch appeared and handed me a letter come by the post: seeing this was directed in Robin’s handwriting I broke the seal and while Gregor and Jasper talked together, I unfolded this letter and read:

“Dearest Gov and Respected Sir, thanks for yr. breief though welcome epistle. You ask me to write particularly of Clee and I will forthwith and fully as possible. You say she has come here for a needed change, but my dear old Sir the change is in herself, she is changed already beyond beleef and quite dreadfully altered from the Clee I knew, the glad, high-mettled Clee of dear old Abbeymead, all warm and womanly tenderness with just the right amount of pride spiced with a dash of Old Nick to make her the adorable feminine creeture she was—was, I say, for alas no more is she! For Oh Governor what a stewpendous change I find in her, —so terribly meek and frightfully humble, enough to break a man’s heart,—so sad and silent, so wildly eager to be busy at anything or working at any time if it be only dusting the furniture here, or out visiting sick with Aunt Rosamond or her helpers or feeding ragged children or washing grimy babies and so on. And when not busy, staring out at the river with great awful eyes that give a man the creeps quite damnably. Indeed sir she is so very strange, so unearthly odd at times she frightens me. As you may remember there is a smallish, grim window on the stairs here that

opens above the river from which you can look right down into the water immediately below, and here when not busy she will stand for hours staring at the river,—not at the ships or boats and things but down at the water, watching it, listening to it and once as I watched her I saw her lips moving as if she talked to it and without a sound. And this is what is troubling me most, Governor, of late she's taken to watching it at night. For coming in late the other night 2 a.m. I caught her at it and all she said was she couldn't sleep and that Father Thames was calling her as he used to do when she was a child. Well, this so worried me I told Aunt Rosamond so now they sleep together. Also I am shocked because this strange, meek, voiceless creature is not the Clee I knew and adored. And I am amazed and mystified to know the reason and what it is all about for she will tell me nothing of what dreadful thing has changed her so terribly and completely indeed she rarely speaks to any one except Aunt Rosamond. Sir, I do not wish to cause you any needless anxiety God knows I do but tell you the plain truth of it and plead your help for this poor stranger who looks at me with Clee's eyes goes in Clee's body yet is no more Clee than I am—who is now and ever shall be dear old Noll and Respected Sir

“Your very faithful, loving

“ROBIN (and I hope) GOODFELLOW.

“Postscriptum. Black John is true blue and a trump with a left that is a bender and a right that is a leveller would fell an ox and has felled lately many worse animals. For we are pounding brutallaty out of these ruffians and respectful decency in and doing it with such uncommon pleasure I have writ dear old Jessamy Todd to come and join us in this very good and nobel work. R.D.”

Having read this letter I rose instantly and tugged the bell-rope.

“Eh?” exclaimed Gregor, starting in his chair, “What is it, Oliver? Oh man ye look like death!”

“Read this!” said I, handing him the letter. “Read it out to Jasper while I make ready.”

“For what, man?”

“London. I ride at once!” So saying, I strode from the room and, meeting Nicholas, bade him order Midnight saddled at once and sped up the wide stairs to prepare for the road and pack a valise with such few necessities as I

must take. Booted and spurred, downstairs I hastened to see Gregor in the act of helping Jasper Shrig into his heavy driving coat.

“Ay, sir,” he nodded, in answer to my look, “the vord being ‘pals’ I’m going along o’ you.”

“I shall ride all night, Jasper.”

“No, pal! By your leave us’ll drive all night. All them miles and for sich journey my Mustard is surer than any blood hoss ever foaled. Besides, for a lone traveller there’s dangers aplenty, ar—footpads and tobymen to oom my chiv, or, as you might say phiz, is pretty well beknown and therefore a caution. So I’ve took the liberty to countermand your hoss and order my tilbury instead for, sir, don’t forget them werry ’igh veels.”

But what I was thinking of was this line from Robin’s letter:

. . . ‘There is a smallish, grim sort of window on the stair’.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

OF THE TERROR THAT RODE UNSEEN

THE WESTERN sky was all ablaze as Gregor stood to wish us safe and speedy travel with happiness at the end.

Then in the fierce glare of an angry sunset, or so I thought it, we began this long night journey that I am never likely to forget since it was for me a waking nightmare and I a haunted man because close though we sat in our lofty vehicle, Jasper and I, the Demon Dread rode between us all those weary miles, finding a voice to plague me in the ceaseless grind and clatter of our wheels, the creak and jingle of our going—tormenting me with ghastly visions of what might be waiting us at our journey's end. . . . Also I must needs dwell upon that line of Robin's letter: 'There is a smallish, grim sort of window on the stair'. And too well now I remembered it, this same window through which, in the Bad Old Days, a poor, misused woman had leapt to forgetfulness and the serenity of death in the dark waters below.

And why not yet another woman . . . my own child woman Clia . . . to be swept into those black deeps and borne away on the broad bosom of Old Father Thames that 'called to her in the night'? Other men had known such bitter loss, such horror of grief before now and why . . . why should Oliver Dale be exempt?

With these and other like dreadful thoughts in my mind, racked and harassed with frightful anxiety, I could have shouted for Jasper to lash his steadily plodding animal to faster gait, but, mindful of the long, weary miles before us, clenched my teeth, folded my arms and was dumb, staring at the white road before us that, as the light failed and shadows crept, faded to a vague, glimmering blur a-wind between looming hedgerows and spectral trees.

So evening deepened to night, its velvety darkness made only the more manifest by the feeble rays of our two lanterns, their dim light showing a few yards of white road with trees and hedges spinning towards us from the darkness before, to whirl by and vanish in the dusty glooms behind.

A very still night this, for there was no wind; a very silent night, for traffic there seemed none. Up hill and down through this vast and silent

darkness and no sound except the never-ending grind of our wheels, jingle and creak of harness and rhythmic beat of powerful hoofs.

We clattered through shadowy hamlets, we rumbled through dim-lit, echoing streets of country towns, we sped across open heaths, we plunged through the leafy shadow of hanging woods.

Creak and jingle, clatter and grind,—and the Demon of Dread busy whispering at my ear.

Slowly, above the loom of motionless tree-tops, rose the pale moon in stately majesty to touch all things with strange, unearthly beauty and show me the stout, muffled form of Jasper Shrig perched above me on the driving seat; thus up came this great, placid moon with splendour of such radiance as quenched the stars, dimmed our flickering lights and showed now some leafy tunnel of over-arching trees or wide prospect of rolling country, hill and valley, coppice and open moor or the flash of shallow stream athwart the way, some aged ford whose waters broke and leapt in a myriad flaming sparkles to our speeding wheels.

Creak and jingle, clatter and grind with the winding, never-ending road and not a living soul to see, nothing but spacious emptiness, mile after mile.

And with every weary mile the Demon Dread showed me these ghastly visions of the horrors that might be, and with every yard, in the sounds of our passage, found dreadful voice that shouted to me now of despair . . . madness . . . death. . . .

Mile after mile through a nightmare world lit by a pallid moon. Creak and jingle, clatter and grind. . . . Despair! Madness! Death! And myself now in such agony of mind as deafened, blinded me to all else until I became aware that Jasper Shrig was leaning down to peer into my face.

“Pal, did you cry out?”

“No, Jasper, I . . . don’t think so——”

“Now Lord love you,” said he, peering closer, “don’t take it so worry ’ard! Never grieve and break your ’eart, pal, unless Windictive Carcumstance so demands and com-pels.”

“Oh, Jasper,” said I, speaking my dread, “that smallish, grim window! The river . . . Old Father Thames calling her from the dark! . . . Despair . . . madness . . . death——”

“No no, pal! Don’t think it. Let’s talk o’ summat else . . . lemme tell you
_____”

And here, like the good friend and kindly man he is, talk he did and volubly though of what he spoke I have no faintest recollection, for the Demon Dread, shrieking him down, deafened me again:

Creak and jingle, clatter and grind. . . . A beloved form in the scowling arch of a smallish, grim window . . . a desolate cry . . . a plunge into the dark waters below . . . Old Father Thames bearing yet another woeful soul away to forgetfulness and sleep. . . .

Creak and clatter, jingle and grind. . . .

I remember a sinking moon, a vague darkness, twinkling stars that paled and vanished in a chilling grey mist. . . .

Creak and jingle, clatter and grind . . . and Father Thames rolling onward to the sea and bearing deep down now within his bosom all that was my earthly joy.

“My Mustard has done famous, pal,—lookee yonder!”

Sunlight . . . houses that swept down and away—and yet away to a brightness, a glory that was Old Father Thames himself.

Broad thoroughfares, a bridge, wide streets growing narrower and ever meaner . . . to a lane . . . an alley . . . an echoing stable-yard and a sudden blessed quiet, for the creak and clatter, the jingle and grind were silent at last. And staring up at me, a top-boot in one great fist, a brush in the other, a herculean form in the early sunshine, this man called Black John. . . .

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE JOY OF FRIENDSHIP

I WAS sprawling in an arm-chair half choked with the brandy Jasper had contrived to get into me, and opening my eyes beheld Black John bending over me and grasping a bottle now instead of boot.

“That’s better, sir!” he nodded. “Drownd me if you didn’t come down atop o’ me with a run like you’d been shot.”

“Very ridiculous of me!” said I, sitting up and trying not to shiver.

“But werry nat’ral, sir,” quoth Jasper, “considering as your pore, clammed innards must be empty as so many drums! A cove can’t play fast and loose wi’ Natur’ in regard to wittles—eh, vot now, pal?” he enquired, for I had risen though with very unwonted effort.

“Mustard!” said I. “That wonder horse of yours needs and deserves your care more than I. A truly noble creature, Jasper. Come, I’ll help you tend him. John, go you and rouse Mr. Robin, bid him dress and come down to me at once.” So saying, and despite Jasper’s urgent protests out I went.

“Pal,” said he, as we wrought together to the comfort of this truly amazing animal, “ ’tis things and doings like this here as draws a man to ye werry a-mazing. For here’s you perishing sick and faint wi’ hunger and anxiety can think o’ my Mustard here, bless his hoofs and hide! Here’s you again breaking your ’eart on account o’ Miss C., and not so much as a question con-sarning same.”

“Because all is well with her, Jasper—so far. John must have spoken had it been otherwise, besides, now I am here, I feel and know it. As for being hungry I don’t think I am and anyhow a man’s horse should come first and especially such as this Mustard of yours——”

Hasty feet sounded in the yard behind us, and, even as I turned, two mighty arms were about me, arms that clasped and hugged me close; then came Robin’s eager voice and in it the true ring of glad welcome:

“Noll,—oh Noll, dear old sir and respected Gov, never was I happier to see you! God bless you, sir, you come precisely when most needed. I wrote asking you to come, my letter must have passed you on the road.”

“No, my Robin, I received it last night and here I am.”

