

WALTER BESANT, JAMES RICE

THE CHAPLAIN OF THE FLEET

Walter Besant
James Rice
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Walter Besant

The Chaplain of the Fleet

Part I

WITHIN THE RULES

CHAPTER I

HOW KITTY LOST HER

FATHER AND HER FRIENDS

My life has been (above any merits of my own) so blessed by Providence, that methinks its history should be begun with the ringing of bells, the singing of psalms, the sound of cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and all kinds of music. For surely the contemplation of a happy course should, even towards its close, be accompanied by a heart full of cheerful piety and gratitude. And though, as often happens to us in the Lord's wisdom, ill fortune, disappointment, troubles of the flesh, and pain of disease may perhaps afflict me in these latter years of fleeting life, they ought not to lessen the glad song of praise for blessings formerly vouchsafed (and still dwelling in my memory)

of love, of joy, and of happiness. Truly, the earth is a delightful place; a fair garden, which yields pleasant fruit; and, if it may be so said with becoming reverence, there are yet, outside the gates of Eden, places here and there which for beauty and delight, to those who thither win their way, are comparable with Paradise itself. In such a place it has been my happy lot to dwell.

Yet, just as the newborn babe begins his earthly course with a wail – ah, joyful cry for ear of mother! – so must this book begin with tears and weeping.

The weeping is that of an orphan over her dead father; the tears are those which fall upon a coffin beside an open grave: they are the tears of men and women come to pay this reverence at the burial of a man who was their best friend and their most faithful servant.

All the morning the funeral knell has been tolling; the people listen, now, to the solemn words of a service which seem spoken by the dead man himself to those who mourn. They admonish and warn, but they bid them be of good cheer, lift up hearts, and trust in the Lord.

When we are in great grief and sorrow, outward things seem to affect us more than in ordinary times, when the heart is in repose, and the mind, perhaps, slower of apprehension. The day, for instance, was late in May; the blackbird, thrush, and chaffinch were singing in the wood beside the church; a lark was carolling in the sky; a cuckoo was calling from the coppice; the hedges were green, and the trees were bright with their first fresh foliage;

the white may-blossom, the yellow laburnum, and the laylock were at their best, and the wild roses were just beginning.

To the country girl who had never yet left her native village, this joy of the spring was so natural that it did not jar upon the grief of her soul. When the funeral was over, and the grave filled in and the people all dispersed, she stood for a few moments alone, and then walked away across the long grass of the churchyard, stepping lightly over the graves of the villagers, opened the little wicket gate which led to the vicarage garden, passed in, and sought a sheltered place where, beneath the shade of bushes, she sat upon a bench and folded her hands, looked before her, and fell a-thinking.

She was between sixteen and seventeen, but tall of her age, and looked older; she wore a new black frock; she had thrown her straw hat with black ribbons upon the bench beside her. As for her face, I suppose it was pretty. Alas! I am a hypocrite, because I *know* that it was pretty. As yet, she did not know it, and had never thought about her face. Her eyes were brown (she has ever been thankful to have had brown eyes); her features were regular, and her face rather long; her hair was abundant and soft: it was like the hair of most English maidens, of a dark brown, or chestnut (it is now white); her arms were shapely, and her fingers thin and delicate (they were the fingers of a Pleydell); as for her complexion, it was as good as can be expected in a girl whose blood is pure, who has, as yet, known no late hours, who has been taught to use plenty of cold water and no washes or messes,

who has run about without thinking of freckles, and has lived in the open air on homely food. In other words, as fine a show of red and white was in the cheeks of that child as ever Sir Joshua Reynolds tried to copy upon canvas.

She was thinking many things. First, of her father and his death; of the funeral, and the grief shown by people whom she had thought to be hard of heart, insensible to his admonitions, and untouched by his prayers. Yet they stood about the grave and wept, rude women and rough men. Would they ever again find a minister so benevolent, so pious, and so active in all good work? She thought of the house, and how dark and lonely it was, deserted by its former owner. She thought of what she should do, in the time before her, and how she would be received in her new home. One thing comforted her: she looked older than she was, and was tall and strong. She could be helpful.

Then she drew out of her pocket a letter written for her only three days before her father died. She knew it quite by heart, but yet she read it again slowly, as if there might still be something in it which had escaped her.

“My beloved Daughter” (thus it ran), – “Knowing that I am about to die and to appear before my Father and merciful Judge, it is right that I should bestir myself to make thee comprehend the situation in which thou wilt be placed. Of worldly wealth I have, indeed, but little to give thee. Face thy lot with hope, resignation, and a cheerful heart. The righteous man, said one who knew, hath never been found to beg his bread. Indeed, the whole course of this world is

so ordered (by Divine wisdom), that he who chooseth the narrow path chooseth also the safest. Therefore, be of good cheer.

“Imprimis. When I am buried, search the bedstead, and, in the head thereof, will be found a bag containing the sum of one hundred guineas in gold pieces. I have saved this money during my twenty years of incumbency. I trust that it will not be laid to my charge that I did not give this also to the poor; but I thought of my daughter first. Secondly, Farmer Goodpenny is indebted to me in the sum of twenty-two pounds, four shillings, and eightpence, for which I have his note. I charge thee that he be not asked to pay interest, and since it may be that he hath not the money, let it wait his good time. He is an honest man, who fears God. Thirdly, there is money, some twelve pounds or more, lying in my desk for present use. Fourthly, there are several small sums due to me, money put out and lent (but not at usury), such as five shillings from the widow Coxon, and other amounts the which I will have thee forgive and remit entirely; for these my debtors are poor people. The horse is old, but he will fetch five pounds, and the cow will sell for two. As for the books, they may be sent to Maidstone, where they may be sold. But I doubt they will not bring more than ten guineas, or thereabouts, seeing that the call for works of divinity is small, even among my brethren of the cloth. And when you go to London, forget not to ask of Mr. Longman, publisher, of St. Paul’s Churchyard, an account of my ‘Sermons,’ published by him last year; my essay on ‘Philo-Judæus,’ issued four years ago; and my ‘Reflections

on the Christian State,' which he hath by him in manuscript. He will perhaps be able to return a larger sum of money than I was led by him at first to expect.

“My will and plain injunctions are as follows:

“When everything has been paid that is owing, and there are none who can hereafter say that he had a claim upon me which was unsatisfied, get together thy wearing apparel and effects, and under some proper protection, as soon as such can be found, go to London, and there seek out thy uncle and mother’s brother, the Reverend Gregory Shovel, Doctor of Divinity, of whom I have spoken to thee of old. I take shame to myself that I have not sent him, for many years, letters of brotherly friendship. Nor do I rightly remember where he is to be found. But I know that he lives, because once a year there comes to me a keg or anker of rum, which I know must be from him, and which I have drunk with my parishioners in a spirit of gratitude. Perhaps it would have been more consistent in a brother clergyman to have sent one of the latest books of our scholars. But he means well, and the rum is, I confess, of the best, and a generous drink, in moderation. He was once Curate and Lecturer of St. Martin’s-in-the-Fields; but I would have thee go first to the Coffee-house in St. Paul’s Churchyard, where they know all the London clergy, and ask for his present lodging. This found, go to him, tell him that I am dead, give him thy money, entrust thyself to him, and be guided by him as thou hast been by me.

“And now, my daughter, if a father’s prayers avail thee, be assured that I die like Jacob the patriarch, blessing thee

and commanding thee. For my blessing, I pray that the Lord may have thee in His keeping, and give thee what is good for the eternal life. For my commandment – Be good: for herein is summed up the whole of the Commandments.

“And remember, my child, the Christian who lives in fear of death is foolish: even as he is foolish who will not lay hold of the promise, and so lives in terror of the Judgment. For now I know – yea, I *know*– that the Lord loveth best that man who all the days of his life walks in faith and dies in hope. – Your loving father,
“Lawrence Pleydell.”

Had ever a girl so sweet a message from the dead, to keep and ponder over, to comfort and console her? She knew every word of it already, but the tears came afresh to her eyes in thinking of the dear hand which wrote those words – quiet now, its labours done, in the cold grave. Her father’s last Will and Testament gave her more than riches – it gave her strength and consolation. The example of his life, which was so Christian and so good, might be forgotten, because the girl was too young to understand it, and too ignorant to compare; but this letter of true faith and religion would never be forgotten.

The Reverend Lawrence Pleydell, Master of Arts and sometime Fellow of the ancient and learned College or House of Christ, Cambridge, was (which is a thing too rare in these days) a country clergyman who was also a scholar, a divine, a man of pious thought, and a gentleman by descent, though only of a younger branch. It is too often found that if a country clergyman

be a gentleman, he continues the habits of his class, such as fox-hunting, card-playing, and wine-drinking, concerning which, although the Bishops seem not yet of one mind upon the matter, I, for my humble part, remembering what kind of man was my good father, venture to think are pursuits unworthy of one who holds a cure of souls. And when a clergyman is a scholar, he is too often devoted entirely to the consideration of his Greek and Latin authors, whereby his power over the hearts of the people is in a measure lost. Or, if he is a divine, he is too often (out of the fulness of his mind) constrained to preach the subtleties and hidden things of theology, which cannot be understood of the common people, so that it is as if he were speaking in an unknown tongue. And sometimes the parson of the parish is but a rude and coarse person, of vulgar birth, who will smoke tobacco with the farmers – yea, even with the labourers – drink with them, and not be ashamed to be seen in beer-houses, tap-rooms, or even at such unseemly diversions as bull-baiting, badger-drawing, and cock-fighting. It were to be wished that the Church were purged of all such.

The parish contained, besides farmers, but one family of gentlefolk, that of Sir Robert Levett, Knight, who with his wife and two children lived at the Hall, and had an estate worth two thousand a year at least. When the vicar's wife died (she was somewhat his inferior in point of family, but had a brother in the Church), and his child was left without a mother, nothing would do for Lady Levett than that the little maid should be taken into

the Hall and brought up, having governesses and teaching, with her own daughter, Nancy, who was of about the same age, but a little younger. So the two girls were playfellows and scholars together, being taught those things which it befits a lady to learn, although one of them would be a poor lady indeed. There was one son, Will, who was at first at Eton with his cousin (and Sir Robert's ward), Harry Temple, the young Squire of Wootton Hampstead. It was a fearful joy when they came home for the holidays. For, although they kept the house in activity and bustle, making disorder and noise where there was generally quiet and order, yet after the manner of boys, who rejoice to show and feel their strength, they would play rough tricks upon the two girls, upset and destroy their little sports, and make them understand what feeble things are young maidens compared with boys.

Now just as the two girls were different – for one grew up tall and disposed to be serious, which was Kitty Pleydell, and the other was small and saucy, always with a laugh and a kiss, which was Nancy Levett – so the boys became different: for one, which was Will Levett, a rosy-cheeked lad, with a low forehead and a square chin, grew to dislike learning of all kinds, and was never happy except when he was in the stables with the horses, or training the dogs, or fox-hunting, or shooting, or fishing, or in some way compassing the death of wild creatures, sports to which his father was only moderately addicted; but the other, Harry Temple, was more studiously disposed, always came home with some fresh mark of his master's approbation, and read every

book he could find.

There came a change in their behaviour to the girls as they grew older. Will ceased to set a dog to bark at them, and to crack a whip to frighten them, or ride unbroken colts in order to make them cry out for fear; and Harry ceased to tease and torment them with little tricks and devices of mischief at which they were half pleased and half humiliated. When the boys left school they were sent to Pembroke College, Cambridge, a college in which many generations of Levetts had been educated. After two terms, Will came home, looking cheerful though somewhat abashed. He had been rusticated *sine die*, as the phrase runs: which means that he was not to go back again until he had made such ample submission and apology, with promises of future amendment as would satisfy the authorities as to the safety of allowing him back.

It was not known rightly what he had done; there was a story in which a retriever, a horse, a punch-bowl, a badger, a bargee, a pump, and a water-trough were curiously mixed up, and his rustication had somehow to do with the introduction of a proctor (whom one understands to be a learned and reverend magistrate) and a bull-dog, into this inconsistent and discordant company.

Sir Robert looked grave when he received his son, my lady wept, and the girls were ashamed; but all speedily recovered their good spirits, and the whole stable rejoiced exceedingly to see Will back among them. Even the foxes and their cubs, Sir Robert said, which had of late waxed fat and lazy, manifested a lively

pleasure, and hastened to get thin so as to afford the greatest sport possible; the trout practised all their tricks in readiness for one who respected a fish of subtlety; the pheasants and young partridges made haste to grow strong on the wing; the snipe and small birds remembered why Nature had taught them to use a devious and uncertain flight; the rabbits left off running straight; the otters remembered the uncertainty of life and the glory of a gallant fight; the ferrets laughed, thinking of the merry days they were going to have; the hares, who never take any solid interest in being hunted, ran away to the neighbouring estates; and the badgers, who were going to be drawn in their holes, turned sulky.

This was what Sir Robert told the girls, who laughed, but believed that it was all true. As for Cambridge, there was no more thought of that. Will had had enough of lectures, chapels, and dons; henceforth, he said, he should please himself.

“Man,” said Sir Robert, “who is ever disappointed, must continually be resigned. What if Will hath refused to get learning? He will not, therefore, gamble away the estate, nor disgrace the name of Levett. Holdfast is a good dog. It is the fortune of this house that if, once in a while, its head prove a fool as regards books, he still sticks to his own.”

Will promised to stick fast to his own, and though he gave himself up henceforth altogether to those pursuits which make a man coarse and deaden his sensibility (whereby he loses the best part of his life), he promised, in his father’s opinion, to prove a capable manager and just landlord, jealous of his own rights, and

careful of those of others.

Will thus remaining at home, the girls saw him every day, and though they had little talk with him, because it could not be expected that they should care to hear how the dogs behaved, and how many rats had been killed that morning, yet he was, in his rough way, thoughtful of them, and would bring them such trifles as pretty eggs, stuffed kingfishers, dressed moleskins, and so forth, which he got in his walks abroad. In the evening he would make his artificial flies, twist his lines, mend his landing-nets, polish his guns; being always full of business, and kindly taking no notice while Nancy or Kitty read aloud, nor seeming to care what they read, whether it was the poetry of Pope, or some dear delightful romance; or the "Spectator," or the plays of Shakespeare. All was one to him.

He seemed in those days a good-natured young man who went his own way and troubled himself not one whit about other people. Women were inferior creatures, of course: they could not shoot, hunt, fish, ride to hounds; they had no strength; they did not like to see things killed; they did not love sport; they did not drink wine; they did not take beer for breakfast; they did not smoke tobacco; they loved tea, chocolate, coffee, and such vanities; they loved to dress fine and stand up making bows to men, which they called dancing; they loved to read a lot of nonsense in rhymes, or to cry over the sorrows of people who never lived. Women, however, had their uses: they kept things in order, looked after the dinner, and took care of the babies.

Will did not say all these things at once; but they were collected together and written down by the girls, who kept a book between them, where they entered all the things they heard which struck their fancy. Nancy even went so far as to try to make up a story about the proctor and the pump, but never dared show it, except to her father, who pinched her ear and laughed. They called the page about the ways of women "Will's Wisdom," and continually added to it without his knowledge; because Will, like all men who love the sports of the field and not the wisdom of the printed page, became quickly angry if he were laughed at. The girls always pictured Esau, for instance, as a grave man, with a square chin, who talked a good deal about his own hunting, took no interest in the occupations of the women, and could never see a joke.

Two years or so after Will's rustication, Harry came of age and left Cambridge without taking a degree. There were bonfires, and oxen roasted whole, and barrels of beer upon the green when he took possession of his own estate and went to live in his own house, which was three miles and a half from the Hall.

He came from Cambridge having no small reputation for learning and wit, being apt at the making of verses in English, Latin, and Italian. He was, moreover, skilled in mathematical science, and especially in astronomy; he had read history, and understood the course of politics. I think that from the beginning he aspired to be considered one of those who by birth and attainments are looked upon as the leaders of the world; he would

be a scholar as well as a gentleman; he would be a poet, perhaps to be ranked with Pope or Dryden; he would be a man of fashion; and he would sit in ladies' *salons*, while other men sat over bottles of port, and talked gallantry. As for his appearance, he was tall and slight in figure; his face was long and rather thin; his eyes were grave; his manner was reserved; to the girls he was always courteous, asking their opinion, setting them right when they were wrong, lending them books, and directing them what to read. To Kitty he was a man to be respected, but never, she may truly say, did she allow her thoughts to dwell on the possibility of love: perhaps because love is between opposites, so that the grave may love the gay; perhaps because she knew very early that Lady Levett earnestly desired one thing – that Harry might fall in love with Nancy; and perhaps because to Nancy herself, little, merry Nancy, whose heart was full of sunshine, as her eyes were full of sunlight, and her lips never moved but to say and sing something saucy, or to laugh and smile – to Nancy, I say, this man was an Apollo, and she wondered that all women, not to speak of men (whose stupidity in the matter of reverence for each other is well known) did not fall down before him and do him open worship.

A few months after Harry Temple came of age, the vicar was taken ill with a putrid fever, caught while administering the last rites of the Church to a dying woman, and was carried off in a fortnight. This disaster not only robbed poor Kitty of the best of fathers, but also of the kindest patron and the most loving friend; for it took her away from the Hall, and drove her out, as will be

presently seen, to meet dangers as she had never imagined among a people whose wickedness after many years, and even to this day, makes her wonder at the longsuffering of the Lord.

CHAPTER II

HOW KITTY MADE ENGAGEMENTS

The day after the funeral, Sir Robert Levett himself walked to the Vicarage in the afternoon, and found the girl still in the garden, on her favourite seat. As soon as she looked into his kind face she burst into fresh tears.

“Cry on, pretty,” he said, sitting beside her, and with a tear in his own eye. “Cry on: to cry is natural. Thou hast lost the best and most Christian father that ever girl had; therefore cry on till thou art tired. Let the tears fall. Don’t mind me. Out handkerchief. So good a scholar shall we never see again. Cry on, if thou hast only just begun, should it bring thee comfort. Nor ever shall we hear so good a preacher. When thou hast finished let me have my say. But do not hurry.”

Even at the very saddest, when tears flow as unceasingly as the fountains in the Land of Canaan, the sight of an elderly gentleman sitting on a bench beneath a mulberry-tree, his hat beside him, his wig in his hands for coolness, his stick between his legs, and his face composed to a decent position, waiting till one had finished, would be enough to make any girl stop crying. Kitty felt immediately inclined to laugh; dried her eyes, restrained her sobs, and pulled out her father’s will, which she gave to Sir Robert to read.

He read it through twice, slowly, and then he hummed and

coughed before he spoke —

“A good man, Kitty child. See that thou forget not his admonitions. I would he were here still to admonish us all. Sinners that we were, to heed his voice no better. And now he is gone — he is gone. Yet he was a younger man than I, by ten years and more, and I remain.” Here he put on his wig, and rose. “As for this money, child, let us lose no time in making that safe, lest some thief should rob thee of it. A hundred guineas! And twenty more with Farmer Goodpenny! And this money waiting at the publishers![\[A\]](#) Verily thou art an heiress indeed!”

In the bedroom, at the head of the great bed, they found beneath the mattress a long narrow box secretly let into the panel close to the great cross-beam. I say secretly, but it was a secret known to all the world. Carpenters always made those secret hiding-places in beds, so that had there been a robber in the house he would have begun by searching in that place. Sir Robert knew where to find the spring, and quickly opened the box.

Within it lay two canvas bags, tied up. Could bags so little hold so great a sum! Sir Robert tossed them into his pockets as carelessly as if they were bags of cherries.

“Now, little maid,” said he, sitting on the bed, “that money is safe; and be sure that I shall call on Farmer Goodpenny to-morrow. Let me know what is to be done about thy father’s wish that thou shouldst go to London?”

“It is his injunction, sir,” said Kitty gravely. “I must obey his will.”

“Yet thy father, child, did not know London. And to send a young girl like thyself, with a bag of guineas about thy neck, to ask in a coffee-house for the address of a clergyman is, methinks, a wild-goose sort of business. As for Dr. Shovel, I have heard the name – to be sure, it cannot be the same man – ” he stopped, as if he would not tell me what it was he had heard.

“It is my father’s command,” she repeated.

“Unless nothing better should be found. Now, London is a dangerous place, full of pitfalls and traps, especially for the young and innocent. We are loth to lose thee, Kitty; we are afraid to let thee go. Nothing will do for Lady Levett but that thou remain with us and Nancy.”

This was a generous offer, indeed. Kitty’s eyes filled with tears again, and while she stood trying to find words of gratitude, and to decline the offer so as not to appear churlish, madam herself came running up the stairs, in her garden hat and plain pinner, and fell to kissing and crying over the girl.

Then she had to be told of the will and last commands.

“To be sure,” she said, “thy father’s commands must be respected and obeyed. Yet I know not whether it would not be well to disobey them. Kitty, my dear, stay with us and be my daughter, all the same as Nancy. I do not ask thee to enter my service, or to receive wages, or to do work for me any other than a daughter may.”

Kitty shook her head again. She was truly grateful; there was no one so kind as her ladyship; but she must go to London as her

father bade her.

“Why,” cried Sir Robert, “the child is right. Let her go. But if she is unhappy with her friends, or if she is in any trouble, let her know where to look for help.”

