

BARING-GOULD SABINE

**THE
PENNYCOMEQUICKS
(VOLUME 1 OF 3)**

Sabine Baring-Gould

The Pennycomequicks (Volume 1 of 3)

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CHAPTER I. SHAKING THE TREE

There is an aboriginal race in Borneo, of which it is said that they dispose of their aged parents and relatives in an interesting, novel, and altogether aboriginal fashion.

They courteously, but withal peremptorily, require them periodically to climb trees, and when they are well up and grappling the branches, they shake the trees. If the venerable representatives of the earlier generation hold on, they are pronounced to be still green; but if they drop, they are adjudged ripe, are fallen upon and eaten, the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet being reserved as the prerogative of the heir-at-law, as the richest morsels.

We do nothing of this sort in Christendom, least of all in civilized England. God, we thank Thee that we are not as other men are, even as these Borneans, for the conversion of whom we put prayer up at the family altar, that is, the breakfast-table, or offer our mite – a veritable mite, a microscopic fraction of our income. We look in England on our aged relatives with reverence, not with greed, and if we butter them, it is not because we desire to eat them, but because they are susceptible to butter. We never calculate the number of pounds they weigh, we never look hungrily at their palms, and never put the ladder against the tree, and with hat off and professions of respect and endearment invite them to climb. The Esquimaux act very differently from the Borneans; they take their ancient relations, and put them out of their huts in the cold, and leave them to freeze or starve. What a stride humanity has made with us! We deal with our poor, meagre relatives in this way? We! – as little do we turn them out in the cold as we do fall upon and eat up our plump ones, like the Borneans.

'One of the pleasures of having a rout, is the pleasure of having it over,' said Tom Hood, in his poem of Miss Killmansegg and her Golden Leg, and he said truly – most truly, when that rout was one of obligation or of interest, or of obligation and interest combined, when it was not a spontaneous burst of hospitality, but a laboured affair, and like a laboured literary effort – heavy.

Mrs. Sidebottom, or as she was pleased to accentuate her name, Siddy-bot-TOME, sat before the fire with her silk evening skirt turned up over her knees to prevent it from becoming scorched, and with her neat little feet on the fender.

What tricks we do play with our names to deliver them from the suspicion of vulgarity. How we double the capital F's, and convert the i's into y's, so that common little Finches can strut as Ffinches and insignificant Smiths can add a cubit to their stature as Smythes! How for distinction we canonize our final syllables, and convert Singeons into St. John's, and Slodgers into St. Ledgers; and elevate Mungy into Mont Joye, and Gallicize our Mullens into Molleynes, take the blackness out of Death by spelling it De'Ath and even turn a Devil into De Ville!

The candles had been blown out on the chimney-piece, in the sconces on the walls, and on the piano. A savour of extinguished candles pervaded the room.

Mrs. Siddy-bot-TOME – her name is given as pronounced once again, that it may stamp itself on the memory of the reader – Mrs. Siddy-bot-TOME (the third time is final) – sat by the fire with puckered lips and brows. She was thinking. She was a lady of fifty, well – very well – preserved, without a gray hair or a wrinkle, with fair skin and light eyes, and hair the colour of hemp. Her eyelashes were lighter still, so light as to be almost white – the white not in fashion at the time, but about to come into fashion, of a creamy tinge.

She was not a clever woman by any means, not a woman of broad sympathies, but a woman who generally had her own way through the force and energy of her character, and as that force was always directed in one direction, and her energy always exerted for one purpose, she accomplished more than did many far cleverer women. She rarely failed to carry her point, whatever that point was.

Whatever that point was, it was invariably one that revolved about herself, as the moon about the earth in the universe, as Papageno about Papagena, in the 'Magic Flute,' and as the cork attached to the cat's tail in the nursery.

If Mrs. Sidebottom had been a really clever woman, she would have concealed her ends and aims, as those who are smuggling lace or silk, coil them about them, and hide them in their umbrellas, under their cloaks, and in their bosoms. But she lacked this cleverness, or failed to admit that selfish aims were contraband. We are all selfish, from the smallest herb, that strives to outrun and smother those herbs that grow about it; through the robin Pecksy, that snaps the worm from its sister Flapsy; and the dog that holds the manger against the ox; to ourselves, the crown of creation and the climax of self-seeking, but we do not show it. The snail has telescopic eyes, wherewith to peer for something he may appropriate to himself; but the snail, when he thinks himself observed, withdraws his horns and conceals them behind a dimple.

Mrs. Sidebottom was either too eager or too careless, or – for charity hopeth all things – too sincere, to disguise her horns. She thrust them this way, that way; they went up to take bird's-eye views; they dived beneath, to survey matters subterranean; they went round corners, described corkscrews, to observe things from every conceivable aspect. They were thrust down throats and into pockets, and, though small, were of thousandfold magnifying power, like those of a fly, and, like those of a prophet, saw into futurity, and, like those of the historian, explored the past.

In a lounging chair, also near the fire, but not monopolizing the middle like his mother, sat Captain Pennycomequick, the son of Mrs. Sidebottom. He wore a smoking jacket, braided with red or brown; and was engaged languidly on a cigarette-case, looking for a suitable cigarette.

Mrs. Sidebottom's maiden name had been Pennycomequick, and as she despised her married name, even when accentuated past recognition, she had persuaded her son to exchange his designation, by royal licence, to Pennycomequick.

But euphony was not the sole or principal motive in Mrs. Sidebottom that induced her to move her son to make this alteration. She was the daughter of a manufacturer, now some time deceased, in the large Yorkshire village or small town of Mergatroyd in the West Riding, by his second wife. Her half-brother by the first wife now owned the mill, was the head and prop of the family, and was esteemed to be rich.

She was moderately well provided for. She had a sort of lien on the factory, and the late Mr. Sidebottom, solicitor, had left something. But what is four hundred per annum to a woman with a son in the army dependent on her, and with a soul too big for her purse, with large requirements, an ambition that could only be satisfied on a thousand a year. Would any stomach be content on half-rations that had capacity for whole ones? On the fringe of the Arctic circle a song is sung that 'Iceland is the fairest land that ever the sun beheld,' but it is only sung by those who have never been elsewhere. Now, Mrs. Sidebottom had seen much more luxuriant and snugger conditions of existence than that which can be maintained on four hundred a year. For instance, her friend, Mrs. Tomkins, having six hundred, was able to keep a little carriage; and Miss Jones, on a thousand, had a footman and a butler. Consequently Mrs. Sidebottom was by no means inclined to acquiesce in a boreal and glacial existence of four hundred, and say that it was the best of states that ever the sun beheld.