“Last night, sir, but——”

“Jasper Shrig drives a four-legged wonder, Robin.”

“And precious big veels, sir!”

“What Shrig—Jasper, old sportsman, give me your fist.”

“And Robin,” said I, “thanks to Jasper your innocence is completely established.”

Now at this, Robin held his vindicator off the better to look at him, then drew him near, removed the famous hat (or dicer) and stooping, very solemnly planted a kiss upon the crown of Jasper’s round, grey head, saying:

“Now Lord bless this clever, old, bullet nob of yours, Jasper! No wonder you were and are such a curse and terror to all rascality. So now, Jasper, dear, old companion, as you would say the vord is a bottle o’ the werry best in your honour, so come along indoors.”

“But, Robin,” said I, “you don’t ask who was the guilty one.”

“No, sir, not I,—what matter? Besides of course, I know who killed Ash. I guessed this from the very first—almost.”

“You . . . guessed it?” I repeated.

“Oh yes, Governor,—naturally. I had only to think and I knew.”

“Then pray who was it?”

“Sir, you must excuse me. Since I’ve been mum so long, mum I’ll be!”

“The guilty one is dead, Robin.”

“Oh . . . why then . . . since it was not myself, it could only have been Martin Croft, the poor, faithful fellow. For you see, Governor, though I’ll confess I admired Rose Thorn, he truly loved her . . . and that day after I’d left George Ash lying pretty done and helpless I met with Martin hobbling through the woods that way and nobody about for miles.”

Now here, and greatly to my surprise, Jasper Shrig turned and grasping my hand shook it very heartily and clasping it still, looked at me and upon his face that is neither round nor square, such smile as I’d never seen there.

“Sir Oliver,” said he gravely and in tone more husky than usual, “I am proud to call you pal, for, sir, you have wrought a stoo-pendious merrycle, by reason o’ yourself and care, pal ‘Young Snod’ is wanished in glory and

left instead—Mr. Robin, a gentleman true and reg’lar out-and-outer and vorthy to be your son. So now Mr. Robin, sir, as I’ve knowed all these years, I’ll be proud ar and honoured to drink along o’ you if ’tis in summat no thicker than vater and no more mellering than—tea!”

“Come then,” laughed Robin, grasping us each by an arm, “come then, Lord love you. And you too, Black John,—we’ll empty a bottle to the joy of Friendship.”

CHAPTER XL

TELLS OF HOPE RENEWED AND WHEREFORE

‘THE JOLLY YOUNG WATERMAN’ was still hushed in sleep as I followed Robin, silently as possible, up to his bedroom beneath the eaves, this small, cosy chamber called ‘Bo’sun’.

“Now,” said I, sinking wearily into the one arm-chair while he perched on the tumbled bed, “now Robin tell me of Clia.” He rubbed his unshaven young chin, ruffled his uncombed, red curls and looked at me very much at a loss.

“Lord, Sir!” he exclaimed. “This is precisely what I was going to ask you. It’s a black mystery to me and rather terrifying, as I told you in my letter.”

“What is your . . . terror, Robin?”

“Well . . . it’s hard to say . . . only you must get her away from here! Take her back with you to dear, old Abbeymead or anywhere. . . . Oh, Governor, take her anywhere away from . . . the damned river.”

“Ah!” said I, stifling my own fear. “Is this your terror?”

“Yes, sir—yes it is! The way she looks and stares at it . . . the ghastly way she has of listening to it when she isn’t watching it, and then steals away . . . generally to that window on the stair and . . . hangs over it . . . ! And I can’t watch over her all day, nor can Aunt Rosamond! Besides, she’s often out for hours, and at night, though she lately sleeps with Aunt, I sometimes wake in a panic and have to go creeping to see if she’s at that cursed window again.”

“Yes,” said I, repressing a shudder, “it is an accursed window, Robin,—a poor creature leapt through it to her death, many years ago——”

“Sir, does she know of this?”

“Probably. Saphronia often spoke of it when we lived here.”

“Then she must know, yes, I’ll swear she does! But, good God, sir,—what’s the meaning of this frightful change? I tell you she’s like a body without a soul, she’s—inhuman! So cold, so placid and indifferent, so

hatefully meek and gentle! Sir, if you do know what it's all about, tell me what has changed her so terribly. Why does she terrify me? What is it about her that . . . yes, revolts me and makes me shiver away from her?"

"Robin," I answered, speaking with an effort, "don't you know? Look me in the eyes,—now tell me—why does she frighten and revolt you? Speak the truth as you always have . . . why?"

"Oh, Governor," he replied, whispering, "dear, old Noll . . . God forgive me if I'm wrong . . . God help and pity you if I'm right . . . she appals me because I . . . I think she . . . is mad, or near it——"

His strong arms were about me, my head was upon his shoulder for, once again, life and strength seemed failing me, my eyes blinked upon a growing darkness and I shivered with a dreadful nausea. . . .

"God, how you must have suffered!" cried Robin. "And curse me for a fool . . ." then I became aware he was bathing my head and face with water that was life to me.

"Not a fool, Robin, no!" said I, contriving to sit upright. "My weakness is possibly because I have eaten little of late. But I'm better now, yes, indeed, quite well again."

"And look like death!" he retorted. "Oh hell and the devil! You must eat at once, sir, you shall . . . eggs and ham . . . if the maids aren't down I'll cook 'em myself——"

"No!" said I. "Sit down, come close and I'll tell you of . . . our Clia. So listen and then help me if you can, you that are my Robin Goodfellow, my boy grown to strong and capable manhood, thank God—help me now!"

So then, perhaps because of my present weakness and his strength, or because my love for him has deepened so very much of late, I told him all, keeping nothing back, no not even Clia's wild words of love for me or mine for her; I told of my grief and anxiety growing hourly to a dread and then a terror that, by reason of his letter, had become so unendurable that here I was, a man very grievous because so utterly helpless.

Now, my tale ended at last, I saw Robin looking at me through glitter of tears that made me yearn toward him all the more. When, after a moment's silence, he spoke it was with a smile despite his manly tears.

"Ah, sir . . . my dear old Noll and Governor, no wonder she loves you,—how could the sweet soul help it, for you are——"

“Dusty!” said I, clapping my two hands on his powerful, young shoulders and rising. “So I’ll wash. And, if you’ll fetch my valise, I’ll shave also.”

“Right, sir!” quoth he, rising. “And then I suggest and insist you take a bite of something and, after that, sleep.” So saying, he opened the door, stepped outside and almost immediately came tip-toeing back again, finger at lip.

“Governor,” he whispered, “she’s there again . . . Clia . . . on the stairs, at the window!”

So I went out upon the landing and leaning across the heavy old balustrade, looked down and beheld her framed in that window against the level beams of the early sun that made a glory all about her.

“Clia!” I said, gently and speaking naturally as possible. Her whole body seemed to stiffen and for a moment she stood rigid and still, then, as I began to descend the stair, she turned and smiled,—that is to say her lips curved though her great, dark eyes held such look of tragedy as made this smile a mockery. Nor did she come to meet me but leaned there in the window recess watching me descend towards her with a curiously detached interest.

“You . . . startled me!” she murmured.

“Have you no greeting for me?” I asked her, reaching out my hands; she gave me limp fingers that lay deadly cold and unresponsive in my clasp, she lifted a pale cheek for my kiss, then stood back to look me up and down beneath faint-wrinkling brows.

“How dusty you are!” she murmured in the same lifeless tone. “And look so—tired. Have you been travelling all night?”

“Yes,” I answered, “I bring good news,—Robin is completely vindicated! Well?” I enquired, for she had turned her head to glance out at the river again.

“Yes,” she answered, abstractedly, “this is very good news. Yes . . .”

“Are you not—glad, my dear?”

“Yes . . . Oh yes.”

“Clia,” said I, leaning beside her at the window, “what do you see—down there?”

She started but kept her wide gaze still fixedly down bent, then sighing deeply, answered:

“Come nearer, Oliver, and I’ll tell you . . . close beside me as you used to do when I was your little Clia and you the only god of my love and worship. . . . It was at this window that you introduced me to ‘Old Father Thames’, told me tales of his glories and taught me to love him. Look at him now, Oliver, our dear old river, just as he was then. Listen now to his dear, familiar voice just the same, too, whispering to me there in the shallows, gurgling out yonder, singing me the same old song I so loved in those far off days. . . . While I listen I am your happy child again, listening to my Father Thames telling me of a golden future . . . and I am waiting for you, Oliver, for you to come home to me, to nurse my doll Liz while I have supper and then to go through my day’s lessons with me and later on hear me say my prayers. . . . Ah but—sometimes my poor Thames weeps and then—oh then I am a woman that dares not dream and has no future . . . and I would weep, too, if I only could—Oh, if I only could! But this is denied me——”

“Clia,” said I, gently. “Oh my dear, forget the river awhile and look at me.”

Slowly, unwillingly, she obeyed, and, gazing into my eyes, threw up her hand as if to ward off what she read there, then frowned and flared at me with something of her natural fire, thank God,—and, reading my thought, made answer as if I had spoken my fear.

“No! Ah—no, of course not! Oh poor, silly man to plague yourself with such horror,—to think such evil of me!”

“What——?” I enquired.

“Suicide! Yes, this is what you have been thinking, that I shall flounce myself into the river, leap to the clasp and comfort of Father Thames——”

“You threatened it——”

“Yes,—yes I did! But only as my last resource . . . and against—you, my Darlingest! Because of the strength of my love and my own weakness! My body crying out for you, my reason and mind afraid and hating the thought of your embrace. . . . Oh Oliver beloved, my yearning is so deep that the mere sight of you, the love in your eyes, your voice—is my agony. So you must leave me, you must go away and soon, beloved, soon.”

“And when I am gone,” said I, hopelessly, “there is always the river. Old Father Thames calling to you in the dreadful stillness of night.”

“Yes,” she sighed, “and I sleep so badly. And every night I pray God to be merciful and lift me up and away from this terror of living. I want the happiness of death.—Ah, no, no—don’t look at me with such eyes, my poor

dear, it shall be in God's own way and time. I will not go as did my heartbroken mother, God bless and pity her! You swore me an oath once, Oliver, and now I swear one to you here before our Almighty God that when I die, which I hope may be soon, it shall be by no act of mine——”

Now what she beheld in my face I cannot say, but suddenly her arms were about me, the arms of a mother, and like a mother she spoke me:

“Oh my dear, you're dropping with fatigue! Go with me at once . . . come, let me help you.”

She bustled me up the stair, she hustled me along the passage, she led me into that bedchamber called ‘Middy’ that breathed the sweetness of herself. She sat me upon her dainty bed, all dusty as I was, and despite my protests, went down upon her knees to pull off my spurred boots; then off came my coat, waistcoat and cravat, and, pushing me down upon the pillows, she smoothed back my tousled hair, smiling down on me with such tender, motherly solicitude as glorified her.