“There may be cousins,” said madam, “who will find thee too pretty for their own faces, and would keep thee at home with the towels and dusters and napkins. I would not have our Kitty a Cinderella – though house-service is no disgrace to a gentlewoman. Or there may be manners and customs of the house that a young girl should disapprove. Or there may be harsh looks instead of kind words. If that is the case, Kitty, come back to us, who love thee well, and will receive thee with kisses and joy.”

Then they left her in the empty house, alone with Deborah, the house servant.

She was looking over her father’s books, and taking out one or two which she thought she might keep in memory of him (as if anything were needed) when she heard steps, and Deborah’s voice inviting some one to enter.

It was Harry Temple: he stood in the doorway, his hat in his hand, and under his arm a book.

“I was meditating in the fields,” he said, “what I should say to Kitty Pleydell, in consolation for her affliction. The learned Boethius – ”

“O Harry!” she cried, “do not talk to me of books. What can they say to comfort any one?”

He smiled. Harry's smile showed how much he pitied people not so learned as himself.

"The greatest men," he said, "have been comforted by books. Cicero, for instance. . . Nay, Kitty, I will not quote Cicero. I came to say that I am sorry indeed to learn that we shall lose thee for a time."

"Alas!" she said, "I must go. It is my father's order."

"I am sure," he replied, "that you would not leave us for a lighter reason. You know our hearts, Kitty, and how we all love you."

"I know – " Kitty began to cry again. Everybody was so full of love and pity. "I know, Harry. And perhaps I shall never n – n – never see you again."

"And does that make this parting harder?" He turned very red, and laid his precious book of consolation on the table.

"Why, of course it does," she replied, wiping her eyes.

"You *shall* see us again," he went on earnestly. "You shall come back with me. Kitty, I will give you one twelvemonth of absence. You know I love you tenderly. But your father's commands must be obeyed. Therefore for a whole year I shall not seek you out. Then, when I come for you, will you return with me, never to go away again?"

"Oh!" she cried, clasping her hands, "how joyfully will I return!"

The young man took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"Divine maid!" he cried. "Fit to grace a coronet, or to make

the home of a simple gentleman an Arcadia of pastoral pleasure!”

“Do not mock me, Harry,” she said, snatching away her hand, “with idle compliments. But forget not to come and carry me away.”

“Alas!” he said; “how shall I exist – how bear this separation for twelve long months? Oh, divine Kitty! Thou will remain an ever-present idea in my heart.”

“Harry,” she burst out laughing in her tears, “think of the learned Boethius!”

So he left her.

In half an hour another visitor appeared.

This time it was Will. He was in his usual careless disorder; his scarlet coat a good deal stained, his waistcoat unbuttoned, his wig awry, his boots dusty, his neckerchief torn, his hands and cheeks browned by the sun. He carried a horsewhip, and was followed by half-a-dozen dogs, who came crowding into the room after him.

“So,” he said, sitting down and leaning his chin upon his whipstock, “thou must go, then?”

“What do you want with me, Will?” she asked, angry that he should show so little sympathy.

“Why,” he replied, rubbing his chin with the whipstock, “not much, Kitty. Nancy will come to cry.”

“Then you can go away, Will.”

“I came to say, Kitty, that though you do be going to go” (Will easily dropped into country talk), “I shanna forget thee. There!”

“Thank you, Will.”

“As for the matter of that, I love thee – ah! like I love old Rover here.”

“Thank you again, Will.”

“And so I’ve brought along a sixpence – here it is – and we’ll break it together.” Here he bent and broke the coin with his strong fingers. “My half goes into my pocket – so; and the other half is thine – there.” He threw it on the table. “Well, that’s done.” He stood up, looked at me sorrowfully, and heaved a great sigh. “I doubt I’ve a done wrong. Hadst been going to stay, a’ woulden a’ spoke yet awhile. Liberty is sweet – girls are skittish. Well, we’ll take a twelvemonth yet. There’s no hurry. Plenty time before us. I shall have my liberty for that while. Mayhap I will fetch thee in the spring. Ay, May’s the best month to leave the dogs and the birds, though the vermin will begin to swarm – rot ’em! Come, Rover. Good-bye, wench.”

He gave her a resounding kiss on the cheek, and turned away.

The girl laughed. She did not pick up the broken sixpence, which, indeed, she hardly noticed, her mind being full of many things.

Presently Nancy came, and the two girls spent a miserable evening together, in great love and friendship.

Now, how could an ignorant country girl, who had never thought over these things at all, guess that she had engaged herself to be married, in one day, in one hour even, to two different men? Yet that was exactly what this foolish Kitty had actually done.

FOOTNOTES

[A] When, some months later, Kitty went to the publisher, that gentleman informed her that there was no money to receive, because he had been a loser by the publication of the books.

CHAPTER III

HOW WE CAME TO LONDON ON THE COACH

With the purpose, therefore, of carrying out my father's injunctions, I remained for a few days at the Vicarage alone, having one servant to take care of me. But, had it not been for an accident, I might have remained at the village all my life. "For," said Lady Levett, "it is but right, child, that the instructions of your father should be carried out; I should like to know, however, who is to take charge of thee to London, and how we are to get thee there? A young maid cannot be sent to London on a pack-horse, like a bundle of goods. As for Sir Robert, he goes no more to town, since he has ceased to be a member. I care not for the court, for my own part, and am now too old for the gaities of London. Nancy will enjoy them, I doubt not, quite soon enough; and as for the boys, I see not very well how they can undertake so great a charge. I doubt, Kitty, that thou must come to the Hall, after all. You can be useful, child, and we will make you happy. There is the still-room, where, Heaven knows, what with the cowslip-wine, the strong waters, the conserving, pickling, drying, candying, and the clove gilliflowers for palleting, there is work enough for you and Nancy, as well as my still-room maid and myself. And just now, Sir Robert calling every day for a summer

sallet (which wants a light hand), to cool his blood!"

I would very willingly have gone to the Hall; I asked nothing better, and could think of nothing more happy for myself, if it could so be ordered. My father's wishes must certainly be obeyed; but if no one at the Hall could take charge of me, it seemed, at first, as if there could be no going to London at all, for our farmers and villagers were no great travellers. None of them knew much of this vast round world beyond their own fields, unless it were the nearest market-town, or perhaps Maidstone, or even Canterbury. Now and again one of the rustics would go for a soldier (being crossed in love); but he never came home again to tell of his campaigns. Or one would go for a gentleman's servant (being too lazy to work like his father); then he would return filled with all the wickedness of London, and stay corrupting the minds of the simple folk, till Sir Robert bade him pack and be off, for a pestilent fellow. Or one would go away to the nearest market-town to be apprenticed to a handicraft (being ambitious, as will happen even to simple clods, and aspiring to a shop). But if he succeeded, such an one would seldom come back to the place which gave him birth.

An accident happened which served my purpose. There was a certain farmer on Sir Robert's estate, whose sister had married a London tradesman of respectability and reputed honesty, named Samuel Gambit (he was a builder's foreman, who afterwards became a master builder, and made great sums of money by taking city contracts. His son, after him, rose to be an alderman in

the city of London). Whether the young woman was in ill health, or whether she was prompted by affection, I know not, but she left her husband for a space and journeyed into the country to see her friends and people. Now when I heard, by accident, that she was about to return, my heart fell, because I saw that my time was come, and that a proper person to take charge of me during the journey was found in Mrs. Gambit.

Madam sent for her. She was a strong, well-built woman, of about six or seven and twenty, resolute in her bearing, and sturdy of speech. She was not afraid, she said, of any dangers of the road, holding (but that was through ignorance) highwaymen in contempt; but she could not be answerable, she said, and this seemed reasonable, for the safety of the coach, which might upset and break our necks. As for the rest, she would be proud to take the young lady with her to London, and madam might, if she wished, consider the extra trouble worth something; but that she left to her ladyship.

“I know,” said Lady Levett, “that it is a great charge for you to conduct a young gentlewoman to town in these bad and dangerous times, when not only the high roads are thronged with robbers, and the streets with footpads, but also the very inns swarm with villains, and gentlemen are not ashamed to insult young persons of respectability in stage-coaches and public places. But Kitty is a good girl, not giddy, and obedient. I will admonish her that she obey you in everything upon the road, and that she keep eyes, ears, and mouth closed all the way.”

The good woman undertook to have her eye upon me the whole journey. Then Lady Levett made her promise that she would take me straight to St. Paul's Coffee-house, St. Paul's Churchyard, there to inquire after my uncle's residence, and never leave me until she had seen me deposited safely in Dr. Shovel's hands.

Now was I in a flutter and agitation of spirits indeed, as was natural, considering that I was going to leave my native place for the first time in my life and to seek out new relations.

"Nancy!" I cried, "what will be my lot? What will become of me?"

Nancy said that she would tell my fortune if I would only leave off walking about and wringing my hands and be comfortable.

Then she sat down beside me in her pretty affectionate way, and threw her arms round my waist, and laid her head upon my shoulder.

"You are so tall and so pretty, Kitty, that all the men will lose their hearts. But you must listen to none of them until the right man comes. Oh! I know what he is like. He will be a great nobleman, young and handsome, and oh, so rich! he will kneel at your feet as humble as a lover ought to be, and implore you to accept his title and his hand. And when you are a great lady, riding in your own coach, as happy as the day is long, you will forget – oh no, my dear! sure I am you will never forget your loving Nancy."

Then we kissed and cried over each other in our foolish girls'

way, promising not only kind remembrance, but even letters sometimes. And we exchanged tokens of friendship. I gave her a ring, which had been my mother's, made of solid silver with a turquoise and two pearls, very rich and good, and she gave me a silver-gilt locket with chased back, and within it a little curl of her hair, brown and soft.

Lady Levett gave me nothing but her admonition. I was going, she said, to a house where I should meet with strangers who would perhaps, after the manner of strangers, be quicker at seeing a fault than a grace, and this particularly at the outset and very beginning, when people are apt to be suspicious and to notice carefully. Therefore I was to be circumspect in my behaviour, and above all, be careful in my speech, giving soft words in return for hard, and answering railing, if there was any railing, with silence. But perhaps, she said, there would be no railing, but only kindness and love, in the which case I was all the more to preserve sweet speech and sweet thoughts, so as not to trouble love. Then she was good enough to say that I had ever been a good maid and dutiful, and she doubted not that so I would continue in my new world, wherefore she kissed me tenderly, and prayed, with tears in her eyes – for my lady, though quick and sharp, was wondrous kind of heart – that the Lord would have me in His keeping.

I say nothing about Sir Robert, because he was always fond of me, and would almost as soon have parted from his Nancy.

Now it was a week and more since I had, without knowing it,

received those overtures of love from Harry Temple and Will, which I took in my innocence for mere overtures of friendship and brotherly affection. They thought, being conceited, like all young men, that I had at once divined their meaning and accepted their proposals; no doubt they gave themselves credit for condescension and me for gratitude. Therefore, when, the evening before I came away, Harry Temple begged me, with many protestations of regret, not to inform Sir Robert or madam of his intentions, I knew not what to say. What intentions? why should I not?

“Reigning star of Beauty!” he cried, laying his hand upon his heart, “I entreat thy patience for a twelvemonth. Alas! such separation! who can bear it!

“Fond Thyrsis sighs, through mead and vale,
His absent nymph lamenting – ”

“O Harry!” I cried, “what do I care about Thyrsis and absent nymphs? You have promised to bring me back in a year. Very well, then, I shall expect you. Of course you can tell Sir Robert whatever you please. It is nothing to me what you tell Sir Robert or my lady.”

“She is cold as Diana,” said Harry, with a prodigious sigh; but I broke from him, and would hear no more such nonsense. Sighing shepherds and cruel nymphs were for ever on Harry Temple’s lips.

As for Will, of course he wanted to have an explanation too. He followed Harry, and, in his rustic way, begged to say a word or two.

“Pray go on, Will,” I said.

“I promised a twelvemonth,” he explained. “I’ll not go back upon my word. I *did* say a twelvemonth.”

“A twelvemonth? Oh yes. You said the same as Harry, I remember.”

“I don’t know what Harry said, but I’ll swear, whatever Harry said, I said just the clean contrary. Now, then, liberty’s sweet, my girl. Come, let us say fifteen months. Lord! when a man is twenty-one he don’t want to be tied by the heels all at once. Let’s both have our run first. You are but a filly yet – ay – a six months’ puppy, so to say.”

“You said a twelvemonth, Will,” I replied, little thinking of what he meant. How, indeed, could I know? “I shall expect you in a twelvemonth.”

“Very good, then. A twelvemonth it must be, I suppose. Shan’t tell my father yet, Kitty. Don’t you tell un neyther, there’s a good girl. Gad! there will be a pretty storm with my lady when she hears it! Ho! ho!”

Then he went off chuckling and shaking himself. How could a courtly gentleman like Sir Robert and a gentlewoman like her ladyship have a son who was so great a clown in his manner and his talk? But the sons do not always take after their parents. A stable and a kennel, when they take the place of a nursery and a

school, are apt to breed such bumpkins even out of gentle blood.

In the morning at five I was to start in the cart which would take us across the country to the stage-coach.

Nancy got up with me, and we had a fine farewell kissing. The boys were up too; Harry out of compliment to me, dressed in a nightcap and a flowered morning-gown; and Will out of compliment to his kennel, for whose sake he always rose at daybreak. He was dressed in his old scarlet coat, he carried a whip in one hand, and half-a-dozen dogs followed at his heels.

“Remember, sweet Kitty,” whispered Harry, with a ceremonious bow, “it is but for a twelvemonth.”

“Only a year,” said Will. “Heart up, my pretty!”

They heard what each had said, and they were looking at each other puzzled when I drove away.

“What did you mean, Will?” asked Harry, when the cart was out of sight, “by saying only a year?”

“I meant what I meant,” he replied doggedly. “Perhaps you know, and perhaps you don’t.”

“Of course I know,” said Harry. “The question is, how do you know?”

“Well,” replied Will, “that is a pretty odd question, to be sure. How could I help knowing?”

“I think,” said Harry, red in the face, “that some one has been injudicious in telling any one.”

Will laughed.

“She ought not to have told, that’s a fact. But we will keep it

secret, Harry; don't tell her ladyship."

So that each thought that the other knew of his engagement with Kitty.

Little heed gave I to them and their promises. It was pleasant, perhaps, though I soon forgot to think about it at all, to remember that Harry and Will after a twelvemonth would come to carry me home again, and that I should never leave the old place again. But just then I was too sad to remember this. I was going away, Heaven knew where, amongst strangers, to people who knew me not; and I mounted the cart in which we were to begin our journey crying as sadly as if it had been the dreadful cart which goes to Tyburn Tree. The best thing to cure a crying fit is a good jolting. It is impossible to weep comfortably when you are shaken and rolled about in a country cart among the deep, hard ruts of last winter. So I presently put up my handkerchief, dried my eyes, and thought of nothing but of clinging to Mrs. Gambit when the wheels sank deeper than usual. The way lay along the lanes which I knew so well, arched over with trees and lofty hedges, then in their beautiful spring dressing. It led past the churchyard, where the sun was striking full upon my father's new-made grave. I tried to think of him, but the cart jolted so terribly that I was fain to remember only how I carried his last admonitions in my bosom, and the money in two bags sewn to my petticoats.

Presently the lane led on to the high-road, which was not quite so rough, and here we came to the roadside inn where the stage-coach changed horses. We waited an hour or so, until at length

we saw it coming slowly up the hill, piled with packages and crowded with passengers. But there was room for two more, and we mounted to our places outside. Presently the machine moved slowly along again. It was so heavily-laden and the roads were so rough, that we rolled as if every moment we were going to roll over into the ditch, where we should all be killed. Mrs. Gambit loudly declared that nothing should ever again take her out of London, where a body could ride in a coach without the fear of being upset and the breaking of necks. On this journey, however, no necks were broken, because the coach did not upset. When the rolling was very bad, Mrs. Gambit clutched me with one hand and her right hand neighbour with the other. I, in my turn, seized her with one hand and my right hand neighbour with the other. Then we both shrieked, until presently, finding that we did not actually go over, I began to laugh.

My neighbour was a clergyman of grave and studious aspect. He wore a full wig, which had certainly been a second-hand one when it was bought, so shabby, was it now; his gown was also shabby, and his stockings were of grey worsted. Clearly a country clergyman of humble means. His face, however, looked young. When I caught him by the arm, he laid hold of my hand with both of his, saying gravely, "Now, madam, I hold you so tightly that you cannot fall." This was very kind of him. And, presently, he wanted to lay his arm round my waist for my better protection. But this was taking more trouble than I would consent to.

There was, however, a worse danger than that of upsetting.

This year, England suffered from a plague of highway-robbers, the like of which was never before known. The roads were crowded with them. They were mostly disbanded soldiers, who, being either disinclined to return to their old trades, or being unable to find employment, roamed about the country either singly or in pairs, or in bands, rogues and vagabonds, ready to rob, steal, plunder, or even murder as occasion offered. They were sometimes so bold that they would attack a whole coachful of passengers, and take from them whatever they carried, unless, as sometimes happened, there were one or two valiant men on the coach ready to give them a warm reception with guns, pistols, swords, or even stout cudgels. They were said seldom to show much fight (being conscious of the gallows awaiting them if they were wounded or captured), and would generally make off. But it was not always that passengers were found ready to risk the fight, and in most cases they sat still and delivered.

With this danger before us, it was not surprising that the conversation should turn upon highwaymen whenever the road became a little smooth, and I listened with terror to the tales I heard. Most of them were related by a man who sat opposite to me. He wore a scratch wig (probably his second-best), and had his hat flapped and tied about his ears as if it were winter. He was, I suppose, a merchant of some kind, because he talked a great deal about prices, and stocks, and markets, with other things, Greek and Hebrew to me. Also, he looked so uneasy, and kept watching the road with so anxious an air, that I felt sure he

must be carrying a great parcel of money like me, and I longed to advise him to imitate my prudence; and at the next town we got down to sew it within his coat. He continually lamented, as we went along, the desperate wickedness of the highway-robbers: he spoke of it as if he were entirely disinterested, and regarded not at all the peril to his own fortune, but only the danger of their own souls, liable to be wretchedly lost and thrown away by their dreadful courses. And he talked so feelingly on this subject that one began to feel as if good words were being spoken to the edification of the soul. As for their suppression, he said that, in their own interests, strong measures would be necessary. Trade would never flourish, and therefore men would not be induced to follow a respectable trade until ships could sail the seas without fear of pirates, and honest merchants carry their property up and down the king's highway without fear of highwaymen. Here we came in sight of a man on horseback, and we all kept silence for an anxious space, till we discovered, by his great wig and black coat, that it was nothing but a country surgeon riding out to see a patient. Then the merchant went on to say that since the gallows did not terrify these evil-doers, he, for one, was for trying how they would like the French wheel.

At this there was a terrible outcry: the clergyman, especially, asking if he wished to introduce French barbarities.

“Such things,” he said solemnly, “are the natural accompaniment of Popery. Pray, sir, remember Smithfield.”

“Sir,” said the merchant, “I hope I am as good a Protestant

as my neighbours. I call that, however, not barbarity but justice and mercy which punishes the guilty and deters the weak. As for barbarities, are we Protestants better than our neighbours? Is it not barbarous to flog our soldiers and sailors for insubordination; to flog our rogues at the cart-tail; to lash the backs of women in Bridewell; to cut and scourge the pickpockets so long as the alderman chooses to hold up the hammer? Do we not hack the limbs of our traitors, and stick them up on Temple Bar? Truly the world would come to a pretty pass if we were to ask our cut-throats what punishment would hurt them least.”

“I like not the breaking of legs on wheels,” cried Mrs. Gambit. “But to call the flogging of Bridewell hussies barbarous! Fie, sir! You might as well call bull-baiting barbarous.”

No one wanted to encourage highway-robbers, yet none but this merchant from foreign parts would allow than an Englishman, however wicked, should cruelly have his limbs broken and crushed by a rod of iron.

“As for the gentlemen of the road,” said Mrs. Gambit, “I, for one, fear them not. They may take the butter and eggs in my basket, but they won’t find my money, for that is in my shoe.”

“Nor mine,” said I, taking courage and thinking to show my cleverness; “for it is all sewn safe inside my petticoats.”

“Hush, silly women!” cried the merchant. “You know not but there is a highwayman sitting in disguise on the coach beside you. I beg pardon, sir,” he turned to the clergyman beside me – “no offence, sir – though I have heard of a thief who robbed a coach

after travelling in it dressed as a gentleman of your cloth.”

“None, sir, none,” replied his reverence. “Yet am I not a highwayman, I do assure you for your comfort. Nor have I any money in my pocket or my shoe. I am but a simple clergyman, going to look at a benefice which hath been graciously bestowed upon me.”

“That, sir,” said the merchant, “is satisfactory, and I hope that no other ears have heard what these ladies have disclosed. Shoes? petticoats? Oh, the things that I have seen and heard!”

The clergyman then told us that he had a wife and six daughters, and that the preferment (two hundred pounds a year!) would make a man of him, who had as yet been little better than a slave with sixty pounds for all his income. The Christian year, he told us, was a long Lent for him, save that sometimes, as at Christmas and Eastertide, he was able to taste meat given to him. Yet he looked fat and hearty.

“My drink,” he said, “is from the spring, which costs nothing; and my bread is but oatmeal-porridge, potatoes, or barley-meal.”

Then he pressed my hand in his, said I resembled his wife in her younger days, and declared that he already felt to me like a father.