Mrs. Sidebottom's half-brother, Jeremiah Pennycomequick, was unmarried and aged fifty-five. She knew his age to a day, naturally, being his sister, and she sent him congratulations on his recurrent birthdays – every birthday brought her nearer to his accumulations. She knew his temperament, naturally, being his sister, and could reckon his chances of life as accurately as the clerk in an Assurance Office. To impress the fact of her relationship on Jeremiah, to obtain, if possible, some

influence over him, at all events to hedge out others from exercising power over his mind, Mrs. Sidebottom had lately migrated to Mergatroyd, and had brought her son with her. She was the rather moved to do this, as her whole brother, Nicholas Pennycomequick, had just died. There had been no love lost between Jeremiah and Nicholas, and now that Nicholas was no more, it was possible that his son Philip might be received into favour, and acquire gradually such influence over his uncle as to prejudice him against herself and her son. To prevent this – prevent in both its actual and its original significations – Mrs. Sidebottom had pulled up her tentpegs, and had encamped at Mergatroyd.

The captain wore crimson-silk stockings and glazed pumps. He had neat little feet, like his mother. When he had lighted a cigarette, he blew a whiff of smoke, then held up one of his feet and contemplated it.

'My dear Lambert,' said Mrs. Sidebottom, 'I wish you could slip those red stockings of yours into your uncle's beetle-crushers.'

'They would be too roomy for me,' said the captain.

'Not at all, Lamb. Your feet would expand to fill his shoes,' argued his mother.

'My feet are pinched enough now – certainly,' sighed Lambert Pennycomequick.

'This dinner will not have cost us nothing,' mused Mrs. Sidebottom, looking dreamily into the coals. 'The champagne was six-and-six a bottle, and three bottles were drunk,' she also heaved a sigh.

'Almost a pound. Surely, gooseberry would have done.'

'No, Lamb! it would not. It never does to be stingy in such matters. Though how we are to pay for it all – ' Mrs. Sidebottom left the sentence as unsettled as the bill for the champagne was likely to remain.

'I don't see why you should not tell Uncle Jeremiah how crippled we are.'

'Never,' said his mother decisively. 'Man's heart as naturally closes against impecunious relatives as does a tulip against rain. When you are bathing, Lamb, you never voluntarily swim within reach of an octopus. If you see one coming, with its eyes fixed on you, and its feelers extended, you strike out for dear life. It is so in the great sea of life, which is full of these many-armed hungry creatures. The waters are alive with them, great as a needy relation, and small as a begging letter. It is insufficient to know how to swim; one must know also how to kick out and keep away from octopuses. No, Jeremiah must not suppose that we want anything of him.'

'It seems to me, mother,' said Lambert, 'that you might just as well tell him we are in difficulties and need his assistance. I am sure he sees it; he was very cold and reserved to-night.'

'Not on any account. You are quite mistaken; he has not a suspicion. Let me see, the waiters were half a guinea each, and the pheasants seven shillings a pair. We could not have sixpenny grapes – it would never have done.'

'I hate reckoning on dead men's shoes,' said Lambert. 'It is mean. Besides, Uncle Jeremiah may outlive us both.'

'No, Lamb, he cannot. Consider his age; he is fifty-five.'

'And you, mother, are fifty, only five years' difference.'

Mrs. Sidebottom did not wince.

'You do not consider that his has been a sedentary life, which is very prejudicial to health. Besides, he has rushes of blood to the head. You saw how he became red as a Tritoma when you made that ill-judged remark about Salome. Apoplexy is in the family. Our father died of it.'

'Well, I hate counting the years a fellow has to live. We must all hop some day.'

'I trust he enjoyed himself,' said Mrs. Sidebottom. 'He took one of the *anges-à-cheval*. Did he touch the ices?'

'I think not.'

'I am sorry – I mean, I am thankful, they are bad for apoplectic persons, Lamb. He pays income-tax on twelve hundred.'

'He does not live at the rate of five hundred.'

'Not at the rate of three.'

'Perhaps eventually he may leave the mill to Philip, and the savings to me. I won't think of it, as it may all turn out different; but that would be best for me.'

'Not best, Lamb. Both the savings and the mill should be yours.'

'What should I do with the mill? You would not have me turn manufacturer?'

'No; but you could sell the business.'

'This is like selling the lion's skin before the lion is killed,' said the captain with a little impatience.

After a pause, during which Mrs. Sidebottom watched a manufactory and a bank and much treasure in the red-hot coals crumble down in the gradual dissolution to ashes, she said:

'Lamb, you have no occasion to be uneasy about your cousin Philip.'

'I am not. I have not given him a thought.'

'Jeremiah can never forgive Nicholas for withdrawing his money from the business at a critical moment, and almost bringing about a catastrophe. When Nicholas did that I was as angry, and used as strong remonstrance as Jeremiah, but all in vain. Nicholas, when he took an idea into his head, would not be diverted from carrying it out, however absurd it was. I did not suppose that Nicholas would be such a fool as he proved, and lose his money. He got into the hands of a plausible scoundrel.'

'Schofield?'

'Yes; that was his name, Schofield, who turned his head, and walked off with pretty nearly every penny. But he might have ruined himself, and I would not have grumbled. What alarmed and angered me was that he jeopardized my fortune as well as that of Jeremiah. A man has a right to ruin himself if he likes, but not to risk the fortunes of others.'

The captain felt that he was not called upon to speak.

'It is as well that we are come here,' pursued Mrs. Sidebottom. 'Though we were comfortable at York, we could not have lived longer there at our rate, and here we can economize. The society here is not worth cultivation; it is all commercial, frightfully commercial. You can see it in the shape of their shoulders and in the cut of their coats. As for the women – But there, I won't be unkind.'

'Uncle Jeremiah winced at my joke about Salome.'

'Salome!' repeated his mother, and her mouth fell at the corners. 'Salome!' She fidgeted in her chair. 'I had not calculated on her when I came here. Really, I don't know what to do about her. You should not have made that joke. It was putting ideas into your uncle's head. It made the blood rush to his face, and that showed you had touched him. That girl is a nuisance. I wish she were married or shot. She may yet draw a stroke across our reckoning.'

Mrs. Sidebottom lapsed into thought, thought that gave her no pleasure. After a pause of some minutes, Captain Lambert said:

'By the way, mother, what table-cloth did you have on to-day? I noticed Uncle Jeremiah looking at it inquisitively.'

'Naturally he would look at it, and that critically, as he is a linen manufacturer, and weaves fine damasks. I hate shop.'

'But – what table-cloth was it?'

'The best, of course. One figured with oak-leaves and acorns, and in the middle a wreath, just like those thrown over one's head by urchins for a tip, on the Drachenfels.'

'Are you sure, mother?'

'I gave it out this morning.'

'Would you mind looking at it? I do not think the table has been cleared yet. When I saw Uncle Jeremiah was professionally interested in it, I looked also, but saw no acorns or oak-leaves.'

'Of course there were oak-leaves and acorns; it was our best.'

'Then I must be blind.'

'Fiddlesticks!' said Mrs. Sidebottom.

However, she stood up and went into the dining-room.