“Such thick, golden curls!” she murmured. “And this poor face so thin and pale, you foolish one to worry so! Ah——” she exclaimed, with sudden pounce, “when did you eat last, you poor, weak man that nearly fainted, when was your last meal, and what?”

“I don't remember——”

“Oh my precious fool!” she exclaimed. “My beloved dolt and idiot,—this is what happens when I leave you! Lie still, poor, swooning wretch, don't dare to move while I go down and frizzle you ham and fry you eggs and brew you coffee and cut you bread and butter,—stir off that bed at your peril!” And away she went. Now scarcely had her light feet gone speeding down the stair (and, joyous thought, in my service)—than round the door came Robin's comely head.

“Come in, my Robin Goodfellow,” said I. No sooner had he done so than instantly he began to execute a hornpipe with extreme nimbleness but hardly a sound.

“Noll,” said he, ceasing suddenly as he had begun, “old respected sir and blessed wizard, you've worked a magic spell, a perfect miracle,—she's herself again! Yes, she is, by all that's marvellous! When she went past my door, which I confess was open, she was . . . singing to herself! And why? demands Robin. ‘Because,’ answered Goodfellow, ‘She is serving the man she loves!’ Governor, if we could hear her now, slapping ham and eggs into pans and things for you, she'd be carolling away like any lark! Also, Noll

and sir, honour compels me to state that I've been—eavesdropping, at first by accident and then—by design. And I'm glad, because I know now what the real thing is like . . . earth and heaven . . . body and soul, for ever and ever! I know now that . . . you were made for and belong to each other, part of each other, you are all life and happiness to each other because you are part of each other . . . only hope I may find myself such joy . . . some day . . . the other half of me, the One Woman. Meantime, sir, your happiness is mine. . . . To be any longer jealous of . . . such love as yours would only shame me and . . . well, you . . . you know what I mean . . . ?”

“Yes,” I answered, reaching out my hands, “yes and God love you for it, Robin! It seems He has made of you the man I dreamed.”

And now I told him of all that had happened in Abbeymead since his flight, of Jasper Shrig's shrewdness and uncanonical methods, of Viscount Ragworth's staunch friendship, and of the somewhat overpowering devotion of his Uncle Roland; and Robin plying me with eager questions until on the stair was rattle of crockery (blessed homely sound) and so to us entered Clia bearing a great tray so very well loaded that Robin uttered a stifled cheer and leapt to aid her.

“Yes,” said she, as he relieved her of this burden, “I prepared breakfast for the three of us. Hold that tray steady, Robin, while I clear the table of my fal-lals,—there!”

Her cheeks were flushed, though this may have been due to the kitchen fire, but her eyes were radiant, her feet quick and light, her every gesture instinct with a new vitality.

And now, myself seated between them on the bed, we breakfasted together, and they vieing with each other to anticipate my every least want. And never in my life have I enjoyed a meal with deeper content, though indeed I scarcely heeded what I ate, so relieved and profoundly grateful was I for this so wondrous change in Clia.

And thus, looking upon these beloved children of my adoption, I was, for the time being, a very happy man.

“Now,” said Clia, when this ever-to-be-remembered meal was ended, “of course you have told our Robin all about everything, Oliver, my birth——”

“Of course!” I answered.

“Which, I don't believe for a moment and never shall!” said Robin; whereat she swooped and kissed him on the ear.

“So now,” said she, looking upon us gravely, “you know, Robin dear, why I could never have married you and shall never, never be Oliver’s wife.”

“Yes, but,” said Robin, “you needn’t——”

“Hush!” said she, closing his lips with her hand. “There would always be the fear . . . and heartbreak. So because of my own sorrow I am going to devote my life to the sorrows of other people, all these that Saphronia used to call ‘her poor ones’, these wretched innocents who suffer so greatly only because of ignorance and want. I have told Aunt Rosamond this and have begun my probation in her hospital and out. Oh, I’m going to be a very busy person, yes more so than ever. But Robin, my dear, if you see me now and then watching and listing to my dear Old Father Thames, don’t prowl and peep because you think I’m going to jump in, silly boy! And you, Oliver, can go back to my loved Abbeymead remembering you have my sacred promise. Now, do you understand, are you quite reassured, my dears, both of you?”

“Absolutely, Clee!” answered Robin.

“Yes!” said I. “But now, Clia, listen to me and think back. . . . When you were very young I asked you very often to try your best to remember all you could of your lost mother, and you would knit your small brows and look up at me with your great, troubled eyes and your answer was always the same. Can you remember what it was?”

Now at this, she instantly wrinkled her white brow, looking at me with troubled eyes, even as she had long ago, and finally shook her head, saying:

“No, Oliver! Ah, how should I when to think back was terror, such terror that at last you told me to forget everything but . . . your love and the happy present. And so I have—or had——”

“However,” said I and somewhat hastily because of the growing trouble in her eyes, “however, I can remember your answer very well, the exact words because I wrote them down at the time and yet, strangely enough, had forgotten them until now,—they were these: ‘She was very kind and soft and sang to you and used to call you Darlingest.’ Now, do you remember? Can you, Clia?”

“Yes . . . almost, yes I think I do . . . and yet so vaguely.”

“Then,” said I, leaning towards her, “if you were old enough to have the least recollection of your mother, you cannot possibly be child of the mother

who died so very young and while her baby was still an infant so lately born. Don't you see this Clia, don't you see?"

"Yes, by the Lord, yes!" exclaimed Robin.

Clia rose and stood looking down on me with the dawn of a glory on her face, her lifted hands clasped and wrung each other and when she spoke it was in broken, whispering voice:

"Oh Oliver if . . . if this is only true! Oh, my dear God be merciful and make it true . . . let me be myself again . . . lift me up from despair, back . . . back to life again and fullness of joy——"

"So He has!" cried Robin and, starting up, he caught her in powerful arms, bore her across the room and set her down before the looking-glass. "See for yourself, girl!" quoth he. "You are our Clee again! Your eyes so bright, your head a-cock, the impish dimple back by your lips and no more dam' milk and watery, meekly frightful mildness. You're Clee again, Noll's Clee! God bless you both, so come back to him and tell him you are!" Saying which, he kissed the top of her bright head, patted it, snatched her up, seated her upon the bed, crossed to the door and was gone, shutting us in together.

And now though my arms yearned for her, though I shivered because of her nearness, for this reason I lay still and, longing to speak my love, was dumb; until at last, sighing deep, she spoke:

"Ah but I . . . I have no true recollection! This vague memory may have been . . . only a child's natural yearning, no more."

"However," said I, "let us believe it true until we . . . prove it so."

"Oliver, you know all this would mean?"

"Yes, I . . . dare to think I do."

"I should be your wife, Oliver, your dear arms, my haven. . . . And you love me so mightily you are trembling for me! Yet your love is so selfless, so nobly reverent that, though I am the merest human woman, it glorifies me and makes my passion a holiness. . . . Do you remember how as a child I begged you to wait till I was old enough to marry you? How jealous I was of Deborah and could be still! Oh, my loved man, if the child's dream should come true——"

"It must, Clia! It shall!"

“I pray God so! But, ah my dear, I must be sure and certain beyond all doubt that I am clean for you body and soul! And with this prayer in my heart I am going to kiss you now, on my knees, for the beloved man you always were and are, and the adored husband you may be.” She sank beside the bed and, thus kneeling, clasped me in the sweet passion of her arms, drawing me to her kiss.

“There—now,” she whispered, “my poor, tired man, close these weary eyes and let me put you to sleep.”

“No!” said I. “ ’Twould be waste of precious time.”

“Yes!” she murmured. “It will be strength and new life. Come now—close these dear eyes.”

So I did, and striving to keep awake to the caress of her gentle fingers in my hair, I sighed with an ineffable content and—was asleep before I knew it.

CHAPTER XLI

WHICH HAS BRIEF REFERENCE TO SHEAVES

WHOEVER has perused this narrative of mine so far as this the Forty-first Chapter have by their patient and kindly interest become as it were my friends, companions who have journeyed with me a little distance on this changing thoroughfare of life, enduring with me, for a brief space, its ups and downs, light and shadow, smooth going and rough, and who in thus sharing my vexations and troubles have forgotten their own for a little while, or so is my fervent hope. If this be so indeed, then truly I have not written in vain, and this novel, despite its many imperfections and shortcomings, has achieved its purpose.

This life of ours, like the infinite universe about us, is and always has been for me a wonder, a joy and profound mystery. For whence is Life, and whence cometh that unknown power the soul of man, so potent for evil or for good,—a spark of God's verity out from the infinite that may blaze like the sun to light Humanity up out of the dark, or to burn a while like destroying flame, or dim to the futility of a glow-worm's tiny beam?

And of all the gifts that life has to offer I dare to think the best and most enduring is Friendship,—not for one or two only but for mankind in general, a kindliness and faith in the goodness of all men that I do believe shall someday win all men to abiding kindliness and brotherhood and the realization that they are indeed children all of the Great Creator and Father of all, living flames of the Godhead never to be quenched.

Thus I who write these words can feel for you who read them a friendship that makes nothing of Time or Distance, or the fact that we shall never behold or speak with one another. Being knit therefore by this invisible bond, I will confess to you, good friends, that as this book draws nearer its end, my stumbling pen halts more and more, so that for many days and nights of late I have not written a line or single word. And this because, as must be very evident by now, I am at best a reticent person who when greatly stirred, be it great happiness or profound sorrow, becomes taciturn to dumbness or very nearly, and in these latter days I have known much of both these emotions.

Therefore, should these last chapters (that I would have the best in this book) prove the worst, being awkward of phrase, unconvincing, or mere bald statements, I pray you remember what manner of man is the writer and judge him kindly as you may and bear with him patiently yet awhile.

So then I will again to my narration, doing my best and in all sincerity as ever.

I awoke to find the day well advanced and, looking at my watch, was surprised to see it showed the hour of four. So up I rose and, having bathed and shaved, found my coat, waistcoat and cravat neatly folded and pinned upon them a note in Clia's handwriting, this:

“Oliver, my own dear, because as I told you I must be sure and certain what creature I am before giving myself to you—all that I am, to be yours forever, and because your beloved nearness plagues my womanhood, I want you to go away and keep from my yearning sight until either I come to you, able and fit to be your wife—or go my solitary way strengthened to bear loneliness by the knowledge of your love for me and mine for you, a love which shall live in me through life and beyond death to that greater life you have taught me to believe in and hope for, and where at last we may know the blessed fulfilment of our love because it must be of God. So, until I know the truth of what I truly am,—now, my dear, because I so love you and am such very human woman, I beseech you let this be—Good-bye.”

Now because I knew this must indeed be Good-bye, for a time at least, I remained some great while with this letter open before me, studying each hastily written word, each comma and stop; then, as I suppose many other folk have done in times of stress and trouble, I prayed God's help and mercy on us both, dumbly though fervently and with many repetitions, being never an eloquent man.