There sat next to the merchant a young gentleman of about seventeen or eighteen, brave in scarlet, for he had just received a commission as ensign in a regiment of the line, and was on his way to join his colours, as he told us with pride. Directly highway robbers were mentioned he assumed, being a young man

with rosy and blushing cheek, fitter for a game of cricket on the green than for war's alarms, a fierce and warlike mien, and assured us that we ladies should not want protection while he was on the coach. And he made a great show of loosening his sword in the scabbard to ensure its quick and ready use, should the occasion rise. The merchant received these professions of courage with undisguised contempt; the clergyman smiled; Mrs. Gambit nodded her head and laughed, as if he was a boy whose talk meant nothing. I neither laughed at him nor scowled at him. In fact I was thinking, girl-like, what a handsome boy he was, and hoping that he would some day become a great general. As the country seems at the present juncture sadly in want of great generals, I fear he has been killed in action.

When we stopped for dinner, at one o'clock – I remember that I never before saw so prodigious a piece of roast beef upon the table – our host must needs spoil all enjoyment of the meal by asking us, just as we were sat down, sharp-set by the air, if we had met or seen anything of a certain "Black Will," who seemed to be very well known by all. The very name caused our poor merchant to push back his plate untasted, and the young officer to rise from the table and hasten to assure himself that his sword was loose in the scabbard.

"Because," said the landlord, "it is right for you to know that Black Will is reported in this neighbourhood with all his crew: a bloody lot, gentlemen. I hope you have no valuables to speak of upon you. However, perhaps they will not meet

you on the road. They murdered a man last year, a young gentleman like you, sir,” nodding to the ensign, “because he offered resistance and drew his sword. What is a little toothpick like that, compared with a quarterstaff in the hands of a sturdy rogue? So they beat his brains out for him. Then they gagged and used most unmercifully, kicking him till he was senseless, an honest gentleman like yourself, sir” – he nodded to our merchant – “who gave them the trouble of taking off his boots, where, for greater safety, as the poor wretch thought, he had bestowed his money – ”

“God bless my soul!” cried the merchant, changing colour, so that I for one felt quite certain that his was there too, and that his courage was down in his boots as well, to keep the money company. “Bless my soul! hanging, mere hanging, is too good for such villains.”

“It is indeed,” replied the landlord, shaking his head. “There was a young lady, too” – I started, because he looked at me – “who had her money sewn in a bag inside her frock.” I blushed red, knowing where mine was. “They made her take it off and dance a minuet with one of them in her petticoats. But indeed there is no end to their wickedness. Come, gentlemen, let me carve faster; spare not the beef; don’t let Black Will spoil your appetites. Cut and come again. He may be twenty miles away. A noble sirloin, upon my word! To be sure, he may be waiting on the hill there in the wood.”

“A glass of brandy, landlord,” cried the merchant, who surely

was a dreadful coward. "Tell me, would he be alone?"

"Not likely." The landlord, I thought, took a pleasure in making us uneasy. "He would have two or three with him. Perhaps six. With pistols. Do take some more beef. And blunderbusses. Ah! a desperate wicked gang."

In such cheerful discourse we took our dinner, and then, with trepidation, mounted to our places and drove away.

We got up the hill safely, and met no Black Will. During the next stage we all kept an anxious look up and down the road. The coach seemed to crawl, and the way was rough. The sight of a man on horseback made our hearts beat; if we saw two, we gave ourselves up for lost. But I was pleased all the time to mark the gallant and resolute behaviour of the boy, who, with his hand upon the hilt of his sword, sat pale but determined; and when he caught my eye, smiled with the courage of one who would defend us to the death, as I am sure he would, like the gallant young knight he was.

Towards the evening we caught sight of the tower of Canterbury Cathedral, and soon afterwards we rolled through the streets of that ancient city, and got down at the Crown Inn, where we were to rest for the night.

I pass over, as unworthy of record, my own wonder at so great and beautiful a city. This was the first town I had ever seen; these the first shops; and this the first, and still the grandest, to my mind, of great cathedral churches. We walked through the great church at sunset, where there was something truly awful in the

lofty arches mounting heavenwards, and the gloom of the roof. Outside there were Gothic ruins; rooks were calling to each other in the trees, and swifts were flying about the tower.

At supper we had more talk about highway-robbers, but we were assured that there was less danger now, because between Canterbury and London the road is more frequented, and therefore robbers, who are by nature a timorous folk, hesitate to attack a coach. Moreover, the landlord told us that we should have with us two or three honest citizens of Canterbury, substantial tradesmen, who travelled to London together for mutual protection, taking money with them, and pistols with which to defend themselves.

“One of them,” he added, “is a lieutenant in the train-band, and a draper in the city: a more resolute fellow never handled a yard-measure.”

The gentlemen ordered a bowl of punch after supper, and we retired. As we left the room, the clergyman followed us. Outside the door, Mrs. Gambit having already begun to go upstairs, he said he would give me his benediction, which he did, kissing me on the cheeks and lips with much (and undeserved) affection. He was good enough to say that I greatly resembled his youngest sister, the beautiful one, and he desired closer acquaintance. Nor could I understand why Mrs. Gambit spoke scornfully of this act of kindness, which was entirely unexpected by me. “Kindness, quotha!” she cried. “A pious man indeed, to love to kiss a pretty maid! I like not such piety.”

In the morning the train-band lieutenant, with his two friends, came swaggering to the inn. He carried his pistols openly, and made more display of them, I thought, than was necessary, considering his character for resolution and desperate bravery. Then we started, our little soldier still ready with his sword.

The road was smoother; it ran for the most part along enclosures and gentlemen's parks. It was broad and straight, having been made, we were told by the draper, in the time of the Romans; and as we drew near to London, the villages became more frequent, and the road was covered with carts, waggons, and carriages of every kind, all moving towards London. Was London bigger than Canterbury? I asked. They laughed at my innocence, and began to tell me that you might take the whole of Canterbury out of London and not miss it much: also that he or she who had not seen London had not seen the greatest marvel and wonder of the world.

"There are fine buildings," said the merchant, "in Paris, though the streets are foul; but in London there are buildings as fine, with streets that are broader: and there is the trade. Aha!" – he smacked his lips – "Paris hath no trade. One has to see the ships in the Pool, and the Custom House, and the wharves, before one can understand how great and rich a city is London. And one should also – but that, young lady, you cannot ever do, live as long as you will, being only a woman – feast at one of the great City Companies to understand how nobly they can use their wealth."

We were still anxious about highwaymen, but our fears

were greatly lessened by the presence of the brave draper of Canterbury. The clergyman kept up a flow of anecdotes, which showed strange acquaintance with the wickedness of the world, on highwaymen, footpads, robbers of all kinds, deceivers of strangers, and practisers on innocence. The merchant listened eagerly, and together they bemoaned the credulity of the ignorant, and the subtlety of the designing.

Our spirits grew higher as we neared the end of our journey. Now, indeed, there was but little fear. The coach travels from Canterbury to London in a single day; we should arrive before nightfall.

“Ha! ha!” said the merchant, rubbing his hands, “we who travel encounter many dangers. In London one can go to bed without fearing to be murdered in one’s sleep, and walk abroad without looking to be brained and murderously treated for the sake of a purse and a watch. There may be pickpockets, shoplifters, and such petty rogues: there may be footpads about St. Pancras or Lincoln’s Inn Fields, but small villains all compared with these desperate rogues of highwaymen.”

“Desperate indeed,” said the clergyman. “Dear sir, we should be grateful for our preservation.”

It was already past seven when we arrived at the Talbot Inn. The merchant fetched a deep sigh, and thanked Providence aloud for keeping us safe from the danger of “Stand and deliver!” The clergyman said, “Amen,” but gently reproved the merchant for not allowing him, as an ordained minister, to take the

lead in every devotional exercise. When they got down they entered the house together. The young ensign pulled off his hat to me, and said that no doubt the rogues had got wind of an officer's presence on the stage. Then he tapped his sword-hilt significantly, and got down, and I saw him no more. The gallant draper, getting down slowly, lamented that he must still be carrying loaded pistols, with never an opportunity for using them upon the road, and uncocked his weapons with as much ostentatious care as he had shown in loading them. For my own part, I had no taste for fighting, or for seeing fights, and was only too glad to escape the hands of men who, if tales were true, did not even respect a girl's frocks. The clergyman bestowed a final benediction upon me, saying that he craved my name with a view to a closer friendship; and would have kissed me again had not Mrs. Gambit pushed him away with great roughness.

The thing I am now about to relate will doubtless seem incredible. Yet it is true. I learned it some time after, when Black Will was hanged, and his last Dying Speech and Confession was cried in the streets.

The merchant and the clergyman entered the Talbot Inn to drink together a bowl of punch at the former's expense before separating. The latter, out of respect for his cloth, called for a private room, whither the punch was presently brought.

Now, when they had taken a glass or two each, both being very merry, they were disturbed by the entrance of two tall and ill-favoured fellows, who walked into the room and sat down, one

on each side of the merchant.

“Gentlemen!” he cried, “this is a private room, ordered by his reverence here and myself for the peaceful drinking of a thanksgiving glass.”

“No,” replied the clergyman, rising and locking the door; “I find, dear sir, that this room had been already bespoke by these gentlemen, who are friends of mine own, and that we have very urgent business which particularly concerns yourself.”

At these words the merchant turned pale, being, as you may imagine, horribly frightened, and perceiving that he had fallen into a nest of hornets. Whereupon he sprang to his feet, and would have rushed to the door, but that two of the villains seized him and pushed him back into the chair, while the third drew a knife and held it at his throat, informing him that his weasand would most certainly be cut across did he but move a finger or utter a sigh. At this dreadful threat the poor man gave himself up for lost, and said no more, only the tears of despair rolled down his face as he thought of what was going to happen to him.

The good clergyman then, with smiles and a polite bow, informed him that in this world things are not always what they seemed to be. “Honest tradesmen,” he said, “often turn out to be common cheats, and substantial citizens become bankrupts. Therefore, it is not surprising if a reverend minister of the Established Church should occasionally bear a hand in a little scheme in which good acting and dexterity are essentials necessary for success. In fact,” he went on, drinking up all the

punch meanwhile, “though to you and to many good friends I am a pious divine, among my particular intimates and these gentlemen of the road” – here he pointed to the two villains – “I am no other than Black Will, at your service! Nay, do not faint, dear sir. Although you would break me on the wheel, had you the power, I assure you I shall do you no harm in the world. Wherefore, kick off your boots!”

Alas! in his boots was the money which the poor man was bringing home from France. They took it all. They tied him to his chair, and that to the table. They gagged him; they put his wig on the table, tied a handkerchief over his head, so that he should seem to be asleep; and then they left him, telling the waiter that the gentleman in the blue room was tired after his journey, and would like to be undisturbed for an hour or two.

To think that this villain (who was but twenty-four when he was hanged, a year or so later) should dare to feel towards me like a father, and to give me his blessing – on the lips!

CHAPTER IV

HOW KITTY FIRST SAW THE DOCTOR

It was past seven in the evening when we arrived at the Talbot Inn of Southwark, and too late to begin our search after my uncle that evening. Mrs. Gambit, therefore, after conference with a young man of eight-and-twenty or so, dressed in broadcloth, very kindly offered me a bed at her own lodging for the night. This, she told me, was in a quiet and most respectable neighbourhood, viz., Fore Street, which she begged me not to confound with Houndsditch. I readily assured her that I would preserve separate the ideas of the two streets, which was easy to one who knew neither.

She then informed me that the young man was no other than her husband, foreman of works to a builder, and that, to save the expense of a porter, he would himself carry my box. Mr. Gambit upon this touched his hat respectfully, grinned, shouldered the box, and led the way, pushing through the crowd around us, and elbowing them to right and left without a word of excuse, as if they were so many ninepins.

I learned afterwards that it is customary with the mechanical tradesmen of London thus to assert their right of passage, and as it is not every one who gives way, the porter's burden

is not unfrequently lowered while he stops to fight one who disputes his path. In evidence of these street fights, most of the London carters, coachmen, chairmen, porters, and labourers, bear continually upon their faces the scars, recent or ancient, of many such encounters. As for the gentlemen, it seems right that they should not disdain to strip and take a turn with their fists against some burly ruffian who would thrust his unmannerly body past his betters, confident in his superior strength.

Mr. Gambit looked round from time to time to see if we were following, and it gave me pain to observe how my box, which was long in shape, became the constant cause of sad accidents; for with it Mr. Gambit either knocked off a hat, or deranged a wig, or struck violently some peaceful person on the back of his head, or gave an inoffensive citizen a black eye, or caused profane passengers to swear. He was, however, so big, strong, and careless about these reproaches, that no one cared to stop him or offered to fight him until he was well on ahead.

“It’s a royal supper,” he turned and nodded pleasantly, shouting these words to his wife: the box thus brought at right angles to the road, barred the way while he spoke, except to the very short. “Tripe – fried tripe! – with onions and carrots and potatoes. Will be done to a turn at eight. Make haste!”

What crowds! what rushing to and fro! what jostling, pushing, and crowding! What hurrying, and what wicked language! Sure something dreadful must have happened, nor could I believe Mrs. Gambit when she assured me that this was the usual crowd of

London.

Then we came to London Bridge: and I saw the ships in the river and the Tower of London. Oh, the forests of masts! And beyond the river, the steeples of the great city shining bright in the evening sunshine. Which of them was my uncle's church?

We crossed the bridge; we walked up Gracechurch Street to Cornhill; we passed through a labyrinth of narrow and winding lanes, crowded like the wider streets. Mr. Gambit hurried along, thinking, I suppose, of his supper, and using my box as a kind of battering-ram with which to force a way. Presently we came to a broad street, which was, in fact, Fore Street, where was Mrs. Gambit's lodging.

"Eight o'clock," said Mr. Gambit, as we reached the top of the stairs. "Now for supper."

There was such a noise in the street below that we could hardly hear the church bells as they struck the hour. Yet there were churches all round us. But their bells clanging together only added somewhat to the general tumult.

"Eight o'clock, wife – good time!"

He dropped my box upon the floor, and hastened down the stairs.

It was a comfortable lodging of two rooms, in one of which a cloth was laid for supper, which Mr. Gambit speedily brought from a cookshop, and we had a royal supper indeed, with two quarts at least of the nauseous black beer of London, to which such men are extravagantly addicted.

Supper ended, Mr. Gambit lit a pipe of tobacco and began to smoke, begging me not to mind him. His wife told him of the farm and her brother, and I tried to listen through the dreadful noise of the street below. It was a warm evening and our window was thrown open; people were passing up and down, talking, singing, whistling, shouting, and swearing. I could hear nothing else; but the good man seemed as if he was deaf to the roar of the street, and listened to his wife as quietly as if we were in the fields. I asked him presently, with a shout, what was the cause of a dreadful riot and tumult? He laughed, and said that it was always the same. It was a pity, I said, that London being so rich, could not keep the streets quiet.

“Ay, but,” said he, “there are plenty of poor people as well, and you must first ask what they think about having their mouth shut.”

The strangeness of the place and the noise in the streets kept me awake nearly all that night, so that, when Mrs. Gambit called me in the morning, I was still tired. But it was time to be up and seeking for my uncle.

We got everything ready: my father’s last will and testament; my bags of money, which Mrs. Gambit carried for me in her basket, and tied the basket to her arm; and my box of clothes. Then, because Mrs. Gambit said that a young lady should not walk with her box carried by a porter, like a servant wench, we hired a coach and told him to drive us to St. Paul’s Coffee-house.

It is not far from Fore Street to St. Paul’s Churchyard, but

the crowd in the streets, the waggons and carts, and the dreadful practice of London drivers to quarrel and then to stop while they abuse each other, delayed us a great deal, so that it was already half-past nine when we came to the Coffee-house.

We got down, leaving the coach at the door.

It was a place the like of which I had never dreamed of. To be sure, everything was new to me just then, and my poor rustic brain was turning with the novelty. There was a long room which smelt of tobacco, rum-punch, coffee, chocolate, and tea; it was already filled with gentlemen, sitting on the benches before small tables, at which some were taking pipes of tobacco, some were talking, some were writing, and some were reading the newspapers. Running along one side of the room was a counter covered with coffee-pots, bottles of Nantz, Jamaica rum, Hollands, and Geneva: there were also chocolate-dishes, sugar, lemons, spices, and punch-bowls. Behind the counter sat a young woman, of grave aspect, knitting, but holding herself in readiness to serve the customers.

The gentlemen raised their heads and stared at me; some of them whispered and laughed; all gazed as if a woman had no more business there than in the inner precincts of the Temple. That was what occurred to me instantly, because they were, I observed, all of them clergymen.

They were not, certainly, clergymen who appeared to have risen in the world, nor did their appearance speak so much in their favour as their calling. They were mostly, in fact, clad

in tattered gowns, with disordered or shabby wigs, and bands whose whiteness might have been restored by the laundress, but had changed long since into a crumpled yellow. I heard afterwards that the house was the resort of those “tattered crapes,” as they are irreverently called, who come to be hired by the rectors, vicars, and beneficed clergy of London, for an occasional sermon, burial, or christening, and have no regular cure of souls.

On such chance employment and odd jobs these reverend ministers contrive to live. They even vie with each other and underbid their neighbours for such work; and some, who have not the means to spend a sixpence at the Coffee-house, will, it is said, walk up and down the street, ready to catch a customer outside. One fears that there must be other reasons besides lack of interest for the ill success of these men. Surely, a godly life and zeal for religion should be, even in this country of patronage, better rewarded than by this old age of penury and dependence. Surely, too, those tattered gowns speak a tale of improvidence, and those red noses tell of a mistaken calling.

This, however, I did not then know, and I naturally thought there must be some great ecclesiastical function in preparation, a confirming on a large scale, about to be celebrated in the great cathedral close beside, whose vastness was such as amazed and confounded me. These clergymen, whose poverty was no doubt dignified by their virtues, were probably preparing for the sacred function after the manner practised by my father, namely, by an

hour's meditation. Perhaps my uncle would be among them.

Seeing me standing there helpless, and I daresay showing, by my face, what I immediately manifested in speech, my rusticity, the young woman behind the counter came to my assistance, and asked me, very civilly, what I lacked.

"I was told," I stammered, "to inquire at the St. Paul's Coffee-house for the present lodging of my uncle." As if there was but one uncle in all London!

"Certainly, madam," said the woman, "if you will tell me your uncle's name."

"I was told that you knew, at this house, the residence of every London clergyman."

"Yes, madam, that is true; and of a good many country clergymen. If you will let me know his name, we will do what we can to assist you."

"He is named" (I said this with a little pride, because I thought that perhaps, from my own rusticity and the homeliness of my companion, she might not have thought me so highly connected), "he is the Reverend Gregory Shovel, Doctor of Divinity."

"Lord save us!" she cried, starting back and holding up her hands, while she dropped her knitting-needle. Why did she stare, smile, and then look upon me with a sort of pity and wonder? "Dr. Shovel is your uncle, madam?"

"Yes," I said. "My father, who was also a clergyman, and is but lately dead, bade me come to London and seek him out."

She shook her head at this news, and called for one William.

There came from the other end of the room a short-legged man, with the palest cheeks and the reddest nose I had ever seen. They spoke together for a few minutes. William grinned as she spoke, and scratched his head, under the scantiest wig I had ever seen.

“Can you tell me?” I began, when she returned. I observed that William, when he left her, ran quickly up the room, whispering to the gentlemen, who had ceased to stare at me, and that, as soon as he had whispered, they all, with one consent, put down their pipes, or their papers, or their coffee, stayed their conversation, and turned their clerical faces to gaze upon me, with a universal grin, which seemed ill-bred, if one might so speak of the clergy. “Can you tell me?”

“I can, madam; and will,” she replied. “What, did your father not know the present residence of Dr. Shovel? I fear it will not be quite such as a young lady of your breeding, madam, had a right to expect. But doubtless you have other and better friends.”

“She has, indeed,” said Miss Gambit, “if his honour Sir Robert Levett, Justice of the Peace, is to be called a good friend. But if you please, tell us quickly, madam, because our coach waits at the door, and waiting is money in London. The country for me, where a man will sit on a stile the whole day long, and do nothing, content with his daily wage. And the sooner we get away from these reverend gentlemen, who stare as if they had never seen a young lady from the country before, the better.”

“Then,” the young woman went on, “tell your man to drive you down Ludgate Hill and up the Fleet Market on the prison side;

he may stop at the next house to the third Pen and Hand. You will find the doctor's name written on a card in the window."

We thanked her, and got into the coach. When we told the coachman where to go, he smacked his leg with his hand, and burst out laughing.

"I thought as much," cried the impudent rascal. "Ah, Mother Slylips! wouldn't the doctor serve your turn, but you must needs look out for one in the Coffee-house? I warrant the doctor is good enough for the likes of you!"

He cracked his whip, and we drove off slowly.

Now, which was really extraordinary, all the reverend gentlemen of the coffee-room had left their places and were crowded round the door, some of them almost pushing their wigs into the coach windows in their eagerness to look at us. This seemed most unseemly conduct on the part of a collection of divines; nor did I imagine that curiosity so undignified, and so unworthy a sacred profession, could be called forth by the simple appearance of a young girl in the coffee-room.

The faces formed a curious picture. Some of the clergymen were stooping, some standing, some mounting on chairs, the better to see, so that the doorway of the Coffee-house seemed a pyramid of faces. They were old, young, fat, thin, red, pale, of every appearance and every age; they were mostly disagreeable to look at, because their possessors were men who had been unsuccessful, either through misfortune or through fault; and they all wore, as they stared, a look of delighted curiosity, as if here

was something, indeed, to make Londoners talk – nothing less, if you please, than a girl of seventeen, just come up from the country.