A moment later the captain heard an exclamation. Then his mother left the dining-room, and he heard her ascend the stairs. Shortly after she descended, and re-entered the room with a face the colour of a table-cloth, or, to be more exact, of the same tone as her eyelashes.

'Well,' said the Captain languidly, 'have the oak-leaves and acorns disappeared in the wash?'

'Oh, Lamb! what is to be done? Jeremiah will never forgive us. He will feel this acutely – as an insult. That owl – that owl of a maid has ruined our prospects.'

'What has she done?'

'And not one of the waiters, though paid half a guinea each, observed it.'

'What was done?'

'She put a sheet on the table, and made up your bed with the oak-leaves and acorns!'

CHAPTER II. SALOME

I lay in bed this morning, musing on the feelings of those aged Borneans as they approached ripeness, and noticed the eyes of the rising generation fixed on them with expectancy, saw their red tongues flicker out of their mouths and stealthily lick their lips. I lay in bed considering whether my time had come to crawl up the tree, whether, perhaps, I was already hanging to one of the branches, and felt the agitation of the trunk. But the thought was uncomfortable, and I turned back to the Borneans who live very remote from us, and I considered how sensitive they must have become in old age to every glance of eye, and word let slip, and gesture of impatience observable in the rising generation. I mused over the little artifices that would be adopted by them to disguise the approach of ripeness; how, when extending their shaking hands over the fire, they would endeavour to control the muscles and disguise their tremble; how they would give to them an unreal appearance of nervous grip; how they would talk loud and deep out of their quavering pipe; and how they would fill in the creases in their brows and cheeks with tallow, and dance at every festival with an affectation of suppleness long lost. And I considered further how that all these little artifices would be seen through and jeered at, and how they never for one minute would postpone the fatal day when the tree would be indicated, and the command given to ascend.

Then next, having felt my ribs and counted them, and my thews and found them shrunk and with no flesh on them, I thought of the Esquimaux, and the way in which their elders were put out of doors and exposed to die of cold; and after I had left my bed, at breakfast, throughout the day, I remained mighty touchy and keenly observant, and alarmed at every slight, and fault of deference, and disregard of habitual consideration, thinking it might be a premonition that I was being considered fit to be turned out into the cold.

Among barbarians it is customary to surfeit a victim destined to become a sacrifice. It almost seemed as if the birthday-banquet given to Uncle Jeremiah by his half-sister had been given with this intent. Mythologists tell us that Pluto, the god of the nether world, and Plutus, the god of wealth, were identical divinities, variously designated according to the aspect in which viewed, whether from that of the victims offered to the god, or from that of the immolator. The god of Death to one was the god of Fortune to another.

Uncle Jeremiah Pennycomequick was not indeed shaken by his half-sister and nephew whilst clinging to the Tree of Life, but was apprised by them as to his ripeness, and to his calibre, and was not unaware that such was the case. Indeed, as already intimated, Mrs. Sidebottom was as incapable of concealing her motives as is Mephistopheles of concealing his hoof. She flattered herself that it was not so, and yet she wore her purposes, her ambitions, in her face.

As Jeremiah walked homewards it was with much the same consciousness that must weigh on the spirits of a bullock that has been felt and measured by a butcher.

He opened his door with a latch-key, and entered his little parlour. A light was burning there, and he saw Salome seated on a stool by the fire, engaged in needle-work. The circle of light cast from above was about her, irradiating her red-gold hair. She turned and looked up at Jeremiah with a smile, and showed the cheek that had been nearest the fire glowing like a carnation.

'What – not in bed?' exclaimed the old man, half reproachfully, and yet with a tone of pleasure in his voice.

'No, uncle; I thought you might possibly want something before retiring. Besides, you had not said Good-night to me, and I couldn't sleep without that.'

'I want nothing, child.'

'Shall I fold up my work and go?'

'No – no,' he replied hesitatingly, and stood looking at the fire, then at his chair, and then, with doubt and almost fear, at her. 'Salome, I should like a little talk with you. I am out of sorts, out of spirits. The Sidebottoms always irritate me. Velvet is soft, but the touch chills my blood. I want to have my nerves composed before I can sleep, and the hour is not late – not really late. I came away from the Sidebottoms as soon as I could do so with decency. Of course, it was very kind of my sister to give this dinner in my honour, on my birthday, but – ' He did not finish the sentence.

The girl took his hand and pressed him to sit down in his chair. He complied without resistance, but drew away his hand from her with a gesture of uneasiness, a shrinking that somewhat surprised her.

When in his seat, he sat looking at her, with his elbows resting on the arms of his chair, and his palms folded before his breast like the hands of a monumental effigy. Salome had resumed her place and work. As he did not speak, she presently glanced up at him and smiled with her slight sweet smile, that was not the motion of the lips, but the dimpling of the pure cheek. He did not return her smile; his eyes, though on her, did not see her and notice the inquiry in her countenance.

Jeremiah was aged that day fifty-five, or, as Mrs. Sidebottom put it for her greater comfort, in his fifty-sixth year. The dinner party at his half-sister's had been given entirely in his honour. His health had been drunk, and many good wishes for long years had been expressed with apparent heartiness; but what had been done to gratify him had been overdone in some particulars, and underdone in others – overdone in profession, underdone in sincerity; and he returned home dissatisfied and depressed.

When the peacock unfurls his fan, he does not persistently face you; if he did so, words would fail to express your admiration, but the bird twirls about on his feet, and foolishly exposes the ribbing of his plumage, so as to provoke contemptuous laughter. It is the same with selfish and with vain persons. They make a prodigious effort to impose, and then, still ruffling with expanded glories, they revolve on their pivots, and in complete unconsciousness exhibit the ignoble rear of sordid artifice, and falsity, and mean pretence.

Joseph Cusworth had been at first clerk and then traveller for the house of Pennycomequick, a trustworthy, intelligent and energetic man. Twenty-two years ago, after the factory had fallen under the sole management of Jeremiah, through the advanced age of his father and his half-brother's disinclination for business, master and man had quarrelled. Jeremiah had been suspicious and irascible in those days, and he had misinterpreted the freedom of action pursued by Cusworth as allowed him by old Pennycomequick, and dismissed him. Cusworth went to Lancashire, where he speedily found employ, and married. After a few years and much vexation through the incompetence or unreliability of agents, Jeremiah had swallowed his pride and invited Cusworth to return into his employ, holding out to him the prospect of admission into partnership after a twelvemonth. Cusworth had, accordingly, returned to Mergatroyd and brought with him his wife and twin daughters. The reconciliation was complete. Cusworth proved to be the same upright, reliable man as of old, and with enlarged experience. His accession speedily made itself felt. He was one of those men who attract friends everywhere, whom everyone insensibly feels can be trusted.

The deed of partnership was drawn up and engrossed, and only lacked signature, when, in going through the mill with Jeremiah, Cusworth was caught by the lappet of his coat in the machinery, drawn in, under the eye of his superior, and so frightfully mangled that he never recovered consciousness, and expired a few hours after.