At last I folded this, to me, most precious letter and finding writing materials to hand, I wrote an answer telling her, the best I might, how inexpressibly dear she was to me and of the love I had treasured dumbly all these years never hoping to give it utterance. I told her also how at this moment Jasper Shrig and his agents were doing all possible to uncover the mystery of her parentage but that come what might and however she or fate should decide, she would remain for me the one and only woman. What else I wrote was for her eyes only and all too imperfectly expressed, since I ever feel more than I can put into words.

Having sealed this my first love letter, I fixed it securely in the frame of the looking-glass and went downstairs to greet and take leave of my Aunt Rosamond, since I intended to set out for Abbeymead at once.

“Well, nephew Oliver,” said she, with such look in her gentle, lovely eyes as seemed to bless me, “well, my dear, you should be a proud and very happy man.”

“I, Aunt Rosamond? Happy?” I questioned in no little surprise and somewhat bitterly.

“Yes, Oliver—you!” she nodded. “For if ever any man made a success of life—you are he.”

“Success?” I repeated, now utterly at a loss. “Pray how?”

“To have won the passionate love of such strong, pure soul as your Clia, and the perfect devotion, the deep respect of such man as your fiery, clean-hearted Robin. Is not this an achievement, my dear?”

“Yes, Aunt!” said I, very fervently. “For this I am truly grateful, God knows,—it will be an abiding joy and . . . comfort.”

“But, Oliver, here is what makes such achievement so . . . bold and splendid, that you dared take these two miserable children to your care heedless of their possibly inherited evils! To lift an impish boy from the foulness of the gutter, to snatch a wretched, ill-used child from degradation—and transform them into such splendid man and woman,—this was nobly venturesome, Oliver, ah yes indeed this is your crowning success and glory! For it is you alone have made them all they are to-day, by your patient care, your example, the power of your own mute goodness,—yes, it is all your doing.”

“Not altogether, Aunt, they themselves——”

“Have lived beneath your influence, Oliver, have learned to esteem all the best of life—honour and truth and most of all—to love you. They are your jewels, your sheaves, this is your time of harvest, my dear. So now instead of looking on me with such woeful eyes, be glad and very thankful.”

“I am,” I answered. “I am indeed, more truly glad, more deeply grateful than I can say. For Robin, God bless him,—is become the man I hoped, and . . . Clia . . . she has told you of this obsession, this haunting fear of hers—I mean about her birth, has she, Aunt?”

“Why of course, my dear. We often talk of it.”

“Aunt Rosamond, what is your opinion of it all?”

“That it is merely an obsession as you say, an unhealthy attitude of mind,—I tell her so, frequently. Oh dear me yes, we have the most tremendous arguments—especially in bed. I tell her it is all ridiculous nonsense, then she will sit up or turn and look at me like virgin martyr in torment and set her chin at me with all a martyr’s heroic resolution! And indeed, Oliver, believing as she does, there is something quite sublime in her nonsense.”

“Suppose, Aunt, her nonsense is truth, and she is indeed the child of suicide and murder? How then?”

“Still nonsense, my dear! Such evils are not inherent. Murder cannot be inherited like bodily disease, and a predisposition towards evil may be eradicated by environment,—must be, or we should all of us be still savages and there could be no possible hope for humanity. And besides, I don’t believe there is one drop of gipsy blood in your Clia. Though she is of such determined nature and strong will, her woman’s heart is your ally, love is strongest of all and, being woman, her heart will decide in the end,—and I, my dear, patient man, I shall dance at your wedding and—perhaps much sooner than you can hope!”

Here, words as usual failing me, I kissed Aunt Rosamond my gratitude instead until, laughing, she held me off to straighten her pretty laced cap and prettier hair.

And so, mightily heartened and comforted, I presently took my leave of this most dear Lady of Comfort. Entering the taproom, this spacious though comfortable chamber, its white and black-beamed walls still bearing Saphronia’s framed rules anent swearing, drunkenness and the like, I beheld Tom and George preparing for the nightly custom.

“Old friends,” said I, as we greeted each other, “I’m glad to know you have taken Black John under your wings . . . forgotten past animosities.”

Now at this, Tom rubbed his square chin and looked at George who coughed, gave a tug at each trim whisker and looked at Tom.

“Why y’see, Sir——” George began.

“ ’Tis like this here, sir,” quoth Tom. “I meanter-say ’tis tother way about. I says, says I, ’tis John, or rayther, Mr. Robin as has took us all under his wing. And, sir, Mr. Robin do ’ave such a way wi’ him as ain’t and can’t be mistook nor yet gain-said, says I,—eh George?”

“Ar, that he has, sir, a way as sweeps a man away and along o’ him his way. And, what’s more, sir, Black John is cleared o’ the charge us held agin him, a clean sheet has John——”

“As a whistle!” nodded Tom. “Ship’s papers, sir, as proves he were at sea when our good messmate was sent aloft so sudden and on-expected. So what I says is—let bygones be so, says I, and what I says now my messmate George do ekker right heartily,—eh George?”

“Ar!” nodded George. “Hearty it is.”

“And where is Mr. Robin at present?” I enquired.

“Sparring in Salamander, sir, along o’ John. Ay, shaping up for to tackle another and reg’lar tough customer this here very night in the old stabling longside the wharf yonder as Mr. Robin has been and hired and means to buy when means allows.”

So to Salamander I went and, opening the door, beheld Robin in the act of spinning a coin to the rafters.

“Tails!” cried Black John, as this coin fell to bounce, roll and settle on the floor.

“Tails it is,—confound you!” exclaimed Robin who, now stooping for the coin, caught sight of me and instantly became somewhat sheepish.

“Pitch and toss?” I enquired.

“Well yes, Governor, in a way.”

“Then come home with me and I’ll give you something better to do in every way.”

“To . . . to Abbeymead, sir?”

“Of course.”

“Then, sir, of course I’ll go—if you insist.”

“I don’t!” said I. “Oh no.”

“Then—if you wish, sir. When do we start?”

“At once.”

“What—now, sir—to-night?” said he, in the utmost dismay.

“By the night mail if possible, Robin. If it has gone I’ll charter a post-chaise.”

“Oh Lord!” he exclaimed, sinking dejectedly into the nearest chair.

“Begging your honour’s pardon,” said Black John diffidently, “if, sir, you could delay a couple o’ hours, say, or till to-morrow morning we’d take it mighty kind like, by reason as me and me Cap’n Robin is bound on a bit of a expedition, sir.”

“The fact is, governor,” Robin explained, rising and gently compelling me into the chair he had just vacated, “John and I were tossing up for a . . . well . . . a coalheaver.”

“Indeed?” said I.

“Yes, sir. This particular coalheaver is a brutal ruffian, but a man of his hands, a two-fisted terror, we hear, and therefore must be tackled and tamed forthwith.”

“And, he’s mine, Cap’n, for tails it were!” quoth John.

“He is, and confound you again!” sighed Robin. “You see, Governor, when we hear of such tough customers as this coalheaver, John and I always toss to decide which of us shall have the pleasure.”

“I understand,” said I, endeavouring not to smile.

“Ah, sir,” exclaimed Robin, very earnestly. “I hoped you would—as you always do! And this, sir, emboldens me to tell you that my proper place is here where I came from, here among the city’s scum. There’s work for me here, Governor, the only work I’m really fitted for.”

“Pray explain,” said I.

“Well sir, instead of becoming a somewhat indifferent farmer to plant and grow things in the earth I’d rather stay here, if you’ll allow me, for a time at least, and try to plant a little decency into this human scum, these poor devils who pass their miserable lives between ale house and prison,—and do it in my own way.”

“How so, Robin?”

“First, sir, I’d thrash ’em to win their proper respect, with Old John here to help of course, then feed ’em, comfort ’em, teach them to wash and be clean, outside and in, and to respect themselves and each other till some few of ’em may grow into respectable citizens at last—perhaps! Sir, I tell you this is the work I’m made for, fitted for, work I understand, handling men, and the rougher the better,—to find that spark of goodness that is in the

worst of 'em, I believe, and . . . Lord, sir——” he exclaimed in sudden, very boyish self-consciousness. “Here am I becoming almost eloquent!”

“Yes, Robin, because you have found something to interest you at last. Pray go on.”

“Well, sir, I’ve been seriously considering the . . . formation of a company, a sort of club for these cut-throats and ruffians. I know the very place for it where John and I can get them together and begin by teaching them the Noble Art. Sportsmanship and . . . and so on, to begin with,—a place where they can wash and eat and fight, and later on, maybe, learn to read, with handicrafts and . . . er . . . what not. Sounds a maddish sort of scheme, I suppose—eh, governor?”

“Extremely!” said I, rising.

“Yes,” he sighed despondently, his ardour quite damped, “I was afraid you might think so, everybody would, for it does sound absurd, I know, but _____”

“But,” I repeated, “you shall have whatever money you require for such splendid madness, Robin.”

For a moment he stared at me as if disbelieving his ears, then, with his long arms about me, the ridiculous fellow was trying to dance.

“Ha, John,” he cried, “you heard him,—you heard? Now isn’t he the grandest old sir and sportsman of 'em all? Oh sir,” said he, releasing me to shake my hand, “for such faith . . . Lord, my dear, old Noll and governor, how can I ever thank you . . . ?”

“Don’t!” said I, reaching for my hat. “Instead walk with me so far as the nearest coach office.”

CHAPTER XLII

A FARMER OF THE FANCY—WHO AND WHAT IT IS

IT should be much easier, as I suppose, to write of epic achievements, to describe tremendous happenings, tempestuous emotions or the tragical sufferings (of others) than to set down and make interesting the ordinary events and small incidents of one's own everyday life.

Hitherto I have contrived to find perpetual interest in the commonplace, and a certain joy in most things, but of late this has quite failed me and thus I, like the melancholy Prince, find all things 'flat, stale and unprofitable'.

So, because life has quite lost its savour and become a mere dull monotony of waiting, a very dreariness of nights and days, I will not tell of them, for I have no heart, no least zest now for the writing of this narrative since I know not how it will end or, indeed, if it will ever be concluded.

Here then, instead of troubling you who read with my own haphazard thoughts or mournful fulminations, I will copy out two letters I received some days ago, the first of these being from Jasper Shrig,—this:

To Sir Oliver Dale at Abbeymead.

Honoured Sir and old Pal,

eyesters has shells no 2 alike, some opens sweet and gentle to a tap, others needs hammers and chisells like this here Case of Sara Noakes as ain't, having been married or wed 5 odd years ago and consequently changed her monniker or name, though I am on to the track of a fact as promises at last, of which you pal and respected sir shall be dooly informed anon by

Your respt. servt. to command
and pal

JASPER SHRIG.