“Bless us!” cried Mrs. Gambit, “are the men gone mad? London is a wicked place indeed, when even clergymen come trooping out merely to see a pretty girl! Fie for shame, sir, and be off with you!”

These last words were addressed to one old clergyman with an immense wig, who was actually thrusting his face through the coach window. He drew it back on this reprimand, and we went on our way.

I looked round once more. The young woman of the counter was still in the doorway, and with her William, with the scrubby wig and the red nose; round them were the clergymen, and they were all talking about me, and looking after me. Some of them wagged their heads, some shook theirs, some nodded, some were holding their heads on one side, and some were hanging theirs. Some were laughing, some smiling, some were grave. What did it mean?

“If,” said Mrs. Gambit, “they were not clergymen, I should say they were all tomfools. And this for a pretty girl – for you are pretty, Miss Kitty, with your rosy cheeks and the bright eyes which were never yet spoiled by the London smoke. But there must be plenty other pretty girls in London. And them to call themselves clergymen!”

“Perhaps they were looking at you, Mrs. Gambit.”

The idea did not seem to displease her. She smiled, smoothed the folds of her gown, and pulled down the ends of her neckerchief.

“Five years ago, child, they might. But I doubt it is too late. Set them up, indeed! As if nothing would suit them to look at but the wife of a respectable builder’s foreman. They must go into the country, must they, after the pretty faces?”

But oh, the noise and tumult of the streets! For as we came to the west front of St. Paul’s, we found Ludgate Hill crowded with such a throng as I had never before believed possible. The chairmen jostled each other up and down the way. The carts, coaches, drays, barrows, waggons, trucks, going up the hill, met those going down, and there was such a crush of carriages, as, it seemed, would never be cleared. All the drivers were swearing at each other at the top of their voices.

“Shut your ears, child!” cried Mrs. Gambit. But, immediately afterwards: “There! it’s no use; they could be heard through my grandfather’s nightcap! Oh, this London wickedness!”

There are many kinds of wickedness in London; but the worst, as I have always thought, because I have seen and heard so much of it, is the great and terrible vice of blasphemy and profane swearing, so that, if you listen to the ragamuffin boys or to the porters, or to the chair and coach men, it would seem as if it were impossible for them to utter three words without two, at least, being part of an oath.

Then some of the drivers fought with each other; the people

in the coaches looked out of the windows – swore, if they were men; if they were ladies, they shrieked. Most of those who were walking up and down the hill took no manner of notice of the confusion; they pushed on their way, bearing parcels and bundles, looking neither to the right nor to the left, but straight in front, as if they had not a moment to spare, and must push on or lose their chance of fortune. Some there were, it is true, who lingered, looking at the crush in the road and the men fighting; or, if they were women, stopping before the shops, in the windows of which were hoods, cardinals, sashes, pinnets, and shawls, would make the mouth of any girl to water only to look at them. At the doors stood shopmen, bravely habited in full-dressed wigs with broad ribbon ties behind, who bowed and invited the gazers to enter. And there were a few who loitered as they went. These carried their hats beneath their arms, and dangled canes in their right hands.

There was plenty of time for us to notice all that passed, because the block in the way took fully half an hour to clear away. We were delayed ten minutes of this time through the obstinacy of a drayman, who, after exchanging with a carter oaths which clashed, and clanged, and echoed in the air like the bombshells at the siege of Mans, declared that he could not possibly go away satisfied until he had fought his man. The mob willingly met his views, applauding so delicate a sense of honour. They made a ring, and we presently heard the shouts of those who encouraged the combatants, but happily could not see them, by

reason of the press. Mrs. Gambit would fain have witnessed the fight; and, indeed, few country people there are who do not love to see two sturdy fellows thwack and belabour each other with quarterstaff, singlestick, or fists. But I was glad that we could not see the battle, being, I hope, better taught. My father, indeed, and Lady Levett were agreed that in these things we English were little better than the poor pagan Romans, who crowded to see gladiators do battle to the death, or prisoners fight till they fell, cruelly torn and mangled by the lions; and no better at all than the poor Spanish papists who flock to a circus where men fight with bulls. It is hard to think that Roman gentlewomen and Spanish ladies would go to see such sights, whatever men may do. Yet in this eighteenth century, when we have left behind us, as we flatter ourselves, the Gothic barbarisms of our ancestors, we still run after such cruelties and cruel sports as fights with fists, sticks, or swords, baitings of bull, bear, and badger, throwing stones at cocks, killing of rats by dogs and ferrets, fights of cocks, dogs, cats, and whatever other animals can be persuaded to fight and kill each other.

When the fight was over, and one man defeated – I know not which, but both were horribly bruised and stained with blood – the carts cleared away rapidly, and we were able to go on. Is it not strange to think that the honour of such a common fellow should be “satisfied” when he hath gotten black eyes, bloody nose, and teeth knocked down his throat?

We got to the bottom of the hill, and passed without further

adventure through the old gate of Lud, with its narrow arch and the stately effigy of Queen Elizabeth looking across the Fleet Bridge. Pity it is that the old gate has since been removed. For my own part, I think the monuments of old times should be carefully guarded, and kept, not taken away to suit the convenience of draymen and coaches. What would Fleet Street be without its bar? or the Thames without its river-gates? Outside, there was a broad space before us. The Fleet river ran, filthy and muddy, to the left, the road crossing it by a broad and handsome stone bridge, where the way was impeded by the stalls of those who sold hot furmety and medicines warranted to cure every disease. On the right, the Fleet had been recently covered in, and was now built over with a long row of booths and stalls. On either side the market were rows of houses.

“Fleet Market,” said the driver, looking round. “Patience, young lady. Five minutes, and we are there.”

There was another delay here of two or three minutes. The crowd was denser, and I saw among them two or three men with eager faces, who wore white aprons, and ran about whispering in the ears of the people, especially of young people. I saw one couple, a young man and a girl, whom they all, one after the other, addressed, whispering, pointing, and inviting. The girl blushed and turned away her head, and the young man, though he marched on stoutly, seemed not ill pleased with their proposals. Presently one of them came to our coach, and put his head in at the window. It was as impudent and ugly a head as ever I saw. He

squinted, one eye rolling about by itself, as if having quarrelled with the other; he had had the bridge of his nose crushed in some fight; some of his teeth stuck out like fangs, but most were broken; his chin was bristly with a three days' beard; his voice was thick and hoarse; and when he began to speak, his hearers began to think of rum.

"Pity it is," he said, "that so pretty a pair cannot find gallant husbands. Now, ladies, if you will come with me I warrant that in half an hour the doctor will bestow you upon a couple of the young noblemen whom he most always keeps in readiness."

Here the driver roughly bade him begone about his business for an ass, for the young lady was on her way to the doctor's. At this the fellow laughed and nodded his head.

"Aha!" he said, "no doubt we shall find the gentleman waiting. Your ladyship will remember that I spoke to you first. The fees of us messengers are but half-a-crown, even at the doctor's, where alone the work is secure."

"What means the fellow?" cried Mrs. Gambit. "What have we to do with gentlemen?"

"All right, mother," he replied, with another laugh. Then he mounted the door-step, and continued to talk while the coach slowly made its way.

We were now driving along the city side of the Fleet Market, that side on which stands the prison. The market was crowded with buyers and sellers, the smell of the meat, the poultry, and the fruit, all together, being strong rather than delicate.

“This,” said Mrs. Gambit, “is not quite like the smell of the honeysuckle in the Kentish hedges.”

The houses on our right seemed to consist of nothing but taverns, where signs were hoisted up before the doors. At the corner, close to the ditch was the Rainbow, and four doors higher up was the Hand and Pen, next to that the Bull and Garter, then another Hand and Pen, then the Bishop Blaize, a third Hand and Pen, the Fighting Cocks, and the Naked Boy. One called the White Horse had a verse written up under the sign:

“My White Horse shall beat the Bear,
And make the Angel fly;
Turn the Ship with its bottom up,
And drink the Three Cups dry.”

But what was more remarkable was that of the repetition in every window of a singular announcement. Two hands were painted, or drawn rudely, clasping each other, and below them was written, printed, or scrawled, some such remarkable legend as the following:

“Weddings Performed Here.”

**“A Church of England Clergyman
always on the Premises.”**

“Weddings performed Cheap.”

“The Only Safe House.”

“The Old and True Register.”

**“Marriage by Church Service
and Ordained Clergymen.”**

“Safety and Cheapness.”

“The Licensed Clergymen of the Fleet.”

“You do well, ladies,” the man with us went on, talking with his head thrust into the coach, “you do well to come to Doctor Shovel, whose humble servant, or clerk, I am. The Doctor is no ordinary Fleet parson. He does not belong to the beggarly gentry – not regular clergymen at all who live in a tavern, and do odd jobs as they come, for a guinea a week and the run of the landlord’s rum. Not he, madam. The Doctor is a gentleman and a scholar: Master of Arts of the University of Cambridge he was, where, by reason of their great respect for his learning and piety, they have made him Doctor of Divinity. There is the Rev. Mr. Arkwell, who will read the service for you for half-a-crown; he was fined five shillings last week for drunkenness and profane swearing. Would it be agreeable to your ladyship to be turned off by such an impious rogue? There is the Rev. Mr. Wigmore will do it for less, if you promise to lay out your wedding money afterwards on what he calls his Nantz: he hath twice been fined for selling spirituous drinks without a license. Who would trust herself to a man so regardless of his profession? Or the Rev. John Mottram – but there, your ladyship would not like to have it read in a prison. Now, at the Doctor’s is a snug room with hassocks. There is, forsooth, the Rev. Walter Wyatt, brother of him who keeps the first Pen and Hand after you turn the corner; but sure, such a sweet young lady would scorn to look for drink after the service; or the Rev. John Grierson, or Mr. Walker, or Mr. Alexander Keith, will do it for what they can get, ay! even – it is reported – down to eighteenpence or a shilling, with a

sixpennyworth of Geneva. But your ladyship must think of your lines; and where is your security against treachery? No, ladies. The Doctor is the only man; a gentleman enjoying the liberties of the Fleet, for which he hath given security; a Cambridge scholar; who receives at his lodging none but the quality; no less a fee than a guinea, with half-a-crown for the clerk, ever enters his house. The guinea, ladies, includes the five-shilling stamp, with the blessing of the Archbishop of Canterbury, which binds the happy pair like an act of parliament or a piece of cobbler's wax. This cheapness is certainly due to the benevolence and piety of the Doctor, who would be loth indeed to place obstacles in the way of so Christian and religious a ceremony."

"We have certainly," cried Mrs. Gambit, in dismay at such a flow of words, "got into Tom Fool's Land. This man is worse than the parsons at the Coffee-house."

"Now, ladies," the fellow went on, throwing the door wide open with a fling, and letting down the steps, "this is the house. Look at it, ladies!"

We got down and stood looking at it.

It was a low house of mean appearance, built in two stories of brick and timber, the first floor overhanging the lower, as was the fashion until the present comfortable and handsome mode of using stucco and flat front was adopted. The brick had been once covered with a coat of yellow wash, which had crumbled away over most of the front; the timber had once been painted, but the paint had fallen off. The roof was gabled; like the rest of

the house, it looked decaying and neglected. The window of the room which looked out upon the street was broad, but it was set with leaden frames of the kind called diamond, provided with the common greenish glass, every other pane being those thick bull's-eye panes, which would stand a blow with a club without being broken. Little light would enter at that window but for the bright sun which shone full upon it; the casement, however, was set open to catch the air.

As for the air, that was hardly worth catching, so foul was it with the fumes of the market. Right in front of the door stood a great heap of cabbage leaves, stalks, and vegetable refuse, which sometimes was collected, put in barrows, and carted into the Fleet Ditch, but sometimes remained for months.

Mrs. Gambit sniffed disdainfully.

“Give me Fore Street,” she said. “There’s noise, if you like, but no cabbage-stalks.”

“This, ladies,” said the man after a pause, so that we might be overpowered with the grandeur of the house; “this is no other than the great Dr. Shovel’s house. Here shall you find a service as regular and as truly read as if you were in the cathedral itself. Not so much as an amen dropped. They do say that the Doctor is a private friend of the dean, and hand-in-glove with the bishop. This way. Your ladyship’s box? I will carry it. This is the good Doctor’s door. The clerk’s fee half-a-crown; your ladyship will not forget, unless the young gentleman, which is most likely, should like to make it half-a-guinea. I follow your ladyships.

Doubt not that, early as it is, his reverence will be found up and ready for good works.”

“I believe,” said Mrs. Gambit, “that this man would talk the hind legs off a donkey. Keep close to me, Miss Kitty. Here may be villainy; and if there is, there’s one at least that shall feel the weight of my ten nails. Young man,” she addressed the fellow with sharpness, “you let that box alone, or if you carry it, go before; I trust Londoners as far as I can see them, and no farther.”

“Pray, ladies,” cried the man, “have no suspicion.”

“It’s all right,” said the coachman, grinning. “Lord! I’ve brought them here by dozens. Go in, madam. Go in, young lady.”

“This way, ladies,” cried the man. “The Doctor will see you within.”

“A clergyman,” continued Mrs. Gambit, taking no manner of notice of these interruptions, “may not always, no more than a builder’s foreman, choose where he would live. And if his parish is the Fleet Market, among the cabbages, as I suppose the Doctor’s is, or about the Fleet Prison, among the miserable debtors, as I suppose it may be, why he must fain live here with the cabbage-stalks beneath his nose, and make the best of it.”

“Your ladyship,” the messenger went on, addressing himself to me, “will shortly, no doubt, be made happy. The gentleman, however, hath not yet come. Pray step within, ladies.”

“You see, Miss Kitty,” said Mrs. Gambit, pointing to the window, with a disdainful look at this impertinent fellow, “this is certainly the house. So far, therefore, we are safe.”

In the window there hung a card, on which was written in large characters, so that all might read:

REVEREND GREGORY SHOVEL,
DOCTOR OF DIVINITY,
FORMERLY OF CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY.

Now, without any reason, I immediately connected this announcement with those curious advertisements I had seen in the tavern windows. And yet, what could my uncle have to do with marrying? And what did the man mean by his long rigmarole and nonsense about the Reverend This and the Reverend That?

However, Mrs. Gambit led the way, and I followed.

The messenger pushed a door open, and we found ourselves in a low room lit by the broad window with the diamond panes, of which I have spoken. The air in the room was close, and smelt of tobacco and rum: the floor was sanded: the wainscoting of the walls was broken in places; walls, floors, and ceiling were all alike unwashed and dirty: the only furniture was a table, half-a-dozen cushions or hassocks, and one great chair with arms and back of carved wood. On the table was a large volume. It was the

Prayer-book of the Established Church of England and Ireland, and it was lying open, I could plainly see, at the Marriage Service.

At the head of the table, a reflection of the sunlight from the window falling full upon his face, sat a man of middle age, about fifty-five years or so, who rose when we came in, and bowed with great gravity. Could this be my uncle?

He was a very big and stout man – one of the biggest men I have ever seen. He was clad in a rich silk gown, flowing loosely and freely about him, white bands, clean and freshly starched, and a very full wig. He had the reddest face possible: it was of a deep crimson colour, tinged with purple, and the colour extended even to the ears, and the neck – so much of it as could be seen – was as crimson as the cheeks. He had a full nose, long and broad, a nose of great strength and very deep in colour; but his eyes, which were large, reminded me of that verse in the Psalms, wherein the divine poet speaks of those whose eyes swell out with fatness: his lips were gross and protruded; he had a large square forehead and a great amplitude of cheek. He was broad in the shoulders, deep-chested and portly – a man of great presence; when he stood upright he not only seemed almost to touch the ceiling, but also to fill up the breadth of the room. My heart sank as I looked at him; for he was not the manner of man I expected, and I was afraid. Where were the outward signs and tokens of that piety which my father had led me to expect in my uncle? I had looked for a gentle scholar, a grave and thoughtful bearing. But, even to my inexperienced eyes, the confident carriage of the

Doctor appeared braggart: the roll of his eyes when we entered the room could not be taken even by a simple country girl for the grave contemplation of a humble and fervent Christian: the smell of the room was inconsistent with the thought of religious meditation: there were no books or papers, or any other outward signs of scholarship; and even the presence of the Prayer-book on the table, with the hassocks, seemed a mockery of sacred things.

“So, good Roger,” he said, in a voice loud and sonorous, yet musical as the great bell of St. Paul’s, so deep was it and full – “So, good Roger, whom have we here?”

“A young lady, sir, whom I had the good fortune to meet on Ludgate Hill. She was on her way to your reverence’s, to ask your good offices. She is – ahem! – fully acquainted with the customary fees of the Establishment.”

“That is well,” he replied. “My dear young lady, I am fortunate in being the humble instrument of making so sweet a creature happy. But I do not see ... in fact ... the other party.”

“The young lady expects the gentleman every minute,” said the excellent Roger.

“Oh!” cried Mrs. Gambit, “the man is stark mad – staring mad!”

“Sir,” I faltered – “there is, I fear, some mistake.”

He waved both of his hands with a gesture reassuring and grand.

“No mistake, madam, at all. I am that Dr. Shovel before whom the smaller pretenders in these Liberties give place and

hide diminished heads. If by any unlucky accident your lover has fallen a prey to some of those (self-styled) clerical gentry, who are in fact impostors and sharpers, we will speedily rescue him from their talons. Describe the gentleman, madam, and my messenger shall go and seek him at the Pen and Hand, or at some other notorious place.”

The clerk, meanwhile, had placed himself beside his master, and now produced a greasy Prayer-book, with the aid of which, I suppose, he meant to give the responses of the Church. At the mention of the word “mistake” a look of doubt and anxiety crossed his face.

“There is, indeed, some mistake, sir,” I repeated. “My errand here is not of the kind you think.”

“Then, madam, your business with me must be strange indeed. Sirrah!” he addressed his clerk, in a voice of thunder, “hast thou been playing the fool? What was it this young lady sought of you?”

“Oh, sir! this good person is not to blame, perhaps. Are you indeed the Rev. Gregory Shovel, Doctor of Divinity?”

“No other, madam.” He spread out both his arms, proudly lifting his gown, so that he really seemed to cover the whole of the end of the room. “No other: I assure you I am Dr. Gregory Shovel, known and beloved by many a happy pair.”

“And the brother-in-law of the late Reverend Lawrence Pleydell, late vicar of – ”

He interrupted me. “Late vicar? Is, then, my brother-in-

law dead? or have they, which is a thing incredible, conferred preferment upon sheer piety?”

“Alas! sir,” I cried, with tears, “my father is dead.”

“Thy father, child!”

“Yes, sir; I am Kitty Pleydell, at your service.”

“Kitty Pleydell!” He bent over me across the table, and looked into my face not unkindly. “My sister’s child! then how – ” He turned upon his clerk, who now stood with staring eyes and open mouth, chapfallen and terrified. “Fool!” he thundered. “Get thee packing, lest I do thee a mischief!”

CHAPTER V

HOW KITTY WITNESSED A FLEET WEDDING

Then I pulled out my father's letter, and gave it to him to read.

He took it, read it carefully, nodding gravely over each sentence, and then returned it to me.

"Lawrence, then," he said softly, "Lawrence is dead! Lawrence Pleydell is dead! And I am living. Lawrence! He hath, without reasonable doubt, passed away in full assurance. He hath exchanged this world for a better. He hath gone to happiness. Nay, if such as he die not in faith, what hope remains for such sinners as ourselves? Then would it be better for those who dwell in the Liberties of the Fleet if they had never been born. So. My sister's child. Hold up thy face, my dear." He kissed me as he spoke, and held his hand under my chin so that he could look at me well. "There is more Pleydell than Shovel here. That is well, because the Pleydells are of gentle blood. And the daughter doth ever favour the father more than the mother. Favour him in thy life, child, as well as in thy features.

"Lawrence is dead!" he went on. "The gentlest soul, the most pious and religious creature that the world has ever seen. He, for one, could think upon his Maker without the terror of a rebellious and prodigal son. The world and the flesh had no temptations

for him. A good man, indeed. It is long since I saw him, and he knew not where I live, nor how. Yet he, who knew me when I was young, trusted still in me – whom no one else will trust. This it is to start in life with goodly promise of virtue, scholarship, and religion.”

He cleared his throat, and was silent awhile.

“Thy father did well, child. I will treat thee as my own daughter. Yet I know not, indeed, where to bestow thee, for this house is not fit for girls, and I have none other. Still, I would fain take thy father’s place, so far as in me lies. He, good man, lived in the country, where virtue, like fresh butter and new-laid eggs, flourishes easily and at the cost of a little husbandry in the way of prayer and meditation. As for us who live in great cities, and especially in the Rules or Liberties of the Fleet, we may say with the Psalmist, having examples to the contrary continually before us, with temptations such as dwellers in the fields wot not of, ‘He that keepeth the Law, happy is he!’ I have neither wife nor child to greet thee, Kitty. I must bestow thee somewhere. What shall we do?”

He paused to think.