From that time, Mrs. Cusworth, with the children, was taken into the manufacturer's house, where she acted as his housekeeper. There the little girls grew up, and made their way into the affections of the solitary man who encouraged them to call him uncle, though there was absolutely no relationship subsisting between them.

Jeremiah had never been married; he had never been within thought of such an event. No woman had ever made the smallest impression on his heart. He lived for his business, which engrossed

all his thoughts; as for his affections, they would have stagnated but for the presence of the children in the house, the interest they aroused, the amusement they caused, the solicitude they occasioned, and for the thousand little fibres their innocent hands threw about his heart, till they had caught and held it in a web of their artless weaving. He had lost his mother when he was born, his father married again soon after, and his life at home with his stepmother had not been congenial. He was kept away from home at school, and then put into business at a distance, and his relations with his half-sister and half-brother had never been cordial. They had been pampered and he neglected. When, finally, he came home to assist his father, his half-sister was married, and his brother, who had taken a distaste for business, was away.

One day of his life had passed much like another; he had become devoted to his work, which he pursued mechanically, conscientiously, but at the same time purposelessly, for he had no one whom he loved or even cared for to whom his fortune might go and for whom, therefore, it would be a pleasure to accumulate. And as for himself, he was without ambition.

When daily he returned from the mill after the admission of the Cusworth family under his roof, the prattle and laughter of the children had refreshed him; their tender, winning ways had overmastered him and softened his hitherto callous heart. It was to him as if the sun had suddenly broken through the clouds that had overarched and chilled and obscured his life, and was warming, glorifying, and vivifying his latter days.

Time passed, and the little girls grew up into young women. They were much alike in face and in colour of hair and eyes and complexion; but there the likeness stopped. In character they were not twins. Their names were Salome and Janet. Janet was married. A year ago, when she was barely nineteen, the son of a manufacturer at Elboeuf, in Normandy, had seen, loved, and made her his own.

This young man, Albert Victor Baynes, had been born and bred in France, but his father had been a manufacturer in Yorkshire, till driven to distraction by strikes at times when he had taken heavy contracts, he, like a score of others similarly situated, had migrated with his plant and business to Normandy, and opened in a foreign land a spring of wealth that copiously irrigated a wide area, and which greed and folly had banished from its proper home. About Rouen, Elboeuf, and Louviers are bristling factory chimneys and busy manufactures, carried thither by Yorkshire capitalists and employers, and where they initiated, the French have followed, and have drained away our English trade.

Young Baynes had come to Yorkshire and to Mergatroyd to visit relatives, and he had at once lost his heart to Janet Cusworth. As he was the only son of a man in good business, and as 'Uncle' Jeremiah was prepared to act liberally towards the daughter of Joseph Cusworth, no difficulties arose to cross the course of love and delay union. It was said that Jeremiah Pennycomequick could hardly have behaved more liberally had Janet been his daughter. But another reason urged him to generosity beside his regard for the girl. This was gratitude to Albert Victor Baynes for choosing Janet instead of his special favourite, Salome, who had chiefly wound herself about his heart. Janet was a lively, frolicsome little creature, whom it was a relaxation to watch, and whose tricks provoked laughter; but Salome was that one of the twins who had depth of character, and who, as the millfolk declared, had inherited all her father's trustworthiness, thoughtfulness, and that magnetism which attracts love.

Salome continued her needlework silently, with the firelight flickering over her fair face and rich hair. Her complexion was very delicate, and perhaps the principal charm of her face consisted in the transparency not of the skin only, but of the entire face, that showed every change of thought and feeling by a corresponding dance of blood and shift of colour in it – and not colour only, for as a mirror takes the lightest breath and becomes clouded by it, so was it with her countenance; bright with an inner light, the slightest breath of trouble, discouragement, alarm, brought a cloud over it, dimming its usual brilliancy.

'Yours is a very tell-tale face,' her sister had often said to her. 'Without your opening your eyes I can read all that passes in your mind.'

At the time that young Baynes had stayed at Mergatroyd, Jeremiah had been uneasy. The young man hovered round the sisters, and spoke to one as much as to the other, and divided his attentions equally between them. The sisters so closely resembled each other in features, complexion and hair, as well as in height and frame, that only such as knew them could distinguish the one from the other, and the distinction consisted rather in expression than in aught else. How anyone could mistake the one for the other was a marvel to Jeremiah, who was never in doubt. But the resemblance was so close that Albert Victor Baynes hung for some time in uncertainty as to which he should take, and was only decided by the inner qualities of Janet, whose vivacity and sparkle best suited the taste of a man whose ideas of woman showed they had been formed in France.

Whilst Baynes was in uncertainty, or in apparent uncertainty, Jeremiah suffered. He loved both the girls, but he loved Salome infinitely better than her sister; it would be to him a wrench to part with brilliant Janet, but nothing like the wrench that would ensue were he required to separate from Salome.

Those who from childhood have been surrounded by an atmosphere of love, who have come to regard it as their natural element, such have no conception of the force with which love boils up in an old heart that has been long arid and affectionless. In the limestone Western Hills there are riverless valleys, tracts of moor and mountain without a rift, dead and waterless, yet deep beneath, in secret channels, streams are flowing, and mighty vaults form subterranean reservoirs, by all who pass over the surface unsuspected. But suddenly from a cliff-side pours the long-hidden water, not a spring, a rivulet, but a full-grown river ready to turn millwheels and carry boats. So is it with certain human natures that have been long passionless, without the token of soft affections: the all-conquering stream of love breaks from their hearts in mighty volume and unexpectedly.

There had been nothing of self-analysis in Jeremiah. The children had sprung up under his care, and year by year had seen them acquire an inch or a fraction of an inch in height, their beauty develop, their intelligences expand; imperceptibly they had stolen from infancy into childhood, and from childhood in like manner had crept unobserved into maidenhood, and then flowered into full and perfect beauty; and each stage of growth had carried them a stage further into Jeremiah's affections, and had cast another and a stronger tie about his heart. He had loved them as children, and he loved them as beautiful and intelligent girls, as belonging to his house, as essential to his happiness, as the living elements that made up to him the idea of home. The only sorrow he had – if that could be called a sorrow which was no more than a regret – was that they were not his own true nieces, or, better still, his children. When Janet was taken and Salome left, he was thankful, and he put away from him for the time the fear that Salome would also take wing and leave him in the same manner as Janet had gone. How could he endure recurrence to the old gloom, and relapse into purposeless gathering of money? How could he endure life deprived of both Janet and Salome? How can a man who has seen the sun endure blindness? Or a man whose ears have drunk in music bear deafness? Deafness and blindness of heart would be his portion in that part of life when most he needed ear and eye – deafness and blindness after having come to understand the melody of a happy home, and see the beauty of a child-encircled hearth.