P.S. My Gimblet sends best respex having traced Venner, Ant. Miss, from Brighthelmston (15 year ago) to village called East Bourn not 100 mile from Abbeymead. Expect, sir and honoured pal, word from said Gimblet soon. J.S.

Here follow extracts from Robin's letter, an effort notable for its length and brightened, here and there, by his original methods of spelling which I set down faithfully:

Sep. 20, 183-.

Ritten in the Club House, Cherry Orchard Alley, near Lambs Court, Thames-side, London.

My blessed old Noll revered Gov and beloved sir

This cheery old world goes on wheels life is humming and I am up to my listeners in work. For the Clubb is now in being and growing daily. Our estabblishmentt consists of 1 barn 1 stabel knocked into 1 and 3 lofts above and I have still 54 pounds 7 shillings and 4 pence in hand of the very nobel summ you trusted to me blessings on your generous old gold nob. . . .

Here follow three close written lines of personalities, whereafter he continues thus:

You will be gladd to know my old John pollyshed off the Coalman in 4 rounds and masterly stile, reducing ferrosity of said coalheaver to a very propper and respectful submission and cheefly with his Left as I have taught him lately, thanks to you sir and dear old Jessamy. The Coalman was strong and game to the backbone but John is Black John a true man of mite and performed thus— Round 1. John taps the Coalman's claret. Round 2. Coalman jumps in and hammers John in the breadbasket very handsomely but to no effect for John shifts and closes Coalman's right peeper with his left and grasses him with his right, a most perfect ribroasting bender. Round 3. Coalman comes up to scratch eager for more and gets it. John staggers him with a bender, they go to a clinch and Coalman is thrown. The Coalman's friends and backers now became fiercely restive and try to break ring, so I got to them and having dropped 3 or 4 of them they became lambs. Round 4. The Coalman coming to scratch and being a true glutton for punishment, was satisfied, John lifting him off his toddlers with a left uppercut and finishing him with a leveller clean as a whistle and extreme prettily with his right. The event being thus happily concluded we began enrolling members for our clubb, the first being the Coalman himself tho he wasn't aware of it or anything else until dowsed with bukket of water. However, having been thus tamed by John and comforted by me with sponge and vinnega

he was duly elected, name of Bill Wicks, and most of his friends too. After which we all assented to loft number 1 where thanks to yr. generosity dear old sir, a cold supper was heartily disposed of with barrell of ale. I forgot to tell you this all took place in our new clubb premisses. News of the supper spread apace and our membership is already 126 with Old John enrolling more as I write. We have drawn up a sett of rules which I copy here sir for yr. consideration and shall be gratefull for any suggestions.

1. Upon entering clubb every member to strip to waiste and wash in bowls provided or imerse whole person in cask also provided if thought needful.

2. Strong filthy and blassefemous language strickly forbidden. Note. If this rule is broken delinkwent to be tackkled and instantly by John or self.

3. Any member who so fancies may spar or fight a round with John or self with muffles or naked mauleys.

4. Any man who would learn to read and write will be lessoned for 1 hour each night at 8 p.m. horn books provided with pens ink and paper.

5. At 7 every evening a cold meal provided for 25 men with fights in ring, sparring or talks on divers subjects before and after.

6. Each member shall pay two pence per week.

7. Sparring matches or fights for any so desiring will be arranged and prizes offered.

These are all the rules I have been able to think out up to the present, sir, if you can suggest others or better, pray do so. Believe me dear old sir this is a man's work very hard yet full of deepest interest, and old John is becoming a power, being a true faithful comrade and noble fellow, what I don't think of he does and between us we are turning these cut-throats into lambs at least in our clubb. They are a grim lot and tuffish customers but no wonder, for all of them are often nigh starvation, most of them have been in jail. Yet some of them are good fellows at heart they really are and especially 5 of whom I shall probably use here later on. And think sir—perhaps among these miserable outcasts, what with fighting and sparring with them, we may find a real champion imagine it—a champion of all England. And all because you had faith in me and backed me up with so much more of the needful than I should ever have dared to ask for. But then you are my old Noll and have always. . . .

Here he launches forth into more personalities, after which he thus makes an end:

I am now puzzelling my nob about a name for our clubb that for all we know may become famous someday and anyhow must be a power for good.

Names suggested by me

The Hand and Glove.

The True and Blue.

The London Griffins.

The Thames Side.

The Lost and Found.

Thames and Riverside.

Names suggested by John.

The Dodgers.

The Left and Right.

The Mauley Boys.

The Level and Benders.

The Ring of Roses.

Dear Gov and Noll the gennerous sum you gave so readily I am laying out in seed as it were, ploughs and harrows and things for this human harvest. I am become a Fancy farmer, tossing bread on the waters in the confydent hope we may reap such a harvest soon or late shall prove your faith and monney and our efforts have not been in vain.

Your ever graitful true and loving,

ROBIN GOODFELLOW (?)

CHAPTER XLIII

WHICH TELLS OF HARVEST TIME

THESE days it is Mrs. Bennet, our silver-haired, gentle-faced housekeeper herself who dusts and orders my great writing-table where now I write so little but think and dream so much, my gaze often as not, upon that vase where droop a few brown and withered stems, all that is left of the flowers set there in their beauty for me so many weeks ago—or is it years?

These wisps of vanished loveliness no hands must touch lest they crumble and are gone, as indeed they must and will despite all my care, since life is a thing so fleeting, an earthly consciousness so soon to pass away.

Thus there is for me a deep pathos in the fact that the work of a man's hands should persist and endure so much longer than the wondrous brain that conceived and the skilful fingers that wrought it. Yet this of itself, I think, gives a hope that the soul which is so much greater than brain or intellect, shall live on for ever, being part of God's Infinity.

I was pondering this tragic mutability of all things human, my hands idle before me, when in through the open lattice came a shapeless old hat and beneath it Gregor's saturnine visage.

"Oomph—hoomph!" quoth he. "Ye're no' writing, I pairceive."

"Nor any desire for it," I answered gloomily.

"And ye're no' reading."

"Nor that either, Gregor. I've no heart to write or mind to read."

"So," he snorted, thrusting bony chin at me, aggressively, "while all other men worruk you must sit there in your idle strength—and the harvest fair yammering for sickle and scythe! Ay and labour sae scarce forbye 'tis a late harvest, ye'll mind, this year, and everybody labouring hard 'gainst chance o' rain, ay—all but yourself, Oliver, that sit here dreaming your life away to waste over a few dried wisps!" and he gestured, quite fiercely, towards the vase on the table before me.

"They were flowers once, Gregor."

“Ay, but staring at and sighing o’er ’em can never make them bloom again, my puir, lovesick laddie. Be up and doing, ay—a man so strong as yoursel’ can do the worruk o’ three or four, and I need ye out yon, Noll,—the harvest is calling you, Goddess Ceres wooing ye,—and I have your gaiters and ploughing boots here waiting ye,—so come out and get into ’em. Ay, come—oot wi’ ye intae the bonny air and sunshine and do a man’s worruk.” Unwillingly I arose, clambered out through the window and, as unwillingly, donned heavy boots and thick leggings.

“Ye’ll be needing a hat, for the sun’s vera powerful, though I doot ’twill bide the harvesting, but ye want a hat so take mine,—noo awa’ wi’ ye, I’ll get me anither. And ye’ll find a scythe waiting ye in the ten-acre.”

So, forth I went, through flowery gardens and tree-shaded park, into a glad and golden world of harvest whence came the ring of whetted sickle or scythe blade with cheery voices of distant reapers, and breathing an air spicy and sweet with the fragrance of carted hay and ripened fruit.

Reaching the ten-acre, I stripped off coat, waistcoat and cravat, rolled up shirt-sleeves, set an edge to my scythe and fell to work.

And lo,—in very little while, what with this healthy exercise, the blazing sun and cool, sweet wind, the gloom was lifted from my spirit, the languor from my body and I began to take pleasure in this labour.

Rhythmic swing and sweep of the long, keen blade,—backward with purring whisper, forward with close-shearing, murmurous edge, cutting a swathe that, I flatter myself, few can better for closeness or width.

Thus wrought I, pausing only to whet my blade or mop streaming face, until the fiery sun was high above me and Gregor came riding the stout cob he uses at such times.

“Bonny worruk!” quoth he. “Straight and clean! Oh man, ye’re doing fine! Now come awa’ and eat.”

“I’m not hungry, Greg.”

“Ye will be.”

“Then send me here a crusty loaf with cheese and an onion and a pint, a gallon,—a keg of small beer.”

“I’ll bring ’em myself, Noll, and we’ll eat together.”

“And don’t,” said I, as he ambled away, “do . . . not . . . forget the beer!”

It was as I straightened my back to wipe face and neck and re-sharpen my scythe that I saw Roland coming towards me.

“So—there you are?” said he, halting to survey my extremely moist and dishevelled person with the utmost disfavour.

“Myself, your honour!” I answered, touching hat in rustic fashion.

“And sweating!” he murmured, fanning himself languidly with snowy handkerchief. “Yes, you sweat quite damnably!”

“And the better for it, Roly-Poly, sir.”

“Damme, but I believe you enjoy it, Oliver!”

“Curse me if I don’t, Roland!”

“Astounding!” he exclaimed.

“It does,” said I, “and leaves me wondering.”

“Oh? What does, pray?”

“The amazing fact that you, Roly, should come trudging across stubbly fields beneath such hot sun and—to me.”

“And yourself the complete yokel most unpleasantly dusty and damp!” he retorted. “What a confoundedly odd fish you are. What must your men think of you?”

“The same, probably. But pray, Sir Arrogance, what do you want with this same yokel?”

“I am here for two reasons, Oliver. In the first place, where is he, what have you done with him? He’s not at the house for I’ve looked and I can get no least satisfaction to my enquiries. So here I am to ask,—no, to demand what the devil have you done with the poor fellow?”

“Who, Roland, and which?”

“My nephew, to be sure.”

“Now, if, by any chance, you can possibly mean Robin——”

“Of course I mean Robin,” he fumed.

“Then your labour is quite vain, my poor Roly, all your seeking and searching, trudging and tramping is all waste labour—and the day so hot! No, don’t rave or curse or scowl or stamp, the sun is too warm for heat of temper, compose yourself, be calm and seated yonder in the shade, then take

a deep breath and pronounce your autocratic will to my humbly attentive ears or, as you might say, ‘listeners.’ ”

“At least and for a wonder you’re infernally chatty!”

“I’ve been dumb all the morning, one cannot use a scythe and talk, especially if one happens to be alone. I shall be grateful for a brief rest,—come, talk to me.” So saying, down I sat beneath adjacent tree and from this pleasant shade, beckoned Roland beside me, whereat he frowned and, muttering pettishly, contrived to seat himself though with no little effort by reason of long spurs and extremely tight buckskins.