“I might find a lodging – but no, that would not do. Or in – but the house is full of men. There is the clerk of St. Sepulchre’s, whose wife would take thee; but the rector bears me a heavy grudge. Ho! ho!” he laughed low down in his chest. “There is not a parish round London, from Limehouse to Westminster, and from Southwark to Highgate, where the niece of Dr. Shovel

would not find herself flouted, out of the singular hatred which the clergy bear to me. For I undersell them all. And if they pass an Act to prevent my marrying, then will I bury for nothing and undersell them still. Well, I must take order in this matter. And who are you, my good woman?" He asked this of Mrs. Gambit.

"Jane Gambit, sir," she replied, "at your service, and the wife of Samuel Gambit, foreman of works. And my charge is not to leave Miss Kitty until she is safe in your reverence's hands. There are the hands, to be sure; but as for safety – "

She paused, and sniffed violently, looking round the room with a meaning air.

"Why, woman, you would not think the child in danger with me?"

"I know not, sir. But Miss Kitty has been brought up among gentlefolk, and the room is not one to which she has been accustomed to live in, or to eat in, or to sleep in, either at the Vicarage or the Hall. Tobacco and the smell of rum may be very well – in their place, which, I humbly submit, is in a tavern, not a gentlewoman's parlour."

"The woman speaks reason," he growled, laying his great hand upon the table. "See, my dear, my brother-in-law thought me holding a rich benefice in the Church. Those get rich benefices who have rich friends and patrons. I had none; therefore I hold no benefice. And as for my residence, why, truly, I have little choice except between this place and the Fleet Prison, or perhaps the King's Bench. Else might I welcome thee in a better and

more convenient lodging. Know, therefore, Kitty, without any concealment, that I live here secluded in the Liberties of the Fleet in order that my creditors, of whom I have as many as most men and more importunate, may no longer molest me when I take my walks abroad; that I am in this place outside the authority of the bishop; and that my occupation is to marry, with all safety and despatch without license, or asking of banns, or any of the usual delays, those good people who wish to be married secretly and quickly, and can afford at least one guinea fee for the ceremony.”

I stared in amazement. To be sure, every clergyman can marry, but for a clergyman to do naught else seemed strange indeed.

He saw my amazement; and, drawing his tall and burly figure upright, he began to deliver an oration – I call it an oration, because he so puffed his cheeks, rolled his sentences, and swelled himself out while he spoke, that it was more like a sermon or oration than a mere speech. In it he seemed to be trying at once to justify himself in my eyes, to assert his own self-respect, and to magnify his office.

“It is not likely, child,” he said, “that thou hast been told of these marriages in the Fleet. Know, therefore, that in this asylum, called the Rules of the Fleet, where debtors find some semblance of freedom and creditors cease to dun, there has grown up a custom of late years by which marriages are here rapidly performed (for the good of the country), which the beneficed clergy would not undertake without great expense,

trouble, delay, and the vexation of getting parents' and guardians' consent, to say nothing of the prodigality and wasteful expense of feasting which follows what is called a regular marriage. Therefore, finding myself some years ago comfortably settled in the place, after contracting a greater debt than is usually possible for an unbeneficed clergyman, I undertook this trade, which is lucrative, honourable, and easy. There are indeed," he added, "both in the Prison and the Rules, but more especially the latter, many Fleet parsons" – here he rolled his great head with complacency – "but none, my child, so great and celebrated as myself. Some, indeed, are mere common cheats, whose marriages – call them, rather, sacrilegious impostures – are not worth the paper of their pretended certificates. Some are perhaps what they profess to be, regularly ordained clergymen of the Church of England and Ireland as by law established, the supreme head of which is his gracious Majesty. But even these are tipplers, and beggars, and paupers – men who drink gin of an evening and small beer in the morning, whose gowns are as ragged as their reputations, and who take their fees in shillings, with a dram thrown in, and herd with the common offscourings of the town, whom they marry. Illiterate, too: not a Greek verse or a Latin hexameter among them all. Go not into the company of such, lest thou be corrupted by their talk. In the words of King Lemuel: 'Let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more.'" Here he paused and adjusted his gown, as if he were in a pulpit. Indeed, for the moment, he imagined,

perhaps, that he was preaching. “As for me, Gregory Shovel, my marriages are what they pretend to be, as tight as any of the archbishop’s own tying, conducted with due decorum by a member of the University of Cambridge, a man whose orders are beyond dispute, whose history is known to all, an approved and honoured scholar. Yes, my niece, behold in me one who has borne off University and College medals for Latin verse. My Latin verses, wherein I have been said to touch Horace, and even to excel Ovid, whether in the tender elegiac, the stately alcaic, the melting sapphic, or the easy-flowing hendecasyllabic loved of Martial, have conferred upon my head the bays of fame. Other Fleet parsons? Let them hide their ignorant heads in their second-hand perukes! By the thunders of Jupiter!” – his powerful voice rose and rolled about the room like the thunder by which he swore – “By the thunders of Jupiter, I am their Bishop! Let them acknowledge that I, and I alone, am The Chaplain of the Fleet!”

During this speech he swelled himself out so enormously, and so flourished his long gown, that he seemed to fill the whole room. I shrank into a corner, and clasped Mrs. Gambit’s hand.

This kind of terror I have always felt since, whenever, which is rare, I have heard a man speak in such a full, rich, manliness of voice. It was a voice with which he might have led thousands to follow him and do his bidding. When I read of any great orator at whose speeches the people went mad, so that they did what he told them were it but to rush along the road to certain death, I think of the Reverend Dr. Shovel. I am sure that Peter the

Hermit, or St. Bernard, must have had such a voice. While he spoke, though the words were not noble, the air was such, the voice was such, the eloquence was such, that my senses were carried away, and I felt that in the hands of such a man no one was master of himself. His demeanour was so majestic, that even the shabby, dirty room in which he spoke became for the time a temple fit for the sacred rites conducted by so great and good a man: the noise of carts, the voices of men and women, were drowned and stilled beneath the rolling music of his voice. I was rapt and astonished and terrified.

Mrs. Gambit was so far impressed when the Doctor began this oration, that she instantly assumed that attitude of mind and body in which country people always listen to a sermon: that is to say, she stood with her chin up, her eyes fixed on the ceiling (fie! how black it was!), her hands crossed, and her thoughts wandering freely whithersoever they listed. It is a practice which sometimes produces good effects, save when the preacher, which is seldom, hath in his own mind a clear message to deliver from the Revealed Word. For it prevents a congregation from discerning the poverty of the discourse; and in these latter days of Whitfield, Wesley, and the sad schisms which daily we witness, it checks the progress of Dissent.

The Doctor, after a short pause, swept back his flowing gown with a significant gesture of his left hand, and resumed the defence or apology for his profession. It was remarkable that he spoke as earnestly, and with as much force, eloquence, and

justness in this address to two women – or to one and a half, because Mrs. Gambit, thinking herself in church, was only half a listener – as if he had been addressing a great congregation beneath the vast dome of St. Paul’s. The Doctor, I afterwards found, was always great; no mean or little ways were his: he lived, he spoke, he moved, he thought like a bishop. Had he been actually a bishop, I am sure that his stateliness, dignity, and pomp would have been worthy of that exalted position, and that he would have graced the bench by the exhibition of every Christian virtue, except perhaps that of meekness. For the Doctor was never meek.

“Let us,” said the Doctor, “argue the question. What is there contrary to the Rubric in my calling? The Church hath wisely ordered that marriage is a state to be entered upon only after sanctification by her ministers or priests; I am one of those ministers. She hath provided and strictly enjoined a rule of service; I read that service. She hath recommended the faithful to marry as if to enter a holy and blessed condition of life; I encourage and exhort the people to come to me with the design of obeying the Church and entering upon that condition. She hath, in deference to the laws of the land, required a stamped certificate (at five shillings); I find that certificate in obedience to the law. Further, for the credit of the cloth, and because people must not think the ministers of the Church to be, like common hackney coachmen, messengers, running lackeys, and such varlets, at the beck and call of every prentice boy and

ragamuffin wench with a yard-measure and a dishclout for all their fortune; and because, further, it is well to remind people of thrift, especially this common people of London, who are grievously given to waste, prodigality, gluttony, fine clothes, drinking, and all such extravagances – nay, how except by thrift will they find money to pay their lawful tithes to Mother Church? – wherefore it is my custom – nay, my undeviating rule – to charge a fee of one guinea at least for every pair, with half-a-crown for the services of the clerk. More may be given; more, I say, is generally given by those who have money in pocket, and generous, grateful hearts. What, indeed, is a present of ten guineas in return for such services as mine? Child, know that I am a public benefactor; behold in me one who promotes the happiness of his species; but for me maids would languish, lovers groan, and cruel guardians triumph. I ask not if there be any impediment; I inquire not if there be some to forbid the banns; I do not concern myself with the lover's rent-roll; I care not what his profession – I have even married a lady to her footman, since she desired it, and a nobleman to his cook, since that was his lordship's will. I ask not for consent of parents; the maiden leaves my doors a wife: when she goes home, no parents or guardians can undo the knot that I have tied. Doctors, learned in theology, casuistry, science, and philosophy, have been called by divers names; there have been the Subtle Doctor, the Golden Doctor, the Eloquent Doctor. For me there has been reserved the title of the Benevolent Doctor; of me let it be said that he loved even

beyond his respect towards his diocesan, even beyond obedience to his ecclesiastical superiors, even beyond consideration to the parish clergy, who by his means were deprived of their fees, the happiness of his fellow men and women.”

His voice had dropped to the lower notes, and his last words were spoken in deep but gentle thunder. When he had finished, Mrs. Gambit dropped her chin and returned to practical business.

“And pray, sir, what will Miss Kitty do?”

Recalled to the facts of the case, the Doctor paused. His cheeks retracted, his breadth and height became perceptibly smaller.

“What will she do? That is, indeed, a difficulty.”

“If,” said Mrs. Gambit, “your honour is a prisoner – ”

“Woman!” he roared, “I enjoy the Liberties of the Fleet – the Liberties, do you hear? Prate not to me of prisoners. Is Dr. Shovel a man, think ye, to clap in a prison?”

“Well, then, is Miss Kitty to live here?” She looked round in disgust. “Why, what a place is this for a young lady virtuously and godlily reared! Your ceiling is black with smoke; the windows are black with dirt; the walls are streaked with dirt; the floor is as thick with mud as the road – faugh! If your honour is a bishop, as you say you are, you can doubtless put the poor young lady, who is used to sweet air and clean floors, where she will get such – and that without profane swearing.”

The last remark was caused by language used at that moment outside the window by a man wheeling a barrow full of cabbages,

which upset. While picking up the vegetables, he swore loudly, administering rebuke in a couple of oaths at least, and in some cases more, to every head of cabbage in turn. An unreflecting wretch indeed, to break a commandment upon a senseless vegetable!

“Nay,” I said, “my uncle will do what is best for me.”

“I will do for thee,” he said, “what I can. This place is not fit for a young girl. All the morning it is wanted for my occupation. In the evening I am visited by gentlemen who seek me for certain merits, graces, or beauties of conversation in which I am said (although I boast not) to be endowed with gifts beyond those allotted to most men. No, child, thou must not stay here.”

While we stood waiting for his decision, we became aware of a most dreadful noise outside. Men were shouting, women were screaming; of course bad language and cursing formed a large part of what was said. The air about the Fleet was always heavy with oaths, so that at last the ear grew accustomed to them, and we noticed them no more than in the quiet fields one notices the buzzing of the insects. But these people, whoever they were, congregated outside the door of the house; and after more oaths and loud talk, the door was opened and they all tramped noisily into the room – a party of men and women, twelve in all – and drew up in some sort of order, every man leading a woman by the hand. As for the men, though I had never seen the sea, I knew at once that monsters so uncouth and rough could be none other than sailors. They were all dressed alike, and wore blue jackets

with flannel shirts and coloured silk neckties: every man carried round his waist a rope, at the end of which was a knife; they wore three-cornered hats without lace or any kind of trimming; they had no wigs, but wore their own hair plastered with tallow, rolled up tightly and tied behind; and one bore a great and grisly beard most terrible to behold. Great boots covered their feet; their hands were smeared with tar; their faces were weather-beaten, being burnt by the sun and blown by the breeze; their eyes were clear and bright, but their cheeks were bruised as if they had been fighting: they were all laughing, and their countenances betokened the greatest satisfaction with everything. As for the women, they were young, and some of them, I suppose, were handsome, but they looked bold and rough. They were very finely dressed, their frocks being of silk and satin, with flowered shawls, and hats of a grandeur I had never before seen; immense hoops and great patches. But the fight outside had torn their finery, and more than one nymph had a black eye. However, these accidents had not diminished the general joy, and they were laughing with the men.

“Why – why!” roared the Doctor, as he called them to attention by banging the table with his fist, so that the windows rattled, the women shrieked, and the plaster fell from the wall. “What is this? Who are ye?”

The impudent fellow with the white apron who had brought us to the place, here stepped in, bringing with him another couple. He, too, had been fighting, for his face was bleeding and bruised.

Fighting, I presently found, was too common in Fleet Market to call for any notice.

“What is this, Roger?” repeated the Doctor. “These tarpaulins are no cattle for my handling. Let them go to the Pen and Hand, or some other pigsty where they can be irregularly and illegally married for eighteenpence and a glass of rum.”

“Please your reverence,” said Roger, handling his nose, which was swollen, tenderly, “they are honest gentlemen of the sea, paid off at Wapping but yesternight, still in their sea-going clothes by reason of their having as yet no time to buy long-shore rigging; not common sailors, but mates by rating in the ship’s books, and anxious to be married by none other than your reverence.”

“Ay – ay! honest Roger.” The Doctor’s voice dropped and became soft and encouraging. “Ay – ay! this is as it should be. Know they of the fee?”

“They wish me to offer your reverence,” said the clerk, “a guinea apiece, and five guineas extra for your honour’s trouble, if so be so small a gift is worth your acceptance; with half-a-crown apiece for the clerk, and a guinea for his nose, which I verily believe is broken in the bridge. I have had great trouble, your reverence, in conveying so large a party safe. And indeed I thought, at one time, the Rev. Mr. Arkwell would have had them all. But the gallant gentlemen knew what was best for them; and so, your honour, with a nose – ”

The Doctor shook his head and interrupted any further explanation.

“That would indeed have been a misfortune for these brave fellows. Come, Roger, collect the fees, and to business with what speed we may.”

“Now then,” said Roger roughly, “money first, business afterwards. No fee, no marriage. Pay up, my lads!”

The men lugged out handfuls of gold from their pockets, and paid without hesitation what they were told. But the women grumbled, saying that for half-a-crown and a dram they would have been married quite as well, and so much more to spend. When the Doctor had put the fees in his pocket, he advanced to the table and took up the Prayer-book. What would my father have said had he witnessed this sight?

Then Roger pulled out his greasy book, and put himself in place ready to say the responses. All being ready, the Doctor again banged the table with his fist so that they all jumped, and the women screamed again, and more plaster fell off the wall.

“Now, all of you!” he roared, “listen to me. The first man who interrupts, the first woman who laughs, the first who giggles, the first who dares to misbehave or to bring contempt on this religious ceremony, I will with my own clerical hands pitch headforemost into the street. And *he shall remain unmarried!*”

Whether they were awed by his great voice and terrible aspect, the men being short of stature as all sailors seem to be, or whether they feared to be pitched through the window, or whether they trembled at the prospect of remaining unmarried (perhaps for life) if the Doctor refused to perform the ceremony, I know not.

What is quite certain is that they one and all, men and women, became suddenly as mute as mice, and perfectly obedient to the commands of Roger the clerk, who told them where to stand, when to kneel, what to say, and what to do. A curtain ring acted as wedding-ring for all.

The Doctor would omit nothing from the service, which he read from beginning to end in his loud musical voice. When he had married the whole six, he shut the Prayer-book, produced six stamped certificates, rapidly filled in the names and dates, which he also entered in his "Register," a great book with parchment cover. Roger acted as witness. Then the brides were presented by the Doctor with the certificates of their marriage. The ceremony lasted altogether about half-an-hour.

"You are now, ladies and gentlemen," he said, smiling pleasantly, "married fast and firm, one to the other. I congratulate you. Marriage in the case of sailors and sailors' wives is a condition of peculiar happiness, as you will all of you presently discover. The husband, at the outset, is liable for the debts of his wife" – here the men looked sheepishly at each other – "this no doubt will be brought home to all of you. There are several brave gentlemen of the sea now languishing in the Fleet Prison through inability to pay off these encumbrances. They will continue to lie there for the whole term of their lives, these unfortunate men. Husbands are also liable for the debts incurred by their wives while they are abroad" – here one or two of the men murmured something about London Port and giving it a

wide berth, which I did not understand. “As for the wives of seafaring men, their blessings and privileges are also peculiar and numerous. They will have to remain at home and pray for the safety of the husbands whom they will see perhaps once every five years or so: they will, in this widowed state, be able to practise many Christian virtues which those who enjoy the constant presence of a husband are less often called upon to illustrate: such are patience under privation, resignation, and hope. Most of them will find the allowance made to them by their husbands insufficient or irregularly paid. If any of them marry again, or be already married, it is, let me tell you, a hanging matter. Yea, there are already in Newgate hard by, several unfortunate women cast for execution who have married again while their husbands were at sea. Lying in the cells they are, waiting for the cart and the gallows!” Here the women looked at one another and trembled, while their cheeks grew pale. “It is too late now. Should there be any woman here who has committed the crime of bigamy, let that woman know that it is too late for aught but repentance. The gallows awaits her. You are now therefore, my friends, bound to each other. I trust and hope that these marriages have not been hastily or lightly entered upon. You have heard the duties of husband to wife and wife to husband, in the words of the service duly read to you by a clergyman of the Church of England. Go now, perform those duties: be bright and shining examples of temperance, fidelity, and virtue. Should any man among you find that his

marriage hath led him, through such a cause as I have indicated, to the King's Bench, or the Fleet, or the Compter; should he have to exchange, against his will, the free air of the sea for the confinement of a gaol, and the rolling deck for the narrow courtyard; should he see himself reduced (having never learned any handicraft or trade) to starvation through these liabilities of his wife, or should any woman among you have hereafter to stand her trial for bigamy either for this work newly accomplished or for any future crime of the same nature, it will then be your comfort to reflect that you were not married by an irregular, self-constituted, self-styled Fleet parson, but by an ordained clergyman and a Doctor of Divinity. Wherefore, I wish you well. Now go, less noisily than you came. But the noise I impute to your ignorance, as not knowing the quality of the man into whose presence you so rudely pushed. As for the marriage feast, see that you enjoy it in moderation. Above all, let your liquors be good. To which end – I speak it purely out of my benevolence and for the good of head and stomach – you will find the rum at the Bishop Blaize cheap and wholesome. Be not tempted to prefer the Rainbow or the Naked Boy, where the liquor is deplorable; and perhaps, in an hour or so, I may look in and drink your healths. Roger, turn them out.”

They went away sheepish and crestfallen, who had come noisy and triumphant. I was ashamed, thinking of my father, and yet lost in wonder, looking at my uncle who had so easily tamed this savage crew.

“I am glad,” said the Doctor, when they had gone, “that this chance did not become the windfall of an irregular and unlicensed practitioner. They cannot say that I warned them not. Well, let them have their way. A few days more and the men will be afloat again, all their money gone; and the women – ”

“Will they starve, sir?” I asked.

“I doubt it much,” he replied. “Come, child, I have a thought of a plan for thee. Follow me. And you, good woman, come with us that you may see your charge in safety.”

The thing that I had seen was like a dream – the appearance of the disorderly sailors and the women whom they married; the words of the service read solemnly in this unhallowed room; the exaction of the money beforehand; the bleeding faces and marks of the recent fight; the exhortation of the Doctor; the disappearance of the actors; the swollen nose, black eye, and the importance of the clerk reading the responses – what strange place was this whereunto I had been led? One pitied, too, the poor fellows on whom Fate had bestowed such wives. I thought, child as I was, how terrible must be life encumbered with such women! Womanlike, I was harder on the women than the men. Yet truly, women are what men make them.

“Follow me, child.”

He led us out of the house, turning to the right. In the market was a lot of country people who were standing about a stall. And we heard a voice: “There’s the Doctor – there goes the great Dr. Shovel.”

My uncle drew himself up to his full height, and stalked grandly along with the eyes of the people upon him. "See," he seemed to say, by the swelling folds of his gown, "see my fame, how widespread it is – my reputation, how great!"

He stopped at the corner of Fleet Lane, where the houses were no longer taverns, and announcements of marriages were no longer to be seen. It was a house of three stories high, with a door which, like all the doors in that neighbourhood, stood ever open.

Here the Doctor stopped and addressed Mrs. Gambit —

"You spoke of safety. I am about to confide this child to the care of two gentlewomen, poor, but of good birth and character, whom unjust laws and the wickedness of men have condemned to imprisonment. I know of no better guardians; but you shall satisfy yourself before you go away. Wait a moment while I confer with the ladies."

We stayed below for ten minutes. Then my uncle came down the stairs, and bade me return with him to be presented to the ladies, who had kindly accepted the charge, on condition, he said, of my good conduct.

I followed him, Mrs. Gambit keeping close to me. We stopped at a door on the first floor. The room was poor and shabby: the furniture, of which there was not much, was old and worn: there was no carpet: a white blind was half drawn over the window: the place, to judge by the presence of a saucepan, a kettle, and a gridiron, was apparently a kitchen as well as a sitting-room: all, except a great portrait of a gentleman, in majestic wig and

splendid gown, which hung over the fireplace, was mean and pinched. Two ladies, of fifty or thereabouts, stood before me, holding out hands of welcome.