What must be the distress of him who has had a well-furnished house to have an execution put in, and everything sold away from before his eyes, nothing left him but the bed on which to lie and gnash his teeth? How bald, how cold, how hateful the dismantled home will seem without the thousand comforts and beautifying objects to which his eyes have been accustomed! The children as they grew up had furnished Jeremiah's house with pleasant fancies, had hung the walls with bright remembrances, and filled every corner with tender associations. The floor was strewn with their primrose homage. The thought that as he had lost Janet, so must he some day lose Salome, rose up continually before Jeremiah, and sickened him with fear. He tried to steel himself in expectation of it. It was in the nature of things that young girls should marry. It was inevitable that a closer and stronger tie should be formed, and then that cord of reverential gratitude which now attached Salome to him

would dwindle imperceptibly, yet surely, to a thread, and from a thread to a filament. In proportion as from the new bond other ties arose, so would that attaching her to him become attenuated till it became formal only.

A great pain arose in Jeremiah's heart.

And now, this evening, he looked at the girl engaged on her needlework, and observation returned into his eyes. Now he began that work of self-analysis, with her before him, that he had never thought of engaging in before, never dreamed would be requisite for him to engage in.

As he looked steadily at Salome, his closed palms trembled, and he separated them, put one to his lips, for they were trembling also, and then to his brow, which was wet.

Salome's soft brown eyes were lifted from her work, and rested steadily on him.

'Dear uncle,' she said. 'My dear – dear, uncle! You are unwell.'

She drew her stool close to him, and threw her arms about him, to draw his quivering face towards her own that she might kiss it. But he started up with a groan, backed from her arms, and paced the room in agitation. He dare not receive her embrace. He dare not meet her eyes. He had read his own heart for the first time, helped thereto by a casual joke from Captain Lambert Pennycomequick at table that evening.

CHAPTER III. A TRUST

During dinner that evening the conversation had turned on modern music. Yorkshire folk are, with rare exceptions, musical, and those who are not musical are expected, at all events, to be able to take their part in a conversation about music. Someone had spoken about old English ballads, whereupon Captain Lambert had said, as an aside to his uncle:

'No one can doubt what is your favourite song.'

'There you have the advantage of me,' said Jeremiah simply.

'"Sally in our Alley" – but I must say you take slow time in getting to the last verse.'

Then he hummed the words:

'And when my seven long years are out,
Oh, then I'll marry Sally!
And then how happily we'll live,
But not in our Alley.'

Then it was that the blood had rushed into the manufacturer's temples, a rush of blood occasioned partly by anger at being made the subject of a joke, and partly by the suggestion which startled him.

Never before that moment had the thought occurred to him that it was possible for him to bind Salome to him by the closest and surest of ties. No, never before had he imagined that this was possible.

How one word starts a train of ideas! As a spark falling on thatch may cause a conflagration, so may a word carelessly dropped set blood on fire and drive a man to madness. That little remark had produced in Jeremiah an effect greater than Lambert could have calculated, and his mother went very near the truth when she rebuked him for saying what he had. From thenceforth Jeremiah could no longer look at Salome in the old light; she was no more a child to him, and he no more an old man beyond the reach of that flame that sweeps round the world and scorches all men. In Wagner's great opera of the 'Valkyrie,' Brunnhild is represented asleep, engirdled by a ring of fire, and Sigurd, who tries to reach her, can only do so by passing through the flame, and to render it innocuous he sings the wondrous fire-spell song, and the flame leaps and declines, and finally goes out to the cadences of the spell. But Jeremiah now found himself caught in the *Waberlohe* that enringed Salome, knowing no incantation by which to abate its ardour; whilst she sat unconscious of the peril to which she subjected others, of the magic that surrounded and streamed forth from her, guileless of the pain which she occasioned him whom she beckoned to her. Jeremiah was caught by the flame, it curled round him, and he writhed in its embrace. He was an old, at all events an elderly, man, his age five and fifty, and Salome was but twenty. He had passed the grand climateric when she was born. Could he, dare he, love her, except with the simple love of a parent for a child? But could he love her thus any longer now that his eyes were opened, and he had discovered the condition of his own heart? When Adam had tasted of the Tree of Knowledge his child-like simplicity was gone, and he made himself coverings to hide himself from himself and from others. So now, this man in the decline of life had tasted also and at once was filled with shame at himself, and he sought out evasion of the truth, a disguise for his feelings, lest Salome should suspect what was passing within him.

'Salome, my child,' he said, 'those Sidebottoms vex me beyond endurance. What do you think! They served up a really sumptuous dinner on a table covered with a sheet.'

'A sheet – from a bed!'

'A sheet, not a tablecloth. It was characteristic.'

'Has that upset you?'

'No – not that. But, Salome, I have been considering how it would be, were this factory, after I am no more, to fall into such hands as those of the ninny captain.'

'There is Mr. Philip,' said the girl.

'Philip – !' the manufacturer paused. 'Philip – I hardly consider him as one of the family. His father behaved outrageously.'

'But for all that he is your nephew.'

'Of course he is, by name and blood, but – I do not like him.'

'You do not know him, uncle.'

'That is true; but –'

'But he is your nearest relative.'

Mr. Pennycomequick was silent. He returned to his chair and reseated himself; not now leaning back, with his arms folded on his breast, but bent forward, with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

He looked into the fire. After full five minutes' silence he said, in a tone of self-justification:

'I can never forgive my half-brother Nicholas.'

'Yet he is dead,' said the girl.

There was no accent of reproach in her voice; nevertheless Jeremiah took her words as conveying a reproach.

'I do not mean,' he said apologetically, 'that I allowed him to die unforgiven, but that his conduct was inexcusable. I have pardoned the man, but I cannot forgive his act.'

'Philip, however,' said Salome, 'is the son of the man, and not of his mistake.'

Jeremiah was touched, and winced; but he would not show it.

'My brother Nicholas acted in such a manner as to produce an estrangement that has, and will have, lastingly influenced our relations. Philip I saw at his father's funeral, which I attended – which,' he repeated the sentence, 'which I attended.'

The girl said no more. She knew that Jeremiah was not a man to brook interference, and she was well aware that this was a matter in which she had no right to interfere. But he was not satisfied with so slight a word of self-justification; he returned to the topic, with his face turned from her, looking into the fire.