“Now then,” quoth he, flapping himself with handkerchief again, “let’s have it! Where’s nephew Robin? And be short—no more of your confounded rhodomontade! Where is he—in a word?”

“London.”

“At that infernal murder hole by the river, at ‘The Waterman’ still, is he?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, the poor, poor lad! Hasn’t he been informed that his name is cleared, his innocence proved? Has no one had the kindness or common decency to tell him so?”

“Yes.”

“Well, does he know that everyone in the South Country, yes the whole country is waiting eagerly to welcome him back—with open arms, to do him honour and . . . and so forth?”

“No.”

“Why then curse and confound it,—he should know! He must and shall, by Heavens! He must come back, yes, damme, even if I have to go after him myself! You see, it’s most important—are you listening, Oliver?”

“Hard!”

“Well, let me tell you we of the Hunt, yes all the sportsmen in Sussex of any account have decided to give a banquet in his honour. What’s keeping him there in London? Ha—is it Clia?”

“No.”

“Who then, and what?”

“Himself.”

“How? Why? What the devil is he after?”

“The Devil.”

Roland ceased napping to stare at me with look of indignant puzzlement.

“Oliver, I ask—I demand you will explain—what is he doing in London?”

“Farming.”

“Eh—farming? In that pestiferous den of iniquity? What on earth d’you mean?”

“Sowing.”

“Oliver, what are you driving at—precisely?”

“Seeds.”

“Seeds?” he repeated. “Did you say—‘seeds’?”

“Of love and kindness,” I nodded.

Roland leaned forward to peer into my face, he leaned back to survey me all over and shook his head.

“Good God!” he murmured. “It’s the heat! Must be sun-stroke.”

“No!” said I.

“Then, damme, it’s bottles,—you’re drunk!”

“No!” said I, again. “If your High Mightiness will bear with me I’ll endeavour to explain more fully and the best I may.”

“Ha!” he exclaimed. “There are times when I’m consumed with desire to pound that smug face of yours quite out of shape. As you know, of course.”

“Yes, Roly. But shall I explain—first?”

“Oh go on!” he groaned, sinking upon his back in peevish resignation. “Tell me in your own confounded way while I lie here perishing with thirst, dry as an infernal bone.”

“Ale shall come anon, Roly, or rather, small beer. However, as regards your nephew and my Robin, his farming is on a grand and noble scale, instead of cabbages or grain he is trying to grow souls——”

“Eh—souls? Souls, d’ye say?”

“Yes, men’s souls—and in very poor soil. He is using his fists, his heart and brain to the betterment and perhaps salvation of poor outcasts, creatures so depraved they are lower than the beasts, far less noble than horse or dog, with much baser instincts, and, unlike mere cattle, perfectly useless——”

“Frightful!” exclaimed Roland, sitting up again.

“It is,” said I, “for these poor half-starved wretches——”

“I mean for Robin, curse and confound it! My nephew . . . a psalm-smiting hot-gospeller, begad!”

“Not precisely, Roland. He is more like your hero, Jessamy Todd, a body-smiting soul-snatcher,—you’ll remember Jessamy so describes himself.”

“Yes, but . . . Jessamy is—Jessamy!”

“And Robin is—himself!”

“Well, I hold you responsible for this . . . this ungentlemanly nonsense of his, by Heavens! So what are you going to do about it?”

“Well,” I repeated, “I have already thanked God.”

Roland fell flat on his back again and so lay blinking speechlessly up at the leaves above us while I gazed away across these wide fields golden for the harvest and listening to the distant ring of whetted scythe blade, took marvellous pleasure in both. And then, before Roland could find adequate retort, to us rode Gregor, a gallon-jar on the offside of his saddle, a capacious basket on the near, at sight of which and whom, Roland sat up and very solemnly took off his hat.

“Hail and fair greeting to thee, Greg old sportsman!” said he. “Give us to drink ere we perish. And, Oliver, when my thirst is quenched, if it ever can be, when do you propose to feed your guest and relation?”

“Now!” I answered. “Here we have cheese, loaf and an onion——”

“God forbid!” he exclaimed, recoiling.

“Ay but,” said Gregor as he dismounted, “we hae also slices o’ cold beef and ham, Noll, ’twas the man Nicholas fair insisted——”

“Then on our Nicholas be my blessing!” sighed Roland.

So presently seated all three in this right pleasant shade we ate and drank with such hearty enjoyment that Roland must needs remark on it.

“It’s the open air,” said I.

“’Tis this beef!” quoth Gregor.

“No, this most delicious ham!” sighed Roland. “Why the deuce do I never taste such at my own house?”

“It is all three,” said I, “plus this noble ale—which I meant should be small beer, Greg.”

“Eh but so did I,” nodded Gregor, “blame Nicholas.”

“Crown him with a halo!” sighed Roland.

When at last our meal was ended we sat talking in a drowsy content until, groaning the word ‘worruk’, Gregor arose, re-slung basket and jar, both empty now, and rode away.

“And now,” said I, reaching for my coat, “you shall read a letter from Robin——”

“No!” sighed Roland.

“Yes!” said I.

“Don’t want to!” yawned Roland. “Too much infernal trouble.”

“Then I’ll read it to you.”

“Shan’t listen, going t’ take nap.”

“Then I’ll read you to sleep,” said I, and unfolding the letter, began to read, and in loud, harsh voice, those extracts I have already set down in this narrative.

And thus perforce Roland listened, though at first he kept his eyes shut and pretended to snore for my annoyance; but I persisted until I saw his eyes were open and when I ended this reading, he sat up the better to shake his head and glare at me.

“So you win!” said he, very bitterly. “Yes, here’s an end of your Robin so far as I am concerned,—this will damn his chances in Society and with the County beyond redemption! With your curst, puritanical, smug self-righteousness you have quite spoiled a . . . a splendid young fellow and highly promising sportsman and—I hope you’re completely satisfied.”

“Completely!” I nodded.

“Well, you’ve had your way with him, and now—what of Clia? She’s beautiful, an heiress in her own right and, since poor young Robin’s out of the running, she might marry anyone—Viscount Ragworth for instance,

Storringdean is keen for it, I know, and an excellent match it will be—unless of course you mean to spoil her prospects also.”

“I hope not, Roland, I hope not with all my heart,—you see, I love her.”

“Naturally, naturally,—and, as a father, very properly, but what I——”

“Not as a father, Roland.”

“Eh—not? D’you mean . . . ha, why do you flinch and jib like a startled horse? Can it be . . . are you telling me that . . . instead of a father, you love her as a . . . a man . . . marriage and . . . and——”

“Yes, Roland,” I answered, looking into his wide eyes, “yes, I do indeed . . . all these years . . . and so devotedly that I hope to . . . make her my wife, if . . . God is so kind.”

Now what he saw in my face I cannot tell, but he flushed hotly, his glance wavered and bowing head he began to pluck at the grass, dropping it with careful precision into the crown of his hat, and thus strangely busied, spoke in greatly altered tone:

“I feel as if I’d spat in a cathedral, damme if I don’t! I have to ask your pardon for my very devilish impertinence. . . . Such subject must be very sacred to you . . . holy . . . forgive me. And now, having apologised, and dam’ awkwardly, I’ll take myself off.” So up he sprang and putting on his hat, instantly showered himself with grass,—whereat I laughed, then so did he, and in this moment our hands found and clasped each other.

“Oliver . . . Noll . . . old fellow,” said he, in shaken voice, “let me wish you joy . . . every happiness . . . you and she. . . . As for Robin, well . . . I’ve been jealous, yes I have, though I shouldn’t have been with such wife and children of my own, but it’s the fact. And so, Noll, in a word, if I have any way aggrieved you, or rather, to put it briefly, if I have caused you any least,—what I mean is, I’m doing my humble damdest to let you know that my confounded heart is in the right place . . . always was and always will be . . . for you! So, if you——”

But here I grasped his arm and walked him back across the wide, sun-smitten fields at such a pace, despite the heat, as gave no further chance for talk just then.

Reaching the house we were greeted by Nicholas, this presiding genius, who at sign from me, bowed and vanished.

In cool spaciousness of the library Roland sank into the nearest easy-chair, dropped hat and whip, drew out handkerchief and mopping his

glistening brow and cheeks, breathed hard and demanded peevishly:

“What . . . the devil . . . Oliver——?”

And I answered, outstretched in adjacent chair and mopping also:

“Wait!”

“Yes but . . . damme . . . why all the infernal hurry?”

“Nicholas!” I replied.

“What on earth has Nick to do with it?”

“Here he is,” said I, as the door opened, “ask him.” And there indeed was Nicholas bearing as it had been some holy relic, a bottle, and with Finch attendant carrying a tray whereon stood two tall glasses.

“This, gentlemen,” said Nicholas as he filled these glasses, “this wine, sirs, cool yet fragrant, rich yet light, is, I humbly suggest, the properest for day of such torrid heat and at such hour. I am bold to affirm you shall find it worthy, gentlemen, worthy. It is a wine to sip for itself or quaff for thirst, sirs.”

Roland sipped, then quaffed with look of beatitude beyond words and setting down his empty glass, sighed.

“Well, sir?” enquired Nicholas, bottle poised.

Roland closed his eyes, sighed again and held out his glass which Nicholas refilled and having done the same with mine, bowed and departed.

And after we had sipped awhile in silence, Roland sighed again, shook his head and spoke:

“My heart, Noll old fellow, as I was trying to tell you in the fields, my heart being in the right place and blood being thicker than any confounded water that ever . . . slopped, I desire to say—what the devil now?” he exclaimed as with discreet knock the door opened and Finch reappeared bearing this time a letter from the post, which, being directed in unfamiliar hand, I laid by unopened and seizing this opportunity to change the subject, for Roland’s tremendous humility is usually somewhat overpowering, I began to talk of horses in general and two in particular, his own ‘Whirlwind’ and Jasper Shrig’s ‘Mustard’. So of horses we talked and argued until the bottle was out and the clocks chiming the hour of four.

“Astounding!” exclaimed Roland as he got to his feet. “Time has flown. In half-an-hour I’m due to meet Storringdean to arrange this banquet—

which it seems is not to be.”

“Call it deferred, Roland. Why not write and suggest it to Robin?”

“B’gad I will! And . . . yes, damme, I’ll send him a contribution for his fool club. Though mind you, Noll, I think it all perfectly mad, absolutely and utterly preposterous, a waste of money and bound to fail.”

“Very likely,” I nodded. “Yet, I would rather lose money for such scheme than pay the bills of a young wastrel.”

“Oh?” he demanded, eyeing me askance.

“Yes!” said I. Roland picked up his hat, clapped it on and frowned at me.

“Ha!” he exclaimed and strode from the room.

“Well?” I enquired, striding with him.