They were both exactly alike, being small and thin, with hollow cheeks, bright eyes, and pointed features like a pair of birds: they wore white caps, a sort of grey frock in cheap stuff: their hair was white: their hands were thin, with delicate fingers, transparent like the fingers of those who have been long in bed with sickness: they were of the same height, and appeared to be of the same age – namely, fifty or thereabouts. My first thought, as I looked at them, was that they had not enough to eat – which, indeed, like all first thoughts, was correct, because that had generally been the case with these poor creatures.

“Kitty,” said the Doctor, taking me by the hand, “I present you to Mrs. Esther Pimpernel” – here the lady on the left dipped and curtsied, and I also, mighty grave – “and to Mrs. Deborah Pimpernel” – here the same ceremony with the lady on the right. “Ladies, this is my niece Kitty Pleydell, daughter of my deceased sister Barbara and her husband Lawrence Pleydell of pious memory. I trust that in consenting thus generously to receive this child in your ward and keeping, you will find a reward for your benevolence in her obedience, docility, and gratitude.”

“Doctor,” murmured Mrs. Esther, in a voice like a turtledove’s for softness, “I am sure that a niece of yours must be all sensibility and goodness.”

“Goodness at least,” said her sister, in sharper tones.

I saw that the difference between the sisters lay chiefly in their voices.

“She will, I trust, be serviceable to you,” said the Doctor, waving his hand. “She hath been well and piously brought up to obedient ways. Under your care, ladies, I look for a good account of her.”

“Dear and reverend sir,” Mrs. Esther cooed, “we are pleased and happy to be of use to you in this matter. No doubt little miss, who is well grown of her years, will repay your kindness with her prayers. As for us, the memory of your past and present goodness – ”

“Tut, tut!” he replied, shaking his great head till his cheeks waggled, “let us hear no more of that. In this place” – here he laid his right hand upon his heart, elevating his left, and leaning his head to one side – “in this place, where infamy and well-deserved misery attend most of those who dwell in it, it is yours, as it should be mine, to keep burning continually the pure flame of a Christian life.”

“How sweet! how noble!” murmured the sisters.

Was it possible? The man whom we had just seen reading the service of Mother Church, which my father had taught me to regard as little less sacred than the words of the Bible itself, in a squalid room, reeking with the fumes of rum and stale tobacco, before a gang of half-drunken sailors, assumed naturally and easily, as if *it belonged to him*, the attitude and language of one devoted entirely to the contemplation and practice of

virtue and good works. Why, his face glowed with goodness like the sun at noonday, or the sun after a shower, or, say, the sun after a good action. The Doctor, indeed, as I learned later, could assume almost any character he pleased. It pleased him, not out of hypocrisy, but because for a time it was a return to the promise of his youth, to be with these ladies the devout Christian priest. In that character he felt, I am convinced, the words which came spontaneously to his lips: for the moment he *was* that character. Outside, in the Fleet Market, he was the great Dr. Shovel – great, because among the Fleet parsons he was the most successful, the most learned, the most eloquent, the most important. In his own room he married all comers, after the manner we have seen; and it raised the envy of his rivals to see how the crowd flocked to him. But in the evening he received his friends, and drank and talked with them in such fashion as I never saw, but of which I have heard. Again, it raised their envy to witness how men came from all quarters to drink with the Doctor. At that time he was no longer the Christian advocate, nor the clergyman; he was a rollicking, jovial, boon companion, who delighted to tell better stories, sing better songs, and hold better talk – meaning more witty, not more spiritual talk – than any of those who sat with him. I have never been able to comprehend what pleasure men, especially men of mature years, can find in telling stories, and laughing, drinking, smoking tobacco, and singing with one another. Women find their pleasures in more sober guise: they may lie in small things, but they are innocent.

Think what this world would be were the women to live like the men, as disorderly, as wastefully, as noisily!

“Now, good woman,” said my uncle to Mrs. Gambit, “are you satisfied that my niece is in safe hands?”

“The hands are good enough,” replied the woman, looking round her; “but the place – ”

“The place is what it is,” said the Doctor sharply; “we cannot alter the place.”

“Then I will go, sir.”

With that she gave me my parcel of money, kissed me and bade me farewell, curtsied to the ladies, and left us.

“I shall send up, ladies,” said the Doctor, “a few trifles of additional furniture: a couple of chairs, one of them an arm-chair – but not for this great, strong girl, if you please – a bed, a shelf for books; some cups and saucers we shall provide for you. And now, ladies, I wish you good-morning. And for your present wants – I mean the wants of this hungry country maid, who looks as if mutton hung in toothsome legs on every verdant hedge – this will, I think, suffice;” he placed money in Mrs. Esther’s hand – I could not but think how he had earned that money – and left us.

When he was gone the two ladies looked at each other with a strange, sad, and wistful expression, and Mrs. Esther, with the guineas in her hand, burst into tears.

CHAPTER VI

HOW KITTY BEGAN TO ENJOY THE LIBERTIES OF THE FLEET

Her tears disconcerted me extremely. What did she cry for? But she presently recovered and dried her eyes. Then she looked at me thoughtfully, and said —

“Sister, I suppose this child has been accustomed to have a dinner every day?”

“Surely,” replied Mrs. Deborah. “And to-day we shall dine.”

To-day we should all dine? Were there, then, days when we should all go hungry?

“You must know, my dear,” Mrs. Esther explained in a soft, sad voice, “that we are very poor. We have, therefore, on many days in a week to go without meat. Otherwise we should have to do worse” — she looked round the room and shuddered — “we should have to give up the independence of our solitude. Hunger, my child, is not the worst thing to bear.”

“A piece of roasting-beef, sister,” said Mrs. Deborah, who had now assumed a hat and a cloak, “with a summer cabbage, and a pudding in the gravy.”

“And I think, sister,” said Mrs. Esther, her eyes lighting up eagerly, “that we might take our dinner — the child might like to take her dinner — at twelve to-day.”

While Mrs. Deborah went into the market, I learned that the two sisters had taken no food except bread and water for a week, and that their whole stock now amounted to two shillings in money and part of a loaf. What a strange world was this of London, in which gentlewomen had their lodging in so foul a place and starved on bread and water!

“But,” she repeated with a wan smile, “there are worse things than hunger. First, we must pay our rent. And here we are at least alone; here we may continue to remember our breeding.”

Before Mrs. Deborah returned, I also learned that they were chiefly dependent on a cousin for supplies of money, which were made to them grudgingly (and indeed he was not rich), and that the Doctor had provided for my maintenance with the offer of so large a weekly sum that it promised to suffice for the wants of all.

“We are,” said Mrs. Esther, “but small eaters; a little will suffice for us. But you, child, are young; eat without fear, eat your fill; the money is for you, and we shall grudge you nothing.”

While the beef was roasting I noticed how their eyes from time to time, in spite of themselves, would be fixed upon the meat with a hungry and eager look. Nor had I any enjoyment of the meal till I had seen their pangs appeased. After the plenty of the Vicarage and the Hall, to think of bread and water, and not too much bread, for days together! Yet, hungry as they were, they ate but little; it shamed me to go on eating, being always a girl of a vigorous appetite and hard-set about the hour of noon; it shamed me at first, also, to observe their ways of thrift, so that not the

least crumb should be wasted. Mrs. Deborah read my thoughts.

“In this place,” she said, “we learn to value what it takes money to procure. Yet there are some here poorer than ourselves. Eat, child, eat. For us this has been, indeed, a feast of Belteshazzar.”

Dinner over, we unpacked my box, and they asked me questions. I found that they were proud of their birth and breeding; the portrait over the fire was, they told me, that of their father, once Lord Mayor of London, and they congratulated me upon being myself a Pleydell, which, they said, was a name very well known in the country, although many great city families might be ignorant of it.

“No gift, my dear,” said Mrs. Esther, “is so precious as gentle blood. Everything else may be won, but birth never.”

All day long there went on the same dreadful noise of shouting, crying, calling, bawling, rolling of carts, cracking of whips, and trampling of horses’ feet. In the evening I asked, when the sun went down, but the noise decreased not, if it was always thus.

“Always,” they replied. “There is no cessation, day or night. It is part,” said Mrs. Deborah, “of our punishment. We are condemned, child; for the sin of having a negligent trustee, we go in captivity, shame, and degradation all our lives.”

“Nay,” said her sister, “not degradation, sister. No one but herself can degrade a gentlewoman.”

Truly, the noise was terrible. When I read in the “Paradise Lost,” of fallen angels in their dark abode, I think of Fleet Market

and the Fleet Rules. It began in the early morning with the rolling of the carts: all day long in the market there was a continual crying of the butchers: "Buy, buy, ladies – buy! Rally up, ladies – rally up!" There were quarrels unceasing and ever beginning, with fights, shouting and cursing: the fish-women quarrelled at their stalls; the poultry-wives quarrelled over their baskets; the porters quarrelled over their burdens; the carters over the right of way; the ragamuffin boys over stolen fruit. There was nothing pleasant, nothing quiet, nothing to refresh; nothing but noise, brawling, and contention. And if any signs of joy, these only drunken laughter from open tavern-doors.

Thus I began to live, being then a maid of sixteen years and seven months, in the Rules and Liberties of the Fleet Prison; surely as bad a place, outside Newgate Prison, as could be found for a girl brought up in innocence and virtue. For, let one consider the situation of the Rules. They include all those houses which lie between the ditch, or rather the market, on the west, and the Old Bailey on the east – fit boundaries for such a place, the filthy, turbid ditch and the criminal's gaol – and Fleet Lane on the north to Ludgate Hill on the south. These streets are beyond and between the abodes of respectability and industry. On the east was the great and wealthy City with the merchants' houses; on the west the streets and squares where the families of the country had their town residence; on the south, the river; on the north, the dark and gloomy streets of Clerkenwell, where thieves lay in hiding and the robbers of the road had their customary

quarters. Why, Jonathan Wyld himself, the greatest of villains, lived hard by in Ship Court. Is there, anywhere, in any town, an acre more thickly covered with infamy, misery, starvation, and wretchedness?

If we walked abroad, we could not go north because of Clerkenwell, where no honest woman may trust herself: if we went south we had to walk the whole length of the market, past the marrying taverns, so that shame fell upon my heart to think how my uncle was one of those who thus disgraced his cloth: when we got to the end, we might walk over the Fleet Bridge, among the noisy sellers of quack medicines, pills, powders, hot furmety, pies, flounders, mackerel, and oysters; or on Ludgate Hill, where the touts of the Fleet parsons ran up and down, inviting couples to be married, and the Morocco men went about, book in hand, to sell their lottery shares. The most quiet way when we took the air was to cross Holborn Bridge, and so up the hill past St. Andrew's Church, where, if the weather were fine, we might go as far as the gardens of Gray's Inn, and there sit down among the trees and feel for a little the joy of silence.

Said Mrs. Deborah, one day, when we two had sat there, under the trees, for half an hour, listening to the cawing of the rooks —
“Child, the place” — meaning the Rules — “is the City of Destruction after Christian and Christiana, and the boys, and Mercy, were all gone away.”

We lived in one room, which was both kitchen and parlour. We had no servant; the Doctor's provision kept us in simple

plenty; we cleaned and dusted the place for ourselves; we cooked our dinners, and washed our dishes; we made our dresses; we did for ourselves all those things which are generally done by a servant. Mrs. Esther said that there was no shame in doing things which, if left undone, would cause a gentlewoman to lose her self-respect. 'Twas all, except the portrait of her father, that she had left of her former life, and to this she would cling as something dearer than life.

There were other lodgers in the house. All who lodged there were, of course, prisoners "enjoying" the Rules – who else would live in the place? On the ground-floor was Sir Miles Lackington, Baronet. He was not yet thirty, yet he had already got rid of a great and noble estate by means of gambling, and now was compelled to hide his head in this refuge, and to live upon an allowance of two guineas made weekly to him by a cousin. This, one would have thought, was a disgrace enough to overwhelm a gentleman of his rank and age with shame. But it touched him not, for he was ever gay, cheerful, and ready to laugh. He was kind to my ladies and to me; his manners, when he was sober, were gentle; though his face was always flushed and cheeks swollen by reason of his midnight potations, he was still a handsome fellow; he was careless of his appearance as of his fortune; he would go with waistcoat unbuttoned, wig awry, neckcloth loose, ruffles limp; but however he went it was with a laugh. When he received his two guineas he generally gave away the half among his friends. In the evening they used to carry him

home to his room on the ground-floor, too drunk to stand.

I soon got to know him, and we had frequent talks. He seemed to be ever meeting me on the stairs when I went a-marketing; he called upon us often, and would sit with me during the warm summer afternoons, when the sisters dropped off to sleep. I grew to like him, and he encouraged me to say freely what I thought, even to the extent of rating him for his profligate practices.

“Why,” he would say, laughing, “I am at the lowest – I can go no lower; yet I have my two guineas a week. I have enough to eat, I drink freely: what more can I want?”

I told him what his life seemed to me.

He laughed again at this, but perhaps uneasily.

“Does it seem so terrible a thing,” he said, leaning against the window with his hands in his pockets, “to have no cares? Believe me, Kitty, Fortune has brought me into a harbour where winds and tempests never blow. While I had my estate, my conscience plagued me night and morning. And yet I knew that all this must fly. Hazard doth always serve her children so, and leaves them naked. Well – it is gone. So can I play no more. But he who plays should keep sober if he would win. Now that I cannot play, I may drink. And again, when, formerly, I was rich and a prodigal, friend and enemy came to me with advice. I believe they thought the Book of Proverbs had been written specially to meet my case, so much did they quote the words of Solomon, Agar, and Lemuel. But, no doubt, there have been fools before, and truly it helpeth a fool no whit to show him his folly. ‘As a thorn goeth

up into the hand of a drunkard, so is a parable in the mouth of fools.' I remember that proverb. Now that Hazard hath taken all, there is no longer occasion for advice. Child, you look upon one who hath thrown away his life, and yet is happier in his fall and repents not. For I make no doubt but that, had I my fortune back, 'twould fly away again in the same fashion."

He concluded with an allusion to the Enemy of Mankind, for which I rebuked him, and he laughed, saying —

"Pretty Puritan, I will offend no more."

Had I been older and more experienced, I should have known or suspected why he came so often and met me daily. Kitty had found favour in the sight of this dethroned king. He loved the maid: her freshness, her rosy cheeks, her youth, her innocence pleased him, I suppose. We know not, we women, for what qualities there are in us that we are loved by men, so that they will commit so many follies for our sake.

"Thou art such a girl, sweet Kitty," he said to me, one day, "so pretty and so good, as would tempt a man wallowing contentedly in the pigsties of the world, to get up, wash himself, and go cleanly, for thy sake. Yet what a miserable wretch should I be did I thus learn to feel my own downfall!"

And again he told me once that he was too far gone to love me; and not far enough gone to do me an injury.

"Wherefore," he added, "I must worship at thy shrine in silent admiration."

It was kindly done of Sir Miles to spare an ignorant girl. For

so ignorant was Kitty, and so brotherly did he seem, that had he asked her to become his wife, I think she would have consented. Oh, the fine state, to be my Lady Lackington, and to live in the Rules of the Fleet!

Another lodger in our house, a man whose face inspired me with horror, so full of selfish passion was it, was a Captain Dunquerque. With him were his wife and children. It was of the children, poor things, that our Esther spoke when she said there were some in the place poorer than themselves; for the wife and children starved, while the captain, their father, ate and drank his fill. A gloomy man, as well as selfish, who reviled the fate which he had brought upon himself. Yet for all his reviling, he spared himself nothing so that his children might have something. I am glad that this bad man has little to do with my history. Another lodger, who had the garret at the top, was Solomon Stallabras, the poet.

It is very well known that the profession of letters, of all the trades, callings, and conditions of men, is the most precarious and the most miserable. I doubt, indeed, whether that ought to be called a profession which requires no training, no colleges or schools, no degree, and no diploma. Other professions are, in a way, independent: the barrister doth not court, though he may depend upon, the favour of attorneys; the rector of the parish doth not ask the farmers to support him, but takes the tithes to which he is entitled; the poor author, however, is obliged to receive of his publisher whatever is offered, nor is there

any corporate body or guild of authors by whom the situation of the poet may be considered and his condition improved. Alone among learned men, the author is doomed to perpetual dependence and poverty. Indeed, when one considers it, scarce anything else is to be expected, for, in becoming an author, a man is so vain as to expect that to him will be granted what has been given to no man except Shakespeare – a continual flow of strength, spirits, ingenuity, wit, and dexterity, so as to sustain, without diminution or relaxation, the rapid production of works for the delight of the world. I say rapid, because the books are bought by publishers at a low rate, though they are sold to the public at large sums. And, if we think of it, scarce any author produces more than one or two books which please the world. Therefore, when the fountain runs dry, whither is that poor author to turn? The public will have none of him; his publisher will have none of him; there remains, it is true, one hope, and that unworthy, to get subscriptions for a volume which he will never produce, because he will have eaten up beforehand the money paid for it before it is written.

The Fleet Prison and its Rules have always been a favourite resort and refuge for poets and men of letters. Robert Lloyd died there, but long after I went away; Richard Savage died there; Churchill was married in the place, and would have died there, had he not anticipated his certain fate by dying early; Samuel Boyce died there; Sir Richard Baker died there; William Oldys, who died, to be sure, outside the Rules, yet drank every night

within them; lastly, within a stone's throw of the Rules, though he was never a prisoner, died the great John Bunyan himself.

I heard my ladies, from time to time, talk of a certain Mr. Stallabras. They wondered why he did not call as usual, and laid the blame upon me; little madam had made him shy. One day, however, Mrs. Esther being called out by one of Captain Dunquerque's children, came back presently, saying that Mr. Stallabras was starving to death in his room.

Mrs. Deborah made no reply, but instantly hurried to the cupboard, when she took down the cold beef which was to be our dinner, and cut off three or four goodly slices; these she laid on a plate, with bread and salt, and put the whole upon a napkin, and then she disappeared swiftly.

“The poor young man! the dear young man!” cried Mrs. Esther, wringing her hands. “What can we do? My dear, the sweetest and most mellifluous of poets! The pride and glory of his age! It was he who wrote ‘Hours of the Night,’ the ‘Pleasures of Solitude,’ the ‘Loves of Amoret and Amoretta,’ and other delightful verses; yet they let him languish in the Fleet! What are my countrymen thinking of? Would it not be better to rescue (while still living) so ingenious and charming a writer from his poverty, than to give him (as they must), after his death, a grave in Westminster Abbey?”

I asked her if we should read together these delightful poems. “We have no copy,” she said. “Mr. Stallabras, who is all sensibility, insists, from time to time, upon our having copies,

so that we may read them aloud to him. Yet his necessities are such that he is fain to take them away again and sell them. As for his manners, my dear, they are very fine, being such as to confer distinction upon the Rules. He has not the easy bearing of Sir Miles Lackington, of course, which one would not expect save in a man born to good breeding; but he possesses in full measure the courtesy which comes from study and self-dignity. Yet he is but a hosier's son."

Mrs. Deborah here returned, bearing an empty plate.

She had trouble at first, she said, to persuade him to eat. His prejudices as a gentleman and a scholar were offended by the absence of horse-radish; but, as he had eaten nothing for two days, he was induced to waive this scruple, and presently made a hearty meal. She had also persuaded him to come downstairs in the evening, and take a dish of tea.

Thanks to the Doctor's liberality in the matter of my weekly board, tea was now a luxury in which we could sometimes indulge. Nothing gave Mrs. Esther more gratification than the return, after long deprivation, to that polite beverage.

At about five o'clock the poet made his appearance. He was short of stature, with a turned-up nose, and was dressed in a drab-coloured coat, with bag-wig, and shoes with steel buckles. Everything that he wore had once been fine, but their splendour was faded now; his linen was in rags, his shoes in holes; but he carried himself with pride. His dignity did not depend upon his purse; he bore his head high, because he thought of his fame. It

inflicted no wound to his pride to remember that he had that day been on the eve of starvation, and was still without a farthing.

“Miss Kitty,” he said, bowing very low, “you see before you one who, though a favourite of the Muses, is no favourite of Fortune:

“Gainst hostile fate his heart is calm the while,
Though Fortune frown, the tuneful sisters smile.’

Poetry, ladies, brings with it the truest consolation.”

“And religion,” said Mrs. Esther.

“There lives not – be sure – the wretch,” cried the poet, “who would dissociate religion and the Muse.”

This was very grand, and pleased us all. We had our dish of tea, with bread and butter. I went on cutting it for the poet till the loaf was quite gone.

During the evening he gave utterance to many noble sentiments – so noble, indeed, that they seemed to me taken out of books. And before he went away he laid down his views as to the profession of letters, of which I have already spoken, perhaps, too severely.

“It is the mission of the poet and author,” he said, “to delight, and to improve while delighting. The man of science may instruct; the poet embodies the knowledge, and dresses it up in a captivating way to attract the people: the divine teaches the dogmas of the Church; the poet conveys, in more pleasing

form, the lessons and instructions of religion: the philosopher and moralist lay down the laws of our being; the author, by tropes and figures, by fiction, by poetry, shows the proper conduct of life, and teaches how the way of virtue leads to happiness. Is not this a noble and elevating career? Does not a man do well who says to himself, ‘This shall be my life; this my lot?’”

He paused, and we murmured assent to his enthusiasm.