'It was thoughtless; it was wicked. The mill was left between us, burdened with a certain charge for my half-sister; and Nicholas never took the smallest interest in the business. I did the work; he drew his share. He got into the hands of a swindling speculator, who fired his imagination with a scheme for converting the Desert of Sahara into a vast inland sea, the company to have the monopoly of the trade round its shores. My brother's head was turned, and he insisted on withdrawing his share from the mill. He would sell his share – draw all his money out of the concern, and pitch it wherever Schofield – I mean wherever it was most likely to be engulfed and yield no return. I remonstrated. I pointed out to my brother the folly of the scheme, the danger to me. I had no wish to have some man, of whom I knew nothing, thrust into partnership with me. I must buy my brother out myself. I did this at a moment when money was dear, and also at a time when it was necessary to provide the mill with new machinery, or be left in the lurch in the manufacture of figured damasks. I had to borrow the money. Slackness set in, and – God knows! – I was as nearly brought to bankruptcy as a man can be without actually stopping. Your father came to my aid. But I had several years of terrible struggle, during which bitter resentment against my brother Nicholas grew in my heart. We never met again. We no longer corresponded. As for his son, I knew nothing of him. I had seen him as a boy. I did not see him again till he was a man, at his father's grave. If Nicholas had considered my prejudices, as I suppose he would call them, he would not have put Philip in a solicitor's office, knowing, as he must have known, my mistrust of lawyers. I will not say that I would not have given him a place with

me, had Nicholas asked for it; but he was either too proud to stoop to request a favour of me, or his old prejudice against trade survived his ruin.'

'Philip may be good and sensible, and a nephew to be proud of. How can you tell, uncle, that he is not, when you do not know him?'

'He has chosen his profession now. He is a lawyer, and so his line of life leads away from mine.' Then ensued silence, broken at length by Salome.

'Uncle,' she said, 'I have had a letter from dear Janet, and what do you think? She is coming to England, and most likely to us. She does not say when; but those dreadful Prussians are making their way to Rouen, in spite of the wonderful stand made by General Faidherbe and the heroic conduct of his troops. Janet says that she wonders how any soldiers can stand against an army commanded by a man-devil, for that is what the Prussian general is named. She says that Albert Victor has felt it his duty to volunteer to fight for the country of his nativity and adoption, so dear Janet is alone, and Albert has advised her to take refuge in England till the tyranny be over. But Janet says she is in hourly expectation that the Prussians will be out-manoevred, surrounded, and cut to pieces, and, much as she hates the enemies, her chief anxiety is that the French may not forget to act with humanity in the moment of victory. She says that the affair at Amiens was quite misrepresented by the English papers, that Faidherbe obtained a splendid victory, and only retired in pursuance of a masterly plan he had conceived of drawing the Prussians on, so as to envelop them and crush them at one blow. Moreover, Janet says that this blow is expected to fall at any moment, and to show how thorough a partisan she is – even to me she has begun to spell her name in the French way, Jeannette.'

'Janet likely to come to us!' exclaimed Jeremiah.

'Only in the event, which she says is more than problematical, of the enemy occupying Rouen. She tells me that the spirit of the French is superb. The way in which every man has flown to arms at the call of his country is unparalleled. She says that the Emperor was the cause of the disasters that have occurred hitherto, but that France has found a man of almost superhuman genius, called Gambetta, who is already causing consternation amongst the Prussians. She says that she has seen it stated in the most trustworthy Paris papers that in Germany mothers still their children with the threat that if they cry, they will invoke Gambetta.'

'Janet will certainly be here shortly,' said Jeremiah. 'The war can only go one way.'

'I shall be delighted to see my darling sister, and yet sorry for the occasion of her visit. She tells me that the factories are all stopped. The hands are now engaged in the defence of their country. Oh, uncle! what would happen to Janet if anything befell Albert Victor? Do you think he was right to leave his wife and take up arms as a franc-tireur? He is not really a Frenchman, though born at Elboeuf.'

To her surprise, Salome saw that her old friend was not attending to what she was saying. He was not thinking of her sister any more. He was thinking about her. When she asked what would happen to Janet were her husband to be carried off, the question forced itself upon his thought, What would become of Salome were he to fall sick, and be unable to defend himself against his half-sister. He was perfectly conscious of Mrs. Sidebottom's object in coming to Mergatroyd, and he was quite sure that in the event of paralysis, or any grievous sickness taking him, his half-sister would invade his house and assume authority therein. He saw that this would happen inevitably; and he was not at all certain how she would behave to Salome. Mrs. Cusworth was a feeble woman, unable to dispute the ground with one so pertinacious, and armed with so good a right, as Mrs. Sidebottom. What friends had Salome? She had none but himself. Her sister's house was about to be entered by the enemy, her sister to be a refugee in England. The factories at Elboeuf were stopped; it was uncertain how the war, when it rolled away, would leave the manufacturers, whether trade that had been stopped on the Seine would return thither. What if the Baynes family failed?

Would it not be advisable to secure to Salome a home and position by making her his wife? Then, whatever happened to him, she would be safe, in an impregnable situation.

'Salome!'

'Yes, uncle.'

She looked up anxiously. She had not let him see that she was aware that he was in trouble of mind, and yet she knew it, though she did not guess its character. Hers was one of those sympathetic natures that feels a disturbance of equilibrium, as the needle in a magnetometer vibrates and reels when to the gross human eye there is naught to occasion it. She had watched Jeremiah's face whilst she spoke to him of her sister, and was surprised and pained to notice how little Janet's calamities and anxieties affected him.

What was the matter with him? What were the thoughts that preoccupied his mind? Not a shadow of a suspicion of their real nature entered her innocent soul.

'Dear uncle,' she said, when she had waited for a remark, after he had called her attention, and had waited in vain, 'what is it?'

'Nothing.'

He had recoiled in time. On the very verge of speaking he had arrested himself.

'Uncle,' she said, 'I am sure you are not well, either in body or in mind.'

He stood up, went out of the room, without a word.

Salome looked after him in surprise and alarm. Was he going off his head? She heard him ascend the stairs to his study, and he returned from it almost immediately. He re-entered the room with a long blue sealed envelope in his hand.

'Look at this, my child, and pay great attention to me. An unaccountable depression is weighing on me – no, not altogether unaccountable, for I can trace it back to the society in which I have been. It has left me with a mistrust of the honesty and sincerity of everyone in the world, of everyone, that is, but you; you' – he touched her copper-gold head lightly with a shaking hand – 'you I cannot mistrust; you – it would kill me to mistrust. I hold to life, to my respect for humanity, through you as a golden chain. Salome, I have a great trust to confide to you, and I do it because I know no one else in whom I can place reliance. This is my will, and I desire you to take charge of it. I commit it to your custody. Put it where it may be safe, and where you may know where to lay hand on it when it shall be wanted.'

'But, uncle, why not leave it with your lawyer.'

'I have no lawyer,' he answered sharply. 'I have never gone to law, and thrown good money after bad. You know my dislike for lawyers. I wrote my will with my own hand after your sister married, and I flatter myself that no wit of man or rascality of lawyers can pervert it. I can set down in plain English what my intentions are as to the disposal of my property, so that anyone can understand my purpose, and no one can upset its disposition.'

'But, uncle – why should I have it who am so careless?'

'You are not careless. I trust you. I have perfect confidence that what is committed to you you will keep, whether the will concerns you or not. I wish you to have it, and you will obey my wishes.'