“Wastrel!” he repeated. “You recall of course that in the old days I myself was generally pretty heavily dipped—up to my young ears in debt? Did this make me a ‘wastrel’, pray?”

“Ass!” said I, taking him by the arm again as he stalked out upon the terrace. “I used the word in a general sense with no thought of you.”

“Oh?” said he.

“No!”

“D’you suppose,” he enquired, as we came in sight of the stables, “fifty pounds is enough for me to throw away on young Robin’s foolery?”

“Very generous,” I answered.

“Why then I may as well make it a hundred.”

And when Roland had departed at his usual headlong gallop, I wandered forlorn, and somewhat aimlessly until remembering the letter back came I to the library and breaking the seal, read this:

Honoured Sir,

As per instructions and according to information received I beg to inform you the woman Anticlea Venner who on 24th inst. of Sept. in year 1810 met her death by fall from Beachey Head was on or about 1st of said month in village of East Bourne delivered of a girl child registered there under name of Anticlea Venner.

Your respt. servt.

So it seemed Clia's terror and dreadful suspicions were no sickly fancies but a very grim reality.

Lifting my eyes from this letter I gazed instinctively at Clia's long dead flowers that were now indeed the very symbol of my hopes.

Rousing at last, I wrote to my Aunt Rosamond enclosing this fateful letter and begging her to break the news of it to Clia as only our gentle Lady of Comfort might.

This note sealed and dispatched, forth I went again to my labour and found it now labour indeed, for the joy of it with the glory and promise of this harvest season all were gone, leaving instead a dreary desolation. Yet I worked on until the sun went down and the weary reapers trudged homewards all, leaving me to the solitude of deepening night, a fragrant, glimmering dusk lit by a great glory of stars. And when it became too dark for labour, I leaned heavily upon my scythe and looking up at the never-ending wonder of this wide firmament, found in its immutable serenity a strange and wistful comfort with something of its peace; for my thought was this: that a Deity who could create such glorious infinitude together with the gentle beauties of flower and herb, and who moreover could set in the heart of man love and sympathy for his fellow, must be a God of infinite compassion.

And now, slow and majestic, rose the full-orbed moon of harvest to make yet another glory and light a weary, very thoughtful man upon his way; for as I walked through the solemn hush of this radiant night, I meditated now upon myself and the past years,—to what purpose I had lived, of what I had sown and what therefore I must reap. And bethinking me of Robin, his clean young manhood, and of Clia, who could be faithful and suffer for an idea believing it her duty, I felt I have not lived quite in vain because of these two and that my harvest is like to be a rich and bounteous one, thank God.

CHAPTER XLIV

OF FULFILMENT AND—FAREWELL

AFTER miserable night of broken slumber I rose in the dawn and having bathed and shaved by candlelight equipped myself for riding and made my way to the stables where, the grooms being all asleep at such hour, I saddled Midnight myself and rode away through a pearly mist towards the rolling Downs and distant sea.

All about me was a chilly twilight but above and beyond I saw the crests of these noble uplands tipped and edged with flame, for there stood golden-footed dawn,—a rim of fire that crept down and ever down in widening glory,—and so came day. Now giving my eager Midnight his head—away we went, mounting up from cold shadow into the warmth and splendour of the rising sun's level beams—until at last I rode high above gloomy dawn and sleeping world, in a golden solitude beneath a cloudless heaven, such deep brooding loneliness as was my present need. For as there are creatures that must creep away to hide themselves when hurt, so is it with me, since, despite my belief in the final justice and mercy of the Almighty, my heart was sore and grievous by reason of my exceeding bitter disappointment.

And so, like the stricken creature I was, alone I wandered all this long day, going by lonely bridle paths and leafy ways careless of whither so long as I was alone with the kindly wind and the sun that was long past its zenith ere I paused at sequestered, rustic ale house to buy such simple fare as was to be had and which I ate thereafter in leafy shade.

Then on I rode again nor did I turn back until the sun was setting.

Thus, night had fallen and the moon was rising when I came in sight of Abbeymead and, avoiding the village and park gates took the lane that brings one direct to the stables. Dismounting I bade my men a somewhat curt good-night and coming to the house entered the library through the open window as I am wont to do sometimes.

The spacious chamber was dark except for the radiant moonlight, and, being wearied by my long ride, I did not trouble to light the candles but sinking into the arm-chair at my writing-table, leaned there to gaze out at the vivid splendour of this great harvest moon.

Now presently as I sat thus brooding, I became aware, little by little, how strong was the perfume of flowers from the garden, which put me to no small wonder how this should be and the rose garden so far away. At last, turning to glance in a certain direction, I saw that which for a moment checked my breath and held me rigid and still . . . for there, plain to see in the moonlight, Clia's flowers were blooming again, instead of withered stalks the vase held and was almost hidden in their fragrant beauty. . . .

Then I heard a tap on the door, I saw it begin to open, and rose to my feet, trembling.

"Clia!" I whispered.

The door swung wide and for a moment she stood gazing on me from the dimness.

"Oliver. . . Oh, my dear!" Such cry of tremulous gladness and yet with a sob in it too. Then her arms were about me and she was wasting her precious kisses on my sleeve, the breast of my coat until I lifted her to my lips.

And no words I write may tell the deep ecstasy of this never-to-be-forgotten reunion.

"Oh, my Oliver," she murmured, "take me, hold me close, for I am and can be truly all your own at last,—as I have been . . . through all the years . . . your little adoring waif, your own, loving woman now! For whoever I am, my blood is clean, thank God! And, oh my dear one, how I have thanked Him for this mercy . . . daily, hourly . . . thanked Him I am free and worthy to be your wife and perhaps . . . yes, perhaps . . . Oh my poor heart is bursting with joy . . . and I can feel my poor, blessed man flinching, I believe he's blushing too, because he thinks I'm going to say 'blessed to bear his children', which of course I do say! And now, he is thinking 'how unmaidenly!' 'And yet,' say I, 'how perfectly natural and womanly and God-meant!' So why should I play the prudish miss at such sacred moment as this is,—and to you, my own dear, that is part of me? 'Ridiculous and I won't!' say I. 'Pray hush!' thinks you. 'I will not!' say I, for I'm home at last, here upon your heart. How strong it beats, Oliver! safe in the arms of my love, my own man, where no shame can ever be. And Oh Darlingest, if I say so much it is because I have felt more and suffered so terribly and been so dreadfully afraid of the future. Oh, can't you say something? Don't you want to? Then kiss me again instead."

All this she said in breathless rush of words, laughing and weeping by turns, and now looked up at me with such eyes that, speech failing me for

very rapture, I gathered her up in my arms and kissed her indeed.

And presently, sitting with her nestled in my embrace, I questioned her as to just how this wonder of happiness had come about; and she answered somewhat on this wise:

“It was Jasper, dear Jasper Shrig. Heavens but the man loves you, Noll, and no wonder, for so does everyone because you are so dear and true and simple and wise and strong and silly and altogether Nollish! This is why I adore you and can tell you so without your taking any least advantage of such perfectly abject confession! Well, he found Sara although she had married and changed her name, Jasper did, and in quite affluent circumstances and mother of a family, I mean Sara is,—think of it! Flaming Sal who could fight like a man and stabbed you because of me, my own beloved! Naturally when Jasper discovered her the poor thing was in a dreadful taking and quite desperate with fear lest her husband or anyone should learn of her past. Well, Jasper contrived so cleverly that she told everything. How when her poor, young mistress went distraught and killed herself, Sara took her baby and ran away with it to Mumping Joe. She told how this poor little baby died too and how she buried it in a cave because she was afraid. Then how one day following a gipsy caravan, she heard a sound like a kitten mewing and found another child, about three years old she thinks, stripped naked and dying in a ditch—me, Oliver! So she took me, God bless her, and when Mumping Joe refused me shelter, flew at him with her knife and terrified him into compliance. So I lived with them until that blessed day when you lifted me from misery and certain degradation, to life and happiness and—you, my own love. So Jasper Shrig with God’s help has saved me from loneliness, and here . . . oh dear God be praised,—here I am, safe in your arms at last.”

“And so,” said I, unsteadily, “Heaven bless Jasper Shrig! I must write and try to thank him the best I may, for my gratitude is beyond expressing, you must help me, dear heart.”

“No!” she laughed, ruffling up my hair to smooth it down again with caressing cheek. “You shall say your thanks instead.”

“What, is he here?”

“Come and see.”

So she brought me to that room Gregor calls his office, and here, a steaming, fragrant bowl upon the table between them, sat Gregor and Jasper Shrig.

“Jasper,” I began.

“Sir and pal,” said he, rising and instantly filling a third glass with this famous One and Only, “dee-doocing as how your lady has dooly informed you con-sarnin the fax o’ this here case, I now takes o-cassion to add thereto in few vords as maybe, thereby ending said case, as follers: Myself, sir, guided by Sara Noakes, now Tupper, deskivered and dug up bones of a infant buried by said Sara some fifteen year ago. Bones aforesaid I had medically examined and pro-nounced to be of sex fee-male of tender age of four months or thereabout. I also have here sworn affidavit, dooly vitnessed, of said Sara Noakes, now Tupper, if you care to look it over.”

“Not now, Jasper,” said I, grasping his hand. “Instead I want to thank you from my heart——”

“’Tis all took, pal, took and onderstood,” quoth he, beaming and handing me the brimming glass, “so don’t say a vord, let’s drink a werry hearty and sacred toast to love and loveliness and the future Lady Dale.”

And so we did, all three.

“And now, sir and pal, p’raps you’d better cast a ogle on this here affidavit.”

“No!” said Clia, with the utmost finality, and proceeded to attempt the impossible and ruffle up Jasper’s close-cropped, grizzled hair. “No, dear Jasper Shrig. I am going to take him out into the moonlight and tell him all about—everything.”

“Then, Lord love your pretty eyes and limbs here’s me wishing you all the blessings of happiness, long life and J.O.Y. j’y and—this here besides.” So saying, Jasper Shrig took her hand and very solemnly kissed each slender finger. “Five on ’em!” quoth he, nodding bullet head. “Five on ’em, ma’m, and may they be as strong and true as their noble fayther, ah, and sweet and lovely as their bee-oo-tiful mother, all on ’em,—and no man could say fairer,—no, nor yet more hearty.”

“No,” she answers softly, “no, my Jasper dear!” Then with sudden, graceful swoop, she clasped and kissed him so tenderly that we left him gazing after us with eyes wider and rounder than ever and actually flushing because of Gregor’s throaty chuckle.

We walked together in a blissful though often silent communion across the harvest fields until the moon began to sink, then slowly back across shadowy park and so at last to the house.

“Home!” said she, pausing to look up at it with a glory in her eyes. “Our home, yours and mine, Oliver! Now . . . do you suppose you could possibly manage to . . . carry me so far?”

“Of course, dear girl. But why?”