“It is true,” he went on, “that the ungrateful world thinks little of its best friends; that it allows me —*me*, Solomon Stallabras, to languish in the Rules of the Fleet. Even that, however, has its consolation; because, ladies, it has brought me the honour and happiness of your friendship.”

He rose, saluted us all three in turn, and sat down again.

“Art,” he went on, “so inspires a man with great thoughts, that it makes more than a gentleman – it makes a nobleman – of him. Who, I would ask, when he reads the sorrows of Clarissa, thinks of the trade – the mere mechanical trade – in which the author’s money was earned? I cannot but believe that the time will come when the Court itself, unfriendly as it now is to men of letters, will confer titles and place upon that poor poet whose very name cannot now reach the walls of the palace.”

My ladies’ good fortune (I mean in receiving the weekly stipend for my maintenance) was thus shared by the starving poet, whom they no longer saw, helpless to relieve him, suffering the privation of hunger. Often have I observed one or other of the sisters willingly go without her dinner, pleading a headache,

in order that her portion might be reserved for Mr. Stallabras.

“For sensibility,” said Mrs. Esther, “is like walking up a hill: it promotes appetite.”

“So does youth,” said Mrs. Deborah, more practical. “Mr. Stallabras is still a young man, Kitty; though you think thirty old.”

That he was a very great poet we all agreed, and the more so when, after a lucky letter, he secured a subscriber or two for his next volume, and was able to present us once more with a book of his own poetry. I do not know whether he more enjoyed hearing me read them aloud (for then he bowed, spread his hands, and inclined his head this way and that, in appreciation of the melody and delicacy of the sentiments), or whether he preferred to read them himself; for then he could stop when he pleased, with, “This idea, ladies, was conceived while wandering amid the fields near Bagnigge Wells;” “This came to me while watching the gay throng in the Mall;” “This, I confess, was an inspiration caught in church.”

“Kitty should enter these confessions in a book,” said Mrs. Esther. “Surely they will become valuable in the day – far distant, I trust – when your life has to be written, Mr. Stallabras.”

“Oh, madam!” He bowed again, and lifted his hands in deprecation. But he was pleased. “Perhaps,” he said, “meaner bards have found a place in the Abbey, and a volume dedicated to their lives. If Miss Kitty will condescend to thus preserve recollections of me, I shall be greatly flattered.”

I did keep a book, and entered in it all that dropped from his

lips about himself, his opinions, his maxims, his thoughts, and so forth. He gradually got possessed of the idea that I would myself some day write his life, and he began insensibly to direct his conversation mainly to me.

Sometimes he met me in the market, or on the stairs, when he would tell me more.

“I always knew,” he said, “from the very first, that I was born to greatness. It was in me as a child, when, like Pope, I lisped in numbers. My station, originally, was not lofty, Miss Kitty.” He spoke as if he had risen to a dazzling height. “I was but the son of a hosier, born in Fetter Lane, and taught at the school, or academy, kept by one Jacob Crooks, who was handier with the rod than with the Gradus ad Parnassum. But I read, and taught myself; became at first the hack of Mr. Dodsley, and gradually rose to eminence.”

He had, indeed, risen; he was the occupant of a garret; his fame lay in his own imagination; and he had not a guinea in the world.

“Miss Kitty,” he said, one day, “there is only one thing that disqualifies you from being my biographer.”

I asked him what that was.

“You are not, as you should be, my wife. If virtue and beauty fitted you for the station of a poet’s wife, the thing were easy. Alas, child! the poet is poor, and his mistress would be poorer. Nevertheless, believe that the means, and not the will, are wanting to make thee my Laura, my Stella, and me thy Petrarch,

or thy Sidney.”

It was not till later that I understood how this starveling poet, as well as the broken baronet, had both expressed their desire (under more favourable circumstances) to make love to me. Grand would have been my lot as Lady Lackington, but grander still as Mistress Stallabras, wife of the illustrious poet, who lived, like the sparrows, from hand to mouth.

CHAPTER VII

HOW KITTY LEARNED TO KNOW THE DOCTOR

Those evenings of riot from which Sir Miles was so often carried home speechless, were spent in no other place than that very room where I had seen the marriage of the sailors; and the president of the rabble rout was no other than the Doctor himself.

I learned this of Sir Miles. If my ladies knew it, of which I am not certain, they were content to shut their eyes to it, and to think of the thing as one of the faults which women, in contempt and pity, ascribe to the strange nature of man. I cannot, being now of ripe years, believe that Heaven hath created in man a special aptitude for debauchery, sin, and profligacy, while women have been designed for the illustration of virtues which are the opposite to them. So that, when I hear it said that it is the way of men, I am apt to think that way sinful.

It was Sir Miles himself who told me of it one morning. I found him leaning against the doorpost with a tankard of ale in his hand.

“Fie, Sir Miles!” I said. “Is it not shameful for a gentleman to be carried home at night, like a pig?”

“It is,” he replied. “Kitty, the morning is the time for repentance. I repent until I have cleared my brain with this

draught of cool October.”

“It is as if a man should drag a napkin in the mud of the Fleet Ditch to clean it,” I said.

He drank off his tankard, and said he felt better.

“Pretty Miss Kitty,” he said, “it is a fine morning; shall we abroad? Will you trust yourself with me to view the shops in Cheapside or the beaux in the Mall? I am at thy service, though, for a Norfolk baronet, my ruffles are of the shabbiest.”

I told him that I would ask Mrs. Esther for permission. He said he wanted first a second pint, as the evening had been long and the drink abundant, after which his brain would be perfectly clear and his hand steady.

I told him it was a shame that a gentleman of his rank should mate with men whose proper place was among the thieves of Turnmill Street, or the porters of Chick Lane, and that I would not walk with a man whose brain required a quart of strong ale in the morning to clear it.

“As for my companions,” he said, taking the second pint which the boy brought him and turning it about in his hands, “we have very good company in the Liberties – quite as good as your friend Christian, in that story you love so much, might have had in Vanity Fair, had he been a lad of mettle and a toper. There are gentlemen of good family, like myself; poets like Solomon Stallabras; merchants, half-pay captains and broke lieutenants; clerks, tradesmen, lawyers, parsons, farmers, men of all degrees. It is like the outside world, except that here all are equal who can

pay their shot. Why, with the Doctor at the head of the table, and a bowl of punch just begun, hang me if I know any place where a man may feel more comfortable or drink more at his ease.”

“The Doctor,” I asked. Now I had seen so little of my uncle that I had almost forgotten the marriage of the sailors, and was beginning again to think of him as the pious and serious minister who spoke of sacred things to my guardians. “The Doctor?”

“Ay;” Sir Miles drank off the whole of his second pint. “Who else?” His voice became suddenly thick, and his eyes fixed, with a strange light in them. “Who else but the Doctor? Why, what would the Rules be without the Doctor? He is our prince, our bishop, our chaplain – what you will – the right reverend his most gracious majesty the King of the Rules.” Sir Miles waved his hand dramatically. “He keeps us sweet; he polishes our wits; but for him we should be wallowing swine: he brings strangers and visitors to enliven us; drinks with us, sings with us, makes wit for us from the treasures of his learning; condescends to call us his friends; pays our shot for us; lends us money; gives food to the starving, and drink – yes, drink, by gad! to the thirsty, and clothes to the naked. Ah, poor girl! you can never see the Doctor in his glory, with all his admirers round him, and every man a glass of punch in his hand and a clean tobacco-pipe in his mouth. The Doctor? he is our boast; a most complete and perfect doctor; the pride of Cambridge; the crown and sum of all doctors in divinity!”

He had forgotten, I suppose, his invitation to take me for a

walk, for he left me here, staggering off in the direction of the Hand and Pen, where, I doubt not, he spent the rest of his idle and wasted day.

It would have been useless and cruel to talk to my guardian about this discovery. It was another thing to be ashamed of. Sir Miles told me less than the truth. In fact the Doctor's house was the nightly resort of all those residents in the Rules whom he would admit to his society. Hither, too, came, attracted by his reputation for eloquence, wit, and curious knowledge, gentlemen from the Temple, Lincoln's Inn, and other places, who were expected, as a contribution to the evening, to send for bowls of punch. But of this presently.

I saw my uncle seldom. He visited the sisters from time to time, and never failed to ask particularly after my progress in knowledge, and especially in the doctrines of the Church of England. On these occasions he generally left behind him, as a present, some maxim or precept tending to virtue, which we could repeat after his departure and turn over in our minds at leisure. Once he found me alone, Mrs. Deborah being indisposed and confined to her room, where her sister was nursing her. He took advantage of their absence to impress upon me the necessity of circumspection in my manner of life.

"Heaven knows, child," he said, "what thy future will be. Hither come none but profligates and spendthrifts. Yet what else can I do with thee? Where bestow thee?"

"Oh, sir!" I said, "let me not be taken from my dear ladies."

“Thou shalt not, child; at least for the present. But it is bad for thee to live here; it is bad for thee to have as an uncle one whose life is sadly inconsistent with his Christian profession, and who might despair, were it not for the example of Solomon (methinks from his history may be sucked consolation by all elderly and reverend sinners). Like him, what I lack in practice I partly make up with precept. He who, like me, is a Fleet parson, should be judged differently from his fellows: he is without the license, and therefore hath forfeited paternal affection of his bishop; he is exposed to temptations which beset not other folk; among those who flock to him for marriage are some who would fain commute their fees for brandy and strong drinks, or even bilk the clergyman altogether – a sin which it is difficult to believe can be forgiven. Hence arise strifes and wraths, unseemly for one who wears a cassock. Hither come those who seek good fellowship and think to find it in the Rules; Templars, young bloods, and wits. Hence arise drinking and brawling; and as one is outside the law, so to speak, so one is tempted to neglect the law. I say nothing of the temptations of an empty purse. These I felt, with many prickings and instigations of the Evil One, while I was yet curate of St. Martin’s-in-the-Fields, before I escaped my creditors by coming here. Then I was poor, and found, as the Wise Man says, that “The poor is hated even of his own neighbour.””

He went on, half preaching, half talking.

A man who sinned greatly, yet preached much; who daily fell,

yet daily exhorted his neighbour to stand upright; who knew and loved, as one loves a thing impossible to attain, the life of virtue; who drank, laughed, and bawled songs of an evening with his boon companions; who married all comers, no questions asked, without scruple and without remorse; a priest whose life was a disgrace to his profession; who did kind and generous things, and paid that homage to Virtue which becomes one who knows her loveliness.

It pleased him to talk, but only with me, about himself. He was always excusing himself to me, ashamed of his life, yet boasting of it and glorying in it; conscious of his infamy, and yet proud of his success; always thinking by what plea he could justify himself, and maintain his self-respect.

“I am a man,” he said, “who is the best of a bad profession. My work is inglorious, but I am glorious; my rivals, who would rob me of my very practice, do not hate me, but esteem and envy me. I have, yea, outside these Rules, friends who love me still; some of them pity me, and some would see me (which is impossible) restored to the fold and bosom of the Church; some who drink with me, talk with me, borrow of me, walk with me, smoke with me, and are honoured by my friendship. There is no man living who would wish me harm. Surely, I am one of those who do good to themselves, whom, therefore, their fellow-men respect.”

I have said that he was generous. Sir Miles spoke the truth when he declared that the Doctor fed the starving and clothed the naked. Truly it seems to me natural to believe that these good

deeds of his must be a set-off to the great wickedness of his life. There were no occupants of the prison and its Liberties who were rich. Some there were who would have starved but for the charity of their friends. The poor prisoners were allowed to beg, but how could poor gentlewomen like my guardians bear to beg for daily bread? Rather would they starve. As for the prison, I know nothing of it; I never saw the inside; it was enough for me to see its long and dreary wall. I used to think at night of the poor creatures shut up there in hopeless misery, as I thought, though Sir Miles declared that most of them were happier in the prison than out; and beside the latticed gate there stood every day a man behind bars begging with a plate and crying: "Pity the poor prisoners."

Is it not sad that the same punishment of imprisonment must be meted out to the rogue and the debtor, save that we let the rogue go free while we keep the debtor locked up? Truly, the Vicar of St Bride's or even the Dean of St. Paul's himself could preach no better sermon, could use no words more fitted to arrest the profligate and bring the thoughtless to reason, than that doleful cry behind the bars. Nor could any more salutary lesson be impressed upon young spendthrifts than to take them from house to house in the Rules and show them the end of graceless ways.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW KITTY SPENT HER TIME

As soon as they were settled together, and the ladies had decided in their own minds that the girl would lighten their lives, they resolved that Kitty's education must not be neglected, and for this end began to devise such a comprehensive scheme as would have required the staff of a whole university to carry it through. Everything was set down (upon a slate) which it behoved a girl to know. Unfortunately the means at their disposal did not allow of this great scheme. Thus it was fitting that music should be taught: Mrs. Deborah had once been a proficient on the spinnet, but there was no spinnet to be had; the French tongue forms part of polite education, but though both ladies had learned it of old, their memory was defective, and they had neither dictionary nor grammar nor any book in the language; limning, both with pencil and in water-colours, should be taught, but the sisters could neither of them draw, and hardly knew a curve from a straight line. Calligraphy is almost a necessary, but the handwriting of both ladies was tremulous, and of antiquated fashion; they knew not the modern Italian hand. There was in the Rules a professor in the art, and an attempt was made to get lessons from him. But he was already old and hastening to the grave, which speedily closed over him; his hand shook, because he drank strong waters; his coat was stained with beer and punch;

his wig smelt always of tobacco.

Mrs. Deborah undertook, as a beginning, to teach the girl book-keeping by single and double entry. How or why she ever came to learn this science has never been understood. Yet she knew it, and was proud of it.

“It is a science,” she said, “which controls the commerce of the world. By its means are we made rich: by the aid of book-keeping we apportion the profit and the loss which are the rewards of the prudent or the punishment of the thriftless. Without book-keeping, my dear, the mysteries and methods of which I am about to impart to you, neither a Whittington, nor a Gresham, nor even a Pimperl, would have risen to be Lord Mayor of London.”

Kitty only imperfectly grasped the rudiments of this science. No doubt, had she been placed in a position of life where it was required, she would have found it eminently useful. Mrs. Esther, for her part, taught her embroidery and sampler work. As for preserving, pickling, making of pastry and home-made wines, cookery, distilling, and so forth, although the sisters had been in their younger days notable, it was impossible to teach these arts, because, even if there had been anything to pickle or preserve, there was only one sitting-room in which to do it. Therefore, to her present sorrow, Kitty speedily forgot all that she had formerly learned in the still-room at Lady Levett's. For there is no station so exalted in which a lady is not the better for knowing the way in which such things should be done, if it is only that she may keep her maids in order. And if, as the learned Dr. Johnson hath

informed us, a lady means one who dispenses gifts of hospitality and kindness, there is another reason why she should know the value of her gifts. There is something divine in the contemplation of the allotment of duty to the two sexes; man must work, build up, invent, and acquire, for woman to distribute, administer, and divide.

As for reading, they had a book on the history of England, with the cover off, and wanting the title-page with several chapters. There was one of those still remaining in which the author exhorted his readers (her teachers told the girl that the admonition belonged to women as well as men) never to grow faint or to weary in the defence of their Liberties. She ignorantly confounded the Liberties of the country with the Liberties of the Fleet, and could not avoid the reflection that a woman would certainly put more heart into her defence of the Liberties if these were cleaner, and if there were fewer men who swore and got drunk. There were also a Bible and a Church Prayer-book; there were three odd volumes of "Sermons;" and there were besides odd volumes of romances, poems, and other works which Mr. Solomon Stallabras was able to lend.

Mrs. Deborah added to her knowledge of book-keeping some mastery over the sublime science of astronomy. By standing on chairs at the window when the west wind blew the fogs away and the sky was clear, it was possible to learn nearly everything that she had to teach. The moon was sometimes visible, and a great many of the stars, because, looking over the market, the

space was wide. Among them were the Pole Star, the Great Bear, Orion's belt, and Cassiopeia's chair. It was elevating to the soul on such occasions to watch the heavenly bodies, and to listen while Mrs. Deborah discoursed on the motions of the planets and the courses of the stars.

“The moon, my dear,” she would say, “originally hung in the heavens by the hand of the Creator, goes regularly every four weeks round the sun, while the sun goeth daily round the earth: when the sun is between the earth and the moon (which happens accidentally once a month or thereabouts), part of the latter body is eclipsed: wherefore it is then of a crescent-shape: the earth itself goes round something – I forget what – every year: while the planets, according to Addison's hymn, go once a year, or perhaps he meant once a month, round the moon. This is the reason why they are seen in different positions in the sky. And I believe I am right in saying that if you look steadily at the Great Bear, you may plainly see that every night it travels once about the earth at least, or it may be oftener at different seasons. When we reflect” – here she quoted from recollection – “that these bodies are so far distant from us, that we cannot measure the space between; that some of them are supposed to be actually greater than our own world; that they are probably inhabited by men and women like ourselves; that all their movements round each other are regular, uniform, never intermittent – how ought we to admire the wisdom and strength of the Almighty Hand which placed them there!”

Then she repeated, with becoming reverence, the words of Mr. Addison, the Christian poet, beginning:

“Soon as the evening shades prevail
The moon takes up the wondrous tale,
And nightly to the listening earth
Repeats the story of her birth.
While all the stars that round her burn,
And all the planets in their turn,
Confirm the tidings as they roll,
And spread the truth from pole to pole.”

In such meditations and exercises did these imprisoned ladies seek to raise their souls above the miseries of their lot. Indeed, one may think there is nothing which more tends to make the mind contented and to prevent repining, than to feel the vastness of nature, the depth and height of knowledge open to man’s intellect, the smallness of one’s self, and the wisdom of God. And although poor Mrs. Deborah’s astronomy was, as has been seen, a jumble; although she knew so little, indeed, of constellations or of planets, that the child did not learn to distinguish Jupiter from the Pole Star, and never could understand (until that ingenious gentleman, who lately exhibited an orrery in Piccadilly, taught her) how the planets and stars could go round the moon, and the moon round the sun, and the sun round the earth, without knocking against and destroying one another, she must be, and is, deeply grateful for the thoughts which the good lady awakened.

In all things the sisters endeavoured to keep up the habits and manners of gentlefolk. The dinner was at times scanty, yet was it served on a fair white cloth, with plates and knives orderly placed: a grace before the meat, and a grace after.

In the afternoon, when the dinner was eaten, the cloth removed, and the plates washed, they were able sometimes to sally forth and take a walk. In the summer afternoons it was, it has been said, pleasant to walk to the gardens of Gray's Inn. But when they ventured to pass through the market there was great choice for them. The daily service in the afternoons at St. Paul's was close at hand: here, while the body was refreshed with the coolness of the air, the mind was calmed with the peace of the church, and the soul elevated by the chanting of the white-robed choristers and the canons, while the organ echoed in the roof. After the service they would linger among the tombs, of which there are not many; and read the famous Latin inscription over the door of the cathedral, "*Si monumentum requiris, circumspice.*"

"I knew him," Mrs. Esther would whisper, standing before the great man's monument. "He was a friend of my father's, and he often came and talked, my sister and myself being then but little, on the greatness of astronomy, geometry, and architecture. In the latter years of his life he would sit in the sunshine, gazing on the noble cathedral he had built. Yet, grand as he is, he would still lament that his earlier plans, which were grander still, had not been accepted."

Then out into the noisy street again: back to the shouts

of chairmen, waggon-drivers, coachmen, the bawling of those who cried up and down pavements, the cries of flying piemen, newsmen, boys with broadsheets, dying confessions, and ballads – back to the clamour of Fleet Market.

Another excursion, which could only be undertaken when the days were long, was that to Westminster Abbey.

The way lay along the Strand, which, when the crowded houses behind St. Clement's and St. Mary's were passed, was a wide and pleasant thoroughfare, convenient for walking, occupied by stately palaces like Northumberland and Somerset Houses, and by great shops. At Charing Cross one might cross over into Spring Gardens, where, Mrs. Esther said, there was much idle talk among young people, with drinking of Rhenish wine. Beyond the gardens was St. James's Park: Kitty saw it once in those days, being taken by Sir Miles Lackington; but so crowded was it with gallant gentlemen, whose wigs and silken coats were a proper set-off to the hoops and satins of the ladies, that she was ashamed of her poor stuff frock, and bade Sir Miles lead her away, which he did, being that day sorrowful and in a repentant mood.

"I have myself worn those silk waistcoats and that silver lace," he said with a sigh. "My place should be amongst them now, were it not for Hazard. Thy own fit station, pretty pauper, is with those ladies. But Heaven forbid you should learn what they know! Alas! I knew not when I ought to stop in the path of pleasure."

"Fie!" said she. "Young men ought not to find their pleasure

in gambling.”

“Humanity,” said Sir Miles, becoming more cheerful when the Park was left, “has with one consent resolved to follow pleasure. The reverend divines bid us (on Sunday) be content to forego pleasure; in the week they, too, get what pleasure they can out of a punch-bowl. I am content to follow with other men. Come, little Puritan, what is thy idea of pleasure?”

That seemed simple enough to answer.

“I would live in the country,” said she readily, “away from this dreadful town; I would have enough money to drink tea every day (of course I would have a good dinner, too), and to buy books, to visit and be visited, and make my ladies happy, and all be gentlewomen together.”

“And never a man among you all?”

“No – we should want no man. You men do but eat, drink, devour, and waste. The Rules are full of unhappy women, ruined by your extravagances. Go live all together and carry each other home at night, where no woman can see or hear.”