He put the paper into her reluctant hands, and waited for her to say something. Her cheeks were flushed with mingled concern for him and fear for herself. Such a valuable deed she thought ought to have been kept in his strong iron safe, and not confided to her trembling hands.

He put his hand on her shoulder.

'Thank you, Salome,' he said. 'You have relieved my mind of a great anxiety.'

'And now, uncle, you will go to bed?'

He stood, with his hand still on her shoulder, hesitatingly. 'I don't know; I am not sleepy.' He thought further. 'Yes, I will go. Good-night, my child.'

Then he left the room, ascended the stairs, passed through his study into his bedchamber beyond, where he turned down the clothes, and threw off his dress coat and waistcoat, and then cast himself on the bed.

His brain was in a whirl. He could not retire to rest in that condition of excitement. He would toss on his bed, which would be one of nettles to him. He left it, stood up, drew on a knitted cardigan jersey, and then put his arms through his great-coat.

About a quarter of an hour after he had mounted to his room he descended the stairs again, and then he encountered Salome once more, leaving the little parlour with the envelope that contained his will in her hand.

'What! You not gone to bed, Salome?'

'No, uncle, I have been dreaming over the fire. But, surely, you are not going out?'

'Yes, I am. There has been such a downpour of rain all day that I have not taken my customary constitutional. I cannot sleep. The night is fine, and I shall go for a stroll on the canal bank.'

'But, uncle, it is past twelve o'clock.'

'High time for you to be in bed. For me, it is another matter. My brain is on fire; I must take a composing draught of fresh night air.'

'But, uncle –'

'Do not remain up longer. I have acted inconsiderately in keeping you from your bed so long. Go to sleep speedily, and do not trouble yourself about me. I have my latch-key, and will let myself in. The gas shall remain turned down in the hall. I am always upset unless I have a walk during the day, and the sheets of rain that poured down have kept me a prisoner. I shall not be out for long. I will cool my head and circulate my blood, under the starry sky.'

'But you will find the roads sloppy, after the rain.'

'The towpath will be dry. I am going there, by the canal. Good-night.'

She held up her innocent, sweet face for the kiss he had neglected to give her a quarter of an hour ago, when he left the room. He half stooped, then turned away without kissing her.

'Good-night, dear Salome. Mind the will. It is a trust.'

Then he went out.

CHAPTER IV. ON THE TOWPATH

There are points, occasions on life's journey, when our guides fail us, and these points and occasions are neither few nor far between. The signposts that might instruct us are either illegible or have not been set up. The forming of a determination is of vital importance, but the material on which to form a determination is withdrawn from us, as the straw was taken from the Israelites when they were ordered to make bricks.

We buy a map and start on our journey, and come to branch-roads which are not set down. The map is antiquated, and no longer serviceable.

We buy a legal compendium which is to obviate having recourse to lawyers, and when we encounter a difficulty, turn to it for enlightenment, and find that precisely this question is passed over.

We purchase a manual of domestic medicine to cut off the necessity of calling in a doctor at every hitch, and when a hitch occurs we discover that precisely this one is unnoted in our book.

We are provided with moral *vade-mecums* which are to serve us in all contingencies, but are arrested at every hundred paces by some knot which the instructions in our *vade-mecum* do not assist us in untying.

Jeremiah now found himself in a predicament from which he did not know how to escape, at a fork in life's road, and he was unable to form a judgment whether to turn to the left hand or to the right.

By his own generosity he had rendered his position discouraging. He had behaved to Janet with so great liberality when she married, as to produce a deep and general impression that Salome would be treated with at least equal liberality in the event of her marriage. An admirer might hesitate to offer for a portionless girl, however charming in feature and perfect in mind, not because necessarily mercenary in his ideas, but because he would know that as single life is impossible without means of supporting it, so double life, containing in itself the promise of development into a number of supplemental lives, is proportionately impossible.

Jeremiah, might, accordingly, with almost certainty, reckon on being left to a solitary and barren decline of life, after he had come late to appreciate the warmth and amenities of domestic association – after he had enjoyed them a sufficient number of years to esteem them indispensable.

He recalled the dead and meagre existence he had led before he received the little girls and their mother into his house, and he sickened at the prospect of recurring to it. He could not disguise from himself that if he lost Salome, everything that gave zest and interest to life would be taken away from him. He would be forced to revert to the hard uniformity of his previous existence; but that thought was repugnant to him. Most men look back on their childhood or to college days as a period of exuberant vitality and unspoiled delight. To but few is it not given to begin their Book of Genesis with Paradise, flowing with sparkling rivers whose beds are gold, rich with flowers, redolent with odours. Sooner or later all are cast out through the gates, and there is no return – only a reminiscence. To some more than to others the smell of the flowers clings through life. The youth and early manhood of Jeremiah had been joyless, spent among briars and thorns, and only late had he found the gates of Eden, and the cherub with a smile had withdrawn his sword, and allowed him a look in. What would be the end of life to him if Salome were taken away? As his health and powers of resistance failed, his house would be invaded by the Sidebottoms, perhaps also by the unknown Philip, and they would wrangle over his savings, and hold him a prisoner within his own walls. But – dare he suggest to Salome that she should be his wife? He did not shut his eyes to their disparity in age, to the fact that her regard for him was of a totally different texture from such as a man exacts of a wife. Would it be possible to change filial into marital love? Was it not as preposterous of him to expect it as was the infatuation of the alchemist to transmute one metal into another?

Then, again, would not his proposal shake, if it did not shatter, her respect, forfeit that precious love she now tendered him with both hands without stint? By asking for what she could not give, would he not lose that which he had already, like the dog that dropped the meat snapping at a shadow, and so leave him in utter destitution? The harbour of the thought of a change of relations had affected the quality of his intercourse with her, had clouded its serenity, disturbed its simplicity. It had prevented him from meeting her frank eye, from receiving her embrace, admitting the touch of her lips. He shrank from her innocent endearments as though he had no right to receive them, tendered in one coinage and received in another value. Were he to communicate to her the thought that fermented within him, would not the yeasty microbe alter her and change her sweet affection for him into something that might be repugnance?

He drew a laboured breath.

'I am in a sore strait,' he groaned; 'I know not what to do. Would to heaven that my course were determined for me.'

He had reached the towpath beside the canal.

'Good-night, sir.'

He was startled. The night watch had met him, the man employed to walk around and through the factories at all hours of the night, on the look-out against fire, on guard against burglars.

'Good-night, sir. Just been on the bank to look at the river. Very full, and swelling instead of going down. Lot of rain fallen of late. Cold for the goldfish yonder.'

'Good-night,' answered the manufacturer; 'I also want to see the river. There is more rain yonder.'

He pointed to the western sky.

'The river is rising rapidly,' said the man; 'but there's no harm can take Pennyquick's – ligs too high.' Jeremiah's factory went by his surname, but contracted by the people through the omission of a syllable.

Then the man passed on his way, rattling his keys. The gold-fish! What did he mean?