“It is a custom they have in Scotland, I believe,—the man carries his woman over the threshold of their future home, and I think——”

But here I swept her up in my arms and, holding her thus high upon my breast, kissed her bright hair, her eyes and ruddy mouth.

“Now,” said I, “what do you think?”

Instead of answering, she hid her face against me and shivered.

“Are you cold, Sweetheart?” I questioned.

“Silly man!” she mumbled, keeping her face still thus hidden. “No, of course not. There are shivers . . . and shivers, my dear, Nollish dolt! And this shiver was . . . just because . . . ! Ah, do you remember years ago when you watched Deborah and Roland ride away together on their wedding night and stood breaking your dear heart because you thought Love had passed you by and left you for ever—do you?”

“Yes.”

“And do you remember how glad I was, and how I made you promise that someday you would be all mine for ever and ever—always?”

“Why of course I do.”

“And how I told you I’d prayed God to make you love just me for always? And how you told me He surely would, and that He is in every tomorrow and that with each dawn comes the bright angel of Hope? And do you remember how I begged that when I’d grown myself into a bee-u-tiful lady you’d marriage me into a wife for yourself?”

“Yes, beloved, I remember,” I answered, bending to look into eyes that now gazed up at me through glitter of tears.

“And lastly, my Oliver . . . Oh my Darlingest, you remember how you . . . carried me home on your shoulder. Well, carry me home now,—not on your shoulder, of course, but here—upon your great strong heart,—to my home, our home for ever and ever . . . Oh Noll, my Oliver . . . !”

So now, good friends, we part; for here I make an end of this narration, though truly there is much might yet be told. But here must be farewell, for we are come to the parting of the ways. Yet to you, one and all, who have journeyed with me thus far, I wish such warm and faithful friendship as now blesses me, and such sweet and steadfast companion to go beside you to the very end of the road.

O.D.

THE END

1939

AUTUMN FICTION



NO SILVER BELLS

Phyllis Hambledon

Author of "Family Tree," "Hogmanay," "The Trick of Courage," etc.

This tale begins as a letter written by a woman to the man who wants to marry her. It ends by becoming the life-story of Christine Innes. It is her answer, and her justification. It tells of youth on a Hebridean island, and an Englishman whom she loves, of the half-mad aunt with whom she lives, and the men who ask her to marry them. It tells of her time of bondage in the house of a woman of uncertain virtue, of how she comes back to the Western Highlands to build her own home—the House of the Streams—Tign na Sruth, on the edge of the loch where the tides run in from the sea. It tells how almost haphazardly she becomes a noted garden designer. There is a child in it, and a desperate man goaded to murder. There is a farm and haymaking, and a ballet danced with the mountains of Lorne as a background. There are gardens. There are little lonely islands where the footfall of Columba still lingers, and where the seagulls wheel against the sky.

Christine will not marry Charles Carne. Why not? Nothing, surely, could be more suitable. This book is her own effort to answer the question. And it is a question that many unmarried women would answer as she did.

THE GOLD GARLAND

Ronald Mason

Author of "Timbermills"

The Gold Garland describes the efforts of Peter Langley to redeem the failure of his marriage by filling in, for the sake of his comfort and self-respect, the gap left by the departure of his wife. His almost unconscious realisation in the process, that even the alternatives for which he had yearned in her presence, are meaningless in her absence, is shown with that careful and sympathetic attention to reality which characterised Mr. Mason's other book. And in an original conclusion Peter is shown, matured by his experiences, according to his wife, as her due, the sum of the honour and satisfaction that the alternatives had been able to give him—the "Gold Garland" of the old Scottish poet Dunbar, whose verse tells of the stars braided by the giant into a garland for his wife's hair.

Again and again Mr. Mason records his deep conviction of the beauty and peace at the heart of simple and common things. Every ordinary thing interests him and is made interesting—a bachelor walking tour, the wind over the Cotswolds, a cricket match at Lord's, the quietness of country inns, the chatter and bustle of a cricket pavilion or the mist about Chanctonbury Ring; of all these things he writes delightedly because they are the things he loves.

THE BARON AT LARGE

Anthony Morton

Winner of the £1,500 Cracksman Competition with his novel "Meet the Baron"

This story has all the smooth competence, the wit and suspense which characterises Anthony Morton's work, as well as a clever plot and a denouement which few people will suspect.

The famous Kellinov collection of precious stones had been split up, but every piece was in England, and Lord Sharron conceived the idea of inviting each owner to Beverley Towers where for the first time for fifty years, the collection could be displayed as a whole. Every owner accepted the invitation, including John Mannering, whom none of the others suspected of being the Baron.

From the first Mannering felt apprehensive about the safety of the jewels, and in the dead of night his fears were justified. The strong-room was rifled, and the Baron—plunging after the thieves—also plunged into a network of crime and intrigue, and into the inevitable suspicion aroused in the minds of the police against him. For there was evidence enough of 'inside' help.

Old friends and new are in these pages, and the duel between Mannering and Chief Inspector William Bristow provides both suspense and excitement while each, in his different way, searches for the truth. The Baron's ingenuity when forcing entry is as marked as ever, and the reader is kept on the edge of uncertainty until the last dramatic scene.

Two outstanding novels whose authors need no introduction

RICH GIRL, POOR GIRL

Faith Baldwin

This is not only the story of two girls and the man they love, but of a small town divided against itself, of a people struggling to free themselves from the feudalism of ex-State Senator Sutton, and the dangerous escapades of the “fast” younger set, led by Larry Dexter. It is written with Miss Baldwin’s deft characterisation and mastery of plot.

When Jonathan Kimber “nailed up his shingle” in Riverport, he did not realise immediately the power of Senator Sutton, who practically owned the town. But he soon felt the attraction of Sally, Senator Sutton’s daughter, who was rich, sophisticated and unaccustomed to competition from a girl like Rose Ward, the niece of old Dr. Ballard, from whom Jonathan inherited his practice. He found himself confronted by conflicting emotions.

Faith Baldwin is one of America’s leading novelists and is as popular over here as she is in the States. Her stories are wise and witty, and she has a remarkable power for understanding and solving the problems of modern life and love. Most of her novels have an American background, but they have become best sellers in this country because of their shrewd and humorous pictures of modern people.

THE HAPPY HARVEST

Jeffery Farnol

Once again Mr. Farnol gives us a fast-moving, colourful romance with its setting in the countryside of Sussex, which he knows so well, and which he describes in his own unique way.

Readers of *The Crooked Furrow* will be familiar with Abbeymead and its owner, Sir Oliver Dale; they will remember Robin and Clia. And now we have a story centred on these old friends and which re-introduces us to Roland, Aunt Rosamond and Saphronia. Once more the lovable, inimitable Jasper Shrig is summoned to solve the mystery of a murder of which Robin is accused.

Sir Oliver Dale is beset with troubles; his tenants in the nearby village are frightened by the “ghost” that sings at night; Robin is believed to be a murderer; Clia, due to a mystery concerning her childhood, leaves Abbeymead and goes to London, while Roland has picked a quarrel with Lord Storringdean, who is one of the deadliest duellists in the country.

Once again Jeremy Jarvis and Jessamy Todd are here to delight us, while the entire story breathes that essence of the beautiful Sussex countryside that is so English and typical of Mr. Farnol’s books. His easily flowing, romantic pen has conjured a story that will transport the reader for happy hours into a world which his brilliant story-telling has made unique.

BERRINGTON'S WIFE

Richard Starr

Author of "Galloway's Daughter," "Joan and Garry," "Peggy Leaves Home," "The Sin of Mary Wilder," etc.

Much of Richard Starr's latest story might be and probably has been duplicated in many ordinary lives. It is about an ordinary marriage of two ordinary people which comes on the rocks.

There is Jim Berrington, a bank clerk; his wife Ella, ex-hospital nurse; his mother, dour descendant of a hard-bitten Scottish clan, with a grim Calvinistic conscience and a devastating devotion to her son. These three, according to their several lights, are actuated by honest intentions towards the marriage and each other. Jim has a streak of complaisance; an amiable, good-natured fellow who deals with unpleasant difficulties by persuading himself they don't exist. He is torn between wife and mother.

Ella is too acquiescent and uncomplaining; too ready to sacrifice her rights for the general good. Her mother-in-law is practical, efficient, dominant, like the stern Highland stock from which she sprang. She sees in her son's wife a weakling, and she has no patience with weaklings.

Mr. Starr leaves it to the reader to apportion the blame; either to one or all the actors in the drama, or to the senseless bludgeonings of chance.

But if the characters are ordinary people there is nothing ordinary about the treatment of the story.

CLOSE THE FRONTIER

Leonard A. Knight

*Author of "Deadman's Bay," "The Creeping Death," "Death Stands Near,"
"Super Cinema Murder," etc.*

There are passages in this exciting story which reveal the true patriot, the man who loves the country and the people. But chiefly we recommend it because it is terrifically exciting. Once Mr. Knight gets his characters inside the frontiers of a certain country we are held in suspense until the end. This author knows how to play the game of cat and mouse with his characters and with his readers. One can never be sure of how things are going to turn out, so frequently does the unexpected happen.

He has created for us a villain who is truly frightening. Who can resist a shudder of apprehension when the blind fanatic comes into and dominates the story? This sinister personage hangs over everything like a malignant blight.

Listen for a moment to the author's description of him. "The light from the green shaded lamp showed the great egg-shaped head seemingly floating above the desk. The huge white hands moved slowly . . . gropingly . . . like blind kittens. His pale eyes were rivetted on mine, and it was impossible to realise they were sightless."

This we claim is the "best" villain of the year!

Read this book for its terrific pace and for a thrill, but, if you want to sleep, do *not* read it just before going to bed.

DEATH IN THE FOREST

Moray Dalton

*Author of "Night of Fear," "Death in the Dark," "The Belfry Murder,"
"The Body in the Road," etc.*

Roger Frere went on a South American cruise to recuperate after a motor accident. Life at home had been made very difficult by his stepmother, who blamed him for the death of his half-sister who had been killed when the new car he had given her had overturned. While the passengers were on shore at San Rinaldo a revolution broke out and Roger, who had driven out of the town to see Celia Holland, was left behind.

After several hairbreadth escapes from falling into the hands of a drink-maddened mob of revolutionaries, Roger finds himself aboard a tramp steamer bound for Cardiff with a strange girl, Nina Manara, whom they had met during their flight. Nina is in danger of her life if she returns to San Rinaldo and the captain refuses to take her to England without a passport, so Roger reluctantly agrees to take her to England as his wife.

When he returns to the old home recently left to him, he finds his stepmother and her younger son comfortably established there. It was an ill-assorted household and all the elements that make for tragedy were present.

Strange things begin to happen and once again our old friend Inspector Collier appears on the scene to clear up another of Moray Dalton's thrilling mystery stories.

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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.

[The end of *The Happy Harvest* by Jeffery Farnol]