HENRY WOOD

JOHNNY LUDLOW, FIRST SERIES

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Johnny Ludlow, First Series:

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Mrs. Henry Wood
Johnny Ludlow, First Series

"We spake of many a vanished scene,
Of what we once had thought and said,
Of what had been, and might have been,
And who was changed, and who was dead."

Longfellow.

I.
LOSING LENA

We lived chiefly at Dyke Manor. A fine old place, so close upon the borders of Warwickshire and Worcestershire, that many people did not know which of the two counties it was really in. The house was in Warwickshire, but some of the land was in Worcestershire. The Squire had, however, another estate, Crabb Cot, all in Worcestershire, and very many miles nearer to Worcester.

Squire Todhetley was rich. But he lived in the plain, good old-fashioned way that his forefathers had lived; almost a homely way, it might be called, in contrast with the show and parade that have sprung up of late years. He was respected by every one, and though hotheaded and impetuous, he was simple-minded, open-handed, and had as good a heart as any one ever had in this world. An elderly gentleman now, was he, of middle height, with a portly form and a red face; and his hair, what was left of it, consisted of a few scanty, lightish locks, standing up straight on the top of his head.

The Squire had married, but not very early in life. His wife died in a few years, leaving one child only; a son, named after his father, Joseph. Young Joe was just the pride of the Manor and of his father's heart.

I, writing this, am Johnny Ludlow. And you will naturally want to hear what I did at Dyke Manor, and why I lived there.

About three-miles' distance from the Manor was a place called the Court. Not a property of so much importance as the Manor, but a nice place, for all that. It belonged to my father, William Ludlow. He and Squire Todhetley were good friends. I was an only child, just as Tod was; and, like him, I had lost my mother. They had christened me John, but always called me Johnny. I can remember many incidents of my early life now, but I cannot recall my mother to my mind. She must have died—at least I fancy so—when I was two years old.

One morning, two years after that, when I was about four, the servants told me I had a new mamma. I can see her now as she looked when she came home: tall, thin, and upright, with a long face, pinched nose, a meek expression, and gentle voice. She was a Miss Marks, who used to play the organ at church, and had hardly any income at all. Hannah said she was sure she was thirty-five if she was a day—she was talking to Eliza while she dressed me—and they both agreed that she would probably turn out to be a tartar, and that the master might have chosen better. I understood quite well that they meant papa, and asked why he might have chosen better; upon which they shook me and said they had not been speaking of my papa at all, but of the old blacksmith round the corner. Hannah brushed my hair the wrong way, and Eliza went off to see to her bedrooms. Children are easily prejudiced: and they prejudiced me against my new

mother. Looking at her with the eyes of maturer years, I know that though she might be poor in pocket, she was good and kindly, and every inch a lady.

Papa died that same year. At the end of another year, Mrs. Ludlow, my step-mother, married Squire Todhetley, and we went to live at Dyke Manor; she, I, and my nurse Hannah. The Court was let for a term of years to the Sterlings.

Young Joe did not like the new arrangements. He was older than I, could take up prejudices more strongly, and he took a mighty strong one against the new Mrs. Todhetley. He had been regularly indulged by his father and spoilt by all the servants; so it was only to be expected that he would not like the invasion. Mrs. Todhetley introduced order into the profuse household, hitherto governed by the servants. They and young Joe equally resented it; they refused to see that things were really more comfortable than they used to be, and at half the cost.

Two babies came to the Manor; Hugh first, Lena next. Joe and I were sent to school. He was as big as a house, compared with me, tall and strong and dark, with an imperious way and will of his own. I was fair, gentle, timid, yielding to him in all things. His was the master-spirit, swaying mine at will. At school the boys at once, the very first day we entered, shortened his name from Todhetley to Tod. I caught up the habit, and from that time I never called him anything else.

And so the years went on. Tod and I at school being drilled into learning; Hugh and Lena growing into nice little children. During

the holidays, hot war raged between Tod and his step-mother. At least *silent* war. Mrs. Todhetley was always kind to him, and she never quarrelled; but Tod opposed her in many things, and would be generally sarcastically cool to her in manner.

We did lead the children into mischief, and she complained of that. Tod did, that is, and of course I followed where he led. "But we can't let Hugh grow up a milksop, you know, Johnny," he would say to me; "and he would if left to his mother." So Hugh's clothes in Tod's hands came to grief, and sometimes Hugh himself. Hannah, who was the children's nurse now, stormed and scolded over it: she and Tod had ever been at daggers drawn with each other; and Mrs. Todhetley would implore Tod with tears in her eyes to be careful with the child. Tod appeared to turn a deaf ear to them, and marched off with Hugh before their very eyes. He really loved the children, and would have saved them from injury with his life. The Squire drove and rode his fine horses. Mrs. Todhetley had set up a low basket-chaise drawn by a mild she-donkey: it was safer for the children, she said. Tod went into fits whenever he met the turn-out.

But Tod was not always to escape scot-free, or incite the children to rebellion with impunity. There came a day when he brought himself, through it, to a state of self-torture and repentance.

It occurred when we were at home for the summer holidays, just after the crop of hay was got in, and the bare fields looked as white in the blazing sun as if they had been scorched. Tod and

I were in the three-cornered meadow next the fold-yard. He was making a bat-net with gauze and two sticks. Young Jacobson had shown us his the previous day, and a bat he had caught with it; and Tod thought he would catch bats too. But he did not seem to be making much hand at the net, and somehow managed to send the pointed end of the stick through a corner of it.

"I don't think that gauze is strong enough, Tod."

"I am afraid it is not, Johnny. Here, catch hold of it. I'll go indoors, and see if they can't find me some better. Hannah must have some."

He flew off past the ricks, and leaped the little gate into the fold-yard—a tall, strong fellow, who might leap the Avon. In a few minutes I heard his voice again, and went to meet him. Tod was coming away from the house with Lena.

"Have you the gauze, Tod!"

"Not a bit of it; the old cat won't look for any; says she hasn't time. I'll hinder her time a little. Come along, Lena."

The "old cat" was Hannah. I told you she and he were often at daggers drawn. Hannah had a chronic complaint in the shape of ill-temper, and Tod called her names to her face. Upon going in to ask her for the gauze, he found her dressing Hugh and Lena to go out, and she just turned him out of the nursery, and told him not to bother her then with his gauze and his wants. Lena ran after Tod; she liked him better than all of us put together. She had on a blue silk frock, and a white straw hat with daisies round it; open-worked stockings were on her pretty little legs. By

which we saw she was about to be taken out for show.

"What are you going to do with her, Tod?"

"I'm going to hide her," answered Tod, in his decisive way. "Keep where you are, Johnny."

Lena enjoyed the rebellion. In a minute or two Tod came back alone. He had left her between the ricks in the three-cornered field, and told her not to come out. Then he went off to the front of the house, and I stood inside the barn, talking to Mack, who was hammering away at the iron of the cart-wheel. Out came Hannah by-and-by. She had been dressing herself as well as Hugh.

"Miss Lena!"

No answer. Hannah called again, and then came up the fold-yard, looking about.

"Master Johnny, have you seen the child?"

"What child?" I was not going to spoil Tod's sport by telling her.

"Miss Lena. She has got off somewhere, and my mistress is waiting for her in the basket-chaise."

"I see her just now along of Master Joseph," spoke up Mack, arresting his noisy hammer.

"See her where?" asked Hannah.

"Close here, a-going that way."

He pointed to the palings and gate that divided the yard from the three-cornered field. Hannah ran there and stood looking over. The ricks were within a short stone's throw, but Lena kept

close. Hannah called out again, and threw her gaze over the empty field.

"The child's not there. Where can she have got to, tiresome little thing?"

In the house, and about the house, and out of the house, as the old riddle says, went Hannah. It was jolly to see her. Mrs. Todhetley and Hugh were seated patiently in the basket-chaise before the hall-door, wondering what made Hannah so long. Tod, playing with the mild she-donkey's ears, and laughing to himself, stood talking graciously to his step-mother. I went round. The Squire had gone riding into Evesham; Dwarf Giles, who made the nattiest little groom in the county, for all his five-and-thirty years, behind him.

"I can't find Miss Lena," cried Hannah, coming out.

"Not find Miss Lena!" echoed Mrs. Todhetley. "What do you mean, Hannah? Have you not dressed her?"

"I dressed her first, ma'am, before Master Hugh, and she went out of the nursery. I can't think where she can have got to. I've searched everywhere."

"But, Hannah, we must have her directly; I am late as it is."

They were going over to the Court to a children's early party at the Sterlings'. Mrs. Todhetley stepped out of the basket-chaise to help in the search.

"I had better fetch her, Tod," I whispered.

He nodded yes. Tod never bore malice, and I suppose he thought Hannah had had enough of a hunt for that day. I ran

through the fold-yard to the ricks, and called to Lena.

"You can come out now, little stupid."

But no Lena answered. There were seven ricks in a group, and I went into all the openings between them. Lena was not there. It was rather odd, and I looked across the field and towards the lane and the coppice, shouting out sturdily.

"Mack, have you seen Miss