Outside the wall of Mr. Pennycomequick's factory was a pool, into which the waste steam and boiling water from the engine discharged, and this pool was always hot. It swarmed with gold-fish. At some time or other, no one knew when, or by whom, a few, perhaps only a pair, had been thrown in, and now the little patch of water was thronged with fish. They throve, they multiplied therein. The mill girls cast crumbs to them from their breakfasts and dinners, and were allowed to net some occasionally for their private keeping in glass globes, but not to make of them an article of traffic. There was not a cottage in Pennyquick's Fold that had not such a vessel in the window.

Jeremiah saw that the overflow from the river had reached this little pool and converted it into a lake, chilling the steamy waters at the same time. Mergatroyd town or village stood on the slope of the hill that formed the northern boundary of Keld-dale. The Keld rose in that range of limestone mountains that divides Lancashire from Yorkshire, and runs from Derbyshire to the Scottish border. After a tortuous course between high and broken hills, folding in on each other like the teeth of a rat-trap, leaving in places scarce room in the bottom for road, rail, and canal to run side by side, it burst forth into a broad basin, banked on north and south by low hills of yellow sandstone, overlying coal. Some way down this shallow trough, on the northern flank, built about the hill-slope, and grouped about a church with an Italian spire perched on pillars, stood Mergatroyd. There the valley spread to the width of a mile, and formed a great bed of gravelly deposit of unreckoned depth. A couple of spade-grafts below the surface, water was reached; yet on this gravel stood most of the factories and their tall chimneys. The nature of the soil forbade sinking for foundations. Accordingly these were laid on the surface, the walls, and even the chimneys, being reared on slabs of sandstone laid on the ground. It might seem incredible that such fragile stone-slates should support such superincumbent masses; nevertheless it was so. The pressure, however, did not always fall on gravel equally compact;

this resulted in subsidences. Few walls had not cracked at some time, most were banded with iron, and not a chimney stood exactly perpendicular.

The canal and the river ran side by side, with a towpath along the former; but the high-road had deserted the valley and ran on the top of the hill. Neither canal nor river were of crystalline purity, or of ordinary cleanness; for into them the mills and dye-works discharged their odorous and discoloured refuse water, dense with oil and pigment, with impurities of every description and degree of nastiness. Fish had long ago deserted these waters, and if an occasional eel was caught it was inedible, so strongly did it taste of oil and dye.

The Yorkshire towns and rivers have their special 'bouquet,' which does not receive favourable appreciation by a stranger; it is not a fluctuating savour like that pervading the neighbourhood of Crosse and Blackwell's, in Oxford Street, which is at one time redolent of raspberries and another pungent with mixed pickles; summer and winter, spring and fall alike, the same dyes, the same oil, and the same horrible detergents are employed, and constitute a permanent, all-pervading effluvium, that clings to the garment, the hair, the breath of the inhabitants, as the savour of petroleum belongs to Baku, and the spice of orange flowers and roses is appropriate to the Riviera.

Far away in the north-west, above the boundary hill, the sky throbbed with light, from the iron furnaces seven miles distant, where the coal and iron were dug out of the same beds, and the one served to fuse the other, as in the human breast various qualities are found which tend to temper, purify and turn to service the one the other. The flames that leaped up from the furnaces as thirsty rolling tongues were not visible from the Keld-dale bottom under Mergatroyd, but the reflection was spread over a wide tract of cloud, and shone with rhythmic flash, as an auroral display. High up the river, at right angles to the axis of the valley, stood a huge, gaunt, five-storied mill for cloth and serge, commonly known as 'Mitchell's.' Every window in Mitchell's mill was alight this night, for it was running incessantly. Trade in cloth and serge was brisk on account of the Franco-German War. What is one man's loss is another man's gain? The rattle of guns in France produced the rattle of the looms in Yorkshire; and every bullet put through a Frenchman's or a German's uniform put a sovereign into the pocket of a cloth-weaver in England. Such is the law of equilibrium in Nature.

Business was brisk among the cloth-workers, but slack among the linen-weavers; the dead on the battle-field were not buried in winding-sheets, least of all in figured damasks.

An unusual downpour of rain had taken place, lasting continuously forty-eight hours. The very windows of heaven seemed to have been opened; at sunset the sky had partially cleared, but there were still lumbering masses of cloud drifting over the face of heaven, as icebergs detached from the mighty wall of black vapour that still remained in the west, built up half-way to the zenith over the great dorsal range, a range that arrested the exhalations from the Atlantic and condensed them into a thousand streams that leaped in 'fosses,' and wriggled and dived among the hills, and cleft themselves roads, to the east or to the west, to reach the sea.

To-night the Keld was very full, so swollen as to have overflowed, or rather to have dived under the embankments, and to ooze up through the soil in all directions in countless irrepressible springs, transforming the paddocks into ponds, and the fields into lagoons.

The towpath was the only walk that was not a mass of mud or a sop of water. It ran well above the level of the fields, and the rain that had fallen on it had drained – or, as the local expression had it, 'siped' away.

Along this towpath Jeremiah walked with his hands behind his back, brooding over his difficulties, seeking a solution that escaped him. If he remained silent, he must be content in a year or two to surrender Salome to another. If he spoke, he might lose her immediately and completely; for were she to refuse him she must at once withdraw from under his roof and remain estranged from him permanently.

But – what if she were to accept him? He who was nearly thrice her age? And what if, in the event of her accepting him, her heart were to wake up and love another? Had he any right to subject

her to such a risk, to impose on her such a trial? Would there not be a sacrifice of his own self-respect were he to offer himself to her? Would the love he would demand of her, given hesitatingly, as a duty, forced and uncertain, make up to him for the frank, ready, spontaneous gush of love which surrounded him at present?

'I am in a strait,' said Jeremiah Pennycomequick, again. 'Would to Heaven that the decision were taken out of my hands, and determined for me.'

He had reached the locks. They were fast shut, and the man in charge was away, in his cottage across the field; there was no light shining from the window. He was asleep. No barges passed up and down at night. His duties ended with the daylight. The field he would have to cross next morning to the lock was now submerged. Mr. Pennycomequick halted at the locks, and stood looking down into the lower level, listening to the rush of the water that was allowed to flow through the hatch. He could just see, below in the black gulf, a phosphorescent, or apparently phosphorescent, halo; it was the foam caused by the fall of the water-jet, reflecting the starlight overhead.

As Jeremiah thus stood, irresolute, looking at the lambent dance of the foam, a phenomenon occurred which roused his attention and woke his surprise.

The water in the canal, usually glassy and waveless, suddenly rose, as the bosom rises at a long inhalation, and rolled like a tidal wave over the top of the gates, and fell into the gulf below with a startling crash, as though what had fallen were lead, not water.

What was the cause of this? Jeremiah had heard that on the occasion of an earthquake such a wave was formed in the sea, and rushed up the shore, without premonition.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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