He shook his head with a laugh, and answered nothing. That same night, however, he was led home at midnight, bawling some drinking song at the top of his voice; so that the girl’s admonition had no effect upon him. Perhaps profligate men feel a pleasure not only in their intemperance but also in repentance. It always seemed to me as if Sir Miles enjoyed the lamentations of a sinner the morning after a debauch.

On the few occasions when their journey was prolonged

beyond Charing Cross, the ladies were generally attended and protected by Mr. Solomon Stallabras, who, though little in stature, was brave, and would have cudgelled a porter, or cuffed a guardsman, in the defence of ladies, as well as the strongest and biggest gentleman.

There are many other things to see in Westminster Abbey – the coronation throne, Henry the Seventh’s Chapel, the monuments of kings, queens, great lords, and noble generals – but Mr. Stallabras had an eye to one spot only.

“There,” he said, “is the Poet’s Corner: with Dryden, Ben Jonson, and the glorious dead of this spot, shall, perhaps, my ashes be mixed. Ladies, immortality is the poet’s meed.”

The poor man needed some solace in these days, when his poverty was excessive. Later on he found a little success: obtained an order for a volume of “Travels in Cashmere” (whither he had never been), which brought him in eight guineas. He afterwards added “A Romantic Tale,” the scene of which was laid in the same sweet abode of Sensibility. It was interspersed with verses, as full of delicacy as the tale itself. But the publisher, who gave him five guineas for it, complained afterwards that he had lost by his bargain. Mr. Stallabras often boasted of the great things he could do were there no publishers, and regretted the invention of printing, which rendered this class, who prey upon the very vitals of poor poets, a necessity.

These holidays, these after-hours of rest in the tranquil aisles of St. Paul’s, or the awful Gothic shades of Westminster, were

far between. Mostly the three sat together over their work, while the tumult raged below.

“Patience, child,” said Mrs. Deborah. “Patience, awhile. We have borne it for nigh thirty years. Can you, who have hope, not bear it a little longer?”

Said Mrs. Esther: “Providence wisely orders every event, so that each year or each day shall add something to the education of the soul. It is doubtless for some wise purpose we have been kept in scarceness among runagates and spendthrifts.”

On Sundays they generally went to the church of St. Giles, Cripplegate. It was a long way from the Rules, but the ladies liked it because it was the church where their father lay buried. From the place where they sat in the seats of the poor, which have neither cushions nor backs, they could read the tablet to the memory of the late Joshua Pimpernel, once Lord Mayor of London, and Alderman of Portsoken Ward. The great church was full of City memories, dear to them from their childhood: when they were girls they used to sit in a stately pew with red serge seats and hassocks; now, they worshipped in the same church, but on the benches among the poor women and the children. Yet there was the same service, with the rector and the clerk in their desks, the schoolboys of the Charity along the left, and the schoolgirls of the Charity along the right; the beadles and vergers, the old women who swept the church, opened the pew doors, curtsied to the quality and remained behind for doles – all brought back their childhood. They were as poor themselves as

these old trots, but they could not stay for doles. It is a large and handsome church, filled with grave citizens, responsible men, whose ventures are abroad on many seas, respected for wealth and upright conduct, good men and true, such as was, in his day, my Lord Mayor Pimpernel himself; with the citizens sit their wives bravely attired, and their daughters making gallant show in hoops, patches, lace, sarsnet, and muslin. Outside the church a graveyard, piled and full, still with a tree or two upon it, whose boughs in June are covered with bright green leaves, among which the sparrows twitter and fly about. There is also a great round tower of antique look, which once had been part of the Roman wall of London.

Here they went to worship. When the minister came to the words in the Litany —

“Lord have mercy upon all prisoners and captives,”

the sisters would catch each other by the hand, and audibly follow the reader in prayer as well as response. For thirty years, for fifty-two Sundays in each year, they had made that prayer in the same words, for most of the time in the same church. Yet what answer?

Kitty took the prayer, presently, for herself as well. If these ladies were prisoners, why, what was she? If they might not sleep abroad, and only walk in the streets by permission and licence of the law, how was she different from them, since she could

not, being but a maid, and young and penniless, go abroad at all without them or some other protection?

The sight of the leaves on the trees outside; the fluttering and flying of the sparrows, now and then the buzzing of a foolish bee who had found his way into the church, carried the girl's thoughts away to the quiet place in the country where, between Hall and Vicarage, she had been brought up. Would the sweet country never more be seen? Was her life to be, like that of these poor ladies, one long prison among reprobates and profligates?

The summer came on apace: it grew hot in June; in July it was so hot that they were fain to sit all day and to sleep all night, with open windows. The air was cooler, perhaps, at night, but it was laden with the odours of decaying cabbages, trodden peas and beans, rotten strawberries, bruised cherries, broken gooseberries, with the nauseous breath of the butcher's stall, and the pestilential smell of the poulterer's shop. Moreover, they could not but hear the oaths and ribaldries of those who sat and lounged about the market, staying in the open air because it was warm and because it was cheap. The bulkheads, bunks, booths, stalls, and counters of the market were free and open to the world: a log of wood for a pillow, a hard plank for a bed; this was the reward of a free and lawless life. On most nights it seemed best to lie with windows closed and endure the heat. Yet closed windows could not altogether keep out the noise, for on these summer nights all the knaves and thieves unhung in this great town seemed to be gathered here, pleased to be all together, a Parliament of rogues,

under the pent-houses and on the stalls of the market. And as in some Roman Catholic countries nuns and monks maintain a perpetual adoration to the Blessed Virgin, whom they ignorantly worship, so did these reprobates maintain a perpetual litany of ribaldry and foul conversation. It never ceased. When one grew tired he lay down and slept: his friends carried on the talk; the drinking booths were open all night long, so that those who talked might slake their thirst, and if any waked and felt thirsty he too might have a drain and so lie down again. Day and night there was a never-ending riot: the ladies, as the hot days continued, grew thinner and paler, but they bore it patiently; they had borne it for thirty years.

Between two and three in the morning there generally came a little respite; most of the brawlers were then asleep, drunk, or tired out; only at corners, where there was drink to be had, men and women still gathered together, talking and joking. At four, or thereabouts, the market-carts began to arrive, and noise of another kind began.

One morning in July Kitty awoke – it was a hot and close night – just when all the City clocks were striking three; it was broad daylight; she sprang from bed, and drawing the blind aside a little, looked out upon the market below and the City around. In the clear and cloudless air, before the new day had charged it with a fresh covering or headpiece of smoke, she saw the beautiful spires of St. Bride's, St. Dunstan's, St. Andrew's, St. Mary's, and St. Clement's rising one beyond the other into

the clear blue sky, their weather-cocks touched by the morning sun; on the south, over the river, were visible the green hills of Surrey, the sun shining on their hanging woods, as plain as if they were half a mile away. On the north there were the low hills of Highgate, Hampstead, and Hornsey, the paradise of cits, and yet places most beautiful, wooded and retired. Everywhere, north, west, and south, spires of churches rising up to the heavens, as if praying for the folk beneath. And under her eyes, the folk themselves!

They were human ruins of the past, the present, and the future.

Old men were among them who lay with curled up limbs, shaking with cold, warm though the night was, and old women, huddled up in scanty petticoats, lying with tremulous lips and clasped hands. The cheeks both of the old men and the old women were swollen with drink. What was the record of their lives? Some of them had been rogues and vagabonds from the very first, though how they managed to scape the gallows would be hard to tell. Doubtless their backs were well scarred with the fustigations of the alderman's whip, and they could remember the slow tread of the cart behind which they had marched from Newgate to Tyburn, the cruel cat falling at every step upon their naked and bleeding shoulders. Yet what help? They must starve or they must steal; and, being taken, they must be hanged or must be flogged.

Why, these poor old men and poor old women should, had they not missed the meaning of their lives, have been sitting in

high places, with the state and reverence due to honoured age, with the memory of a life well fought, hung with chains of gold, draped with cloth of silver and lace. Yet they were here, crouched in this filthy, evil-smelling place, eyes shut, backs bent, lips trembling, cheeks twitching, and minds hardened to iniquity. Did any of them, perchance, remember how one who knew declared that never had he seen the righteous forsaken or the good man beg his bread?

A dreadful shivering seized the girl. What plank of safety, what harbour of refuge was open to her that she too might escape this fate? What assurance had she that her end might not be like unto the end of these? Truly none, save that faith by which, as Paul hath taught, the only way to heaven itself is opened.

Then there were young men with red and swollen faces, thieves and vagabonds by profession, who found the air of the market more pleasant than that of Turnmill or Chick Street. Yet it was an ominous and suspicious place to sleep in; a place full of bad dreams for thieves, criminals, and debtors, since close at hand was the Fleet Prison, its wards crowded with the careless, who lounged and jested, and the hopeless, who sat in despair; since but a hundred yards from them stood the black and gloomy Newgate, its condemned cells full of wretches, no worse than themselves, waiting to be hanged, its courts full of other wretches, no worse than themselves, waiting to be tried, sentenced, and cast for execution, and its gaol-fever hanging over all alike, delivering the wards from their prisoners, cheating the

hangman, hurrying to death judge, jury, counsel, prisoner, and warders together. But they never think upon such things, these poor rogues; each hopes that while his neighbour is hanged, he will escape. They cannot stop to think, they cannot turn back: behind them is the devil driving them downwards; before them, if they dare to lift their eyes, the horrid machinery of justice with pillory, whip, and gallows. Among them, here and there, pretty boys and girls, lying asleep side by side upon the hard wooden stalls; boys with curly hair and rosy faces, girls with long eyelashes, parted lips, and ruddy cheeks – pity, pity, that when they woke they should begin again the only trade they knew: to thieve, filch, and pick pockets, with the reward of ducking, pumping, flogging, and hanging.

So clear was the air, so bright the morning, that what she saw was impressed upon her memory clearly, so that she can never forget it. The old men and old women are dead; the young men and women are, one supposes, hanged; what else could be their fate? And as for the boys and girls, the little rogues and thieves, who had no conscience and took all, except the whippings, for frolic, are any left still to sleep on hot nights in that foul place, or are all hanged, whipped at the cart-tail, burnt in the hand, or at best, transported to labour under the lash in the plantations?

Sinner succeeds unto sinner as the year follows year; the crop of gallows fruit increases day by day; but the criminals do not seem to become fewer.

CHAPTER IX

HOW THE SOUTH SEA BUBBLE MADE TWO WOMEN PRISONERS

One Sunday evening in the autumn, the market being then quiet, the two ladies and the girl sat round a fire of coal, talking together by its light. The memories of the sisters, by some accident, were carried back to the past, and they told the child the story, of which she already knew a part, how by a great and crying injustice of the law, they had been shut up in prison, for no fault of their own, for nearly thirty years.

“My father’s eyes,” said Mrs. Deborah, looking at the portrait over the fireplace, “seem to rest upon me to-night.”

Mrs. Esther shuddered.

“It is a sign, sister,” she said, “that something will happen to us.”

Mrs. Deborah laughed a little bitterly. I thought afterwards that the laugh was like that of Sarai, because a thing did happen to her, as will presently be seen.

“Nothing,” she said, “will happen to you and to me any more, Esther, except more pain and more starvation.”

“Patience, Deborah,” sighed Mrs. Esther. “We who have borne our captivity for nine-and-twenty years –”

“And seven months,” said her sister.

“Can surely bear it a little longer.”

“We were girls when we came here,” said Mrs. Deborah; “girls who might have had lovers and become mothers of brave sons – not that you, Kitty, should let your thoughts run on such matters. But there are no honest lovers for honest girls in the Rules of the Fleet.”

“Lovers!” echoed Mrs. Esther, with a heavy sigh. “Mothers! with sons! Ah, no! not for us.”

“We are old women now, sister. Well, everything is short that hath an end. Let us take comfort. To earthly prison is a certain end appointed.”

“We came to the gaol, sister,” continued Mrs. Esther, “two girls, weeping, hand-in-hand. Poor girls! poor girls! My heart bleeds to think of them, so young and so innocent.”

“We shall go out of it,” said her sister, “with tears of joy. They shall write upon our tombstones, ‘These sisters thank God for death.’”

“What fault, we asked – ah! Deborah, how often we asked it! – what fault had we committed? For what sin or crime of ours did this ruin fall upon us?”

“I ask it still,” said Deborah the impatient, “I ask it every day. How can they call this a land of justice, when two innocent women can be locked up for life?”

“My sister, we may not kick against the pricks. If laws are unjust they must be changed, not disobeyed.”

Mrs. Deborah replied by a gesture of impatience.

“We were blessed with parents,” said Mrs. Esther, half talking to herself, half to me, “whose worth and piety were as eminent as their lofty positions in the City. Our respected father was Lord Mayor in the year 1716, when, with our esteemed mother, who was by birth a Balchin, and the granddaughter of Sir Rowland Balchin, also once Lord Mayor, he had the honour of entertaining his Highness Prince George of Denmark. We were present at that royal banquet in the gallery. Our father was also, of course, an alderman – ”

“Of Portsoken Ward,” said Mrs. Deborah.

“And Worshipful Master of the Company of Armour Scourers.”

“And churchwarden of St. Dionis Backchurch,” said Mrs. Deborah.

“Which he beautified, adding a gallery at his own expense.”

“And where, in 1718, a tablet was placed in the wall to his memory,” added Mrs. Deborah.

“And one to the memory of Esther, his wife,” continued the elder sister, “who died in the year 1719, so that we, being still minors, unfortunately became wards of a merchant, an old and trusted friend of our father.”

“A costly friend he proved to us,” said Mrs. Deborah.

“Nay, sister, blame him not. Perhaps he thought to multiply our fortunes tenfold. Then came the year of 1720, when, by visitation of the Lord, all orders and conditions of men went mad, and we, like thousands of others, lost our little all, and from rich

heiresses of twenty thousand pounds apiece – such, Kitty, was then our enviable condition – became mere beggar-girls.”

“Worse,” said Mrs. Deborah grimly. “Beggar-wenches are not in debt; they may go and lay their heads where they please.”

“We were debtors, but to whom I know not; we owed a large sum of money, but how much I know not; nor have ever been able to understand how our guardian ruined us, with himself. I was twenty-two, and my sister twenty-one; we were of age; no one could do anything for us; needs must we come to the Fleet and be lodged in prison.”

“Esther!” cried her sister, shuddering; “must we tell her all?”

“My child,” continued Mrs. Esther, “we suffered at first more than we dare to tell you. There was then in charge of the prison a wretch, a murderer, a man whose sins towards me I have, I hope, forgiven, as is my Christian duty. But his sins towards my sister I can never forgive; no, never. It is not, I believe,” she said with more asperity than I had ever before remarked in her – “it cannot be expected of any Christian woman that she should forgive in a wicked man his wickedness to others.”

“That is my case,” said Mrs. Deborah. “The dreadful cruelties of Bambridge, so far as I am concerned, are forgiven. I cannot, however, forgive those he inflicted upon you, Esther. And I never mean to.”

This seemed at the moment an edifying example of obedience to the divine law. Afterwards the girl wondered whether any person was justified in nourishing hatred against another. And as

to that, Bambridge was dead; he had committed suicide; he had gone where no human hate could harm him.

Every one knows that this man must have been a most dreadful monster. He was the tenant, so to speak, of the prison, and paid so much a year for the privilege of extorting what money he could from the unfortunate debtors. He made them pay commitment fees, lodging fees, and fees of all kinds, so that the very entrance to the prison cost a poor wretch sometimes more than forty pounds. He took from the two ladies all the money they had, to the last guinea; he threatened them with the same punishment which he (illegally) inflicted on the unfortunate men; he would, he said, clap them in irons, set them in tubs, put them in the strong-room, which was a damp and dark and filthy dungeon, not fit for a Turk; he kept their lives in continual terror of some new misery: they had ever before their eyes the spectacle of his cruelties to Captain MacPheadrid, whom he lamed; Captain Sinclair, whom he confined until his memory was lost and the use of his limbs; Jacob Mendez, whom he kept locked up till he gave up his uttermost farthing; and Sir William Rich, whom he slashed with a hanger and beat with sticks because he could not pay his lodging.

And as every one knows, Bambridge was at last turned out through the exertions of General Oglethorpe.

“And how can I forget the generous band,
Who, touched with human woe, redressive searched

Into the horrors of the gloomy gaol!”

“We endured these miseries,” continued Mrs. Esther, “for four years, when our cousin was able to go security and pay the fees for us to leave the dreadful place and enjoy the Rules. Here, at least, we have some liberty, though we must live among scenes of rudeness, and see and hear daily a thousand things which a gentlewoman should be able to escape and forget. Our cousin,” she went on, after a pause, “is not rich, and is able to do little for us: he sends us from time to time, out of his poverty, something for our necessities: out of this we have paid our rent, and being able sometimes to do some sewing work, we have lived, though but poorly. Two women want but little: a penny will purchase a dish of broth.”

“It is not the poverty we lament,” said Mrs. Deborah, “it is the place wherein we live.”

“Then,” Mrs. Esther went on, “Heaven sent us a friend. My dear, be it known to you, that had it not been for the Doctor, we had, ere now, been starved. He it was who found us in hunger and cold; he fed us, clothed us, and warmed us.”

“To us, at least, he will always be the best of men,” said Mrs. Deborah.

“More than that, sister; he hath brought us this child to be our joy and comfort: though God in His mercy forbid that your young days should all be wasted in this wicked place, which surely is the very mouth – ”

Here they were interrupted by an uproar in the street below us: a bawling and bellowing of many men: they were bringing home the baronet, who was already drunk. Among the voices Kitty heard, and hung her head with shame, the tones of her uncle, as clear and sonorous as the great bell of St. Paul's.

They said nothing for a space. When all was quiet again, and the brawlers had withdrawn, Mrs. Esther spoke in her gentle way.

“A man's life doth, doubtless, seem to himself different from what he seems to the women who know him. We know not his moments of repentance, his secret prayers, or his temptations. Men are stronger than women, and they are also weaker: their virtues are nobler: their vices are more conspicuous. We must not judge, but continue to think the best. I was saying, my dear, when we were interrupted by the brawling of Sabbath-breakers, that your uncle, the worthy Doctor, is the most kind-hearted and generous of men. For all that he has done to us, three poor and defenceless women, we have nothing to give in return but our prayers. Let us give him these, at least. May the Lord of all goodness and mercy reward him, strengthen him, and forgive him whatever frailties do beset him!”

CHAPTER X

HOW THE DOCTOR WAS AT HOME TO HIS FRIENDS

If it be true (which doubtless will be denied by no one) that women are fond of changing their fashions and of pranking themselves continually in some new finery, it is certainly no less true that men – I mean young ones – are for ever changing their follies as well as their fashions. The follies of old men – who ought to be grave, in contemplation of the next world – seem to remain the same: some of them practise gluttony: some love the bottle: some of them the green table: some, even more foolish, pretend to renew their youth and counterfeit a passion for our sex. As for the fashions of the young men, one year it is the cocking of a hat, the next it is the colour of a waistcoat, the cut of a skirt, the dressing of a wig; the ribbon behind must be lengthened or reduced, the foretop must stick up like a horn one year and lie flat the next, the curls must be amplified till a man looks like a monstrous ram, or reduced till he resembles a monkey who has been shaved; the sword must have hilt and scabbard of the fashionable shape which changes every year; it must be worn at a certain angle; the rule about the breadth of the ruffle or the length of the skirt must be observed. So that, even as regards their fashions, the men are

even with the women. Where we cannot vie with them is in the fashion of their amusements, in which they change for ever, and more rapidly than we change the colour of a ribbon. One season Ranelagh is the vogue, the next Vauxhall; the men were, for a year or two, bitten by that strange madness of scouring the streets by night, upsetting constables, throwing pence against window-panes, chasing belated and peaceful passengers, shouting and bellowing, waking from sleep timid and helpless women and children. Could one devise a braver and more noble amusement? Another time there was the mischievous practice of man-hunting. It was thought the work of a fine fellow, a lad of spirit, to lie hidden, with other lads of spirit, in Lincoln's Inn Fields, or some such quiet place, behind the bushes, until there might pass by some unfortunate wretch, alone and unprotected. Then would they spring to their feet, shouting, "That's he! that's he! after him, boys!" and pursue the poor man through the streets with drawn swords and horrid cries, until, half dead, he rushed into some tavern or place of refuge. As for actors, singers, or dancers, they take them up for a season, and then abandon them for no merit or fault in them whatever; one day they are all for Church, and the next they applaud Orator Henley; one day they shout for Nancy Dawson, and the next for Garrick; one day they are Whig, and the next Tory; one year they brandish thick clubs, wear heavy greatcoats with triple capes, swear, drink porter, and go like common coachmen; the next, with amber canes, scented gloves, lace ruffles, flowered silk waistcoats, skirts, extended like

a woman's hooped petticoat, they amble along as if the common air was too coarse for them, mince their words, are shocked at coarse language, and can drink nothing less fine than Rhenish or Champagne, though the latter be seven shillings and sixpence a flask; and as for their walk, they go on tip-toe like a city madam trying to look like a gentlewoman. The next year, again, they are all for Hockley-in-the-Hole and bear-baiting. This year, the fashion was for a short space, and among such as could get taken there, to spend the evenings in the Rules of the Fleet, where, the bloods of the town had discovered, was to be found excellent company for such as liked to pay for it, among those who had been spent and ruined in the service of fashion, gaming, and gallantry.

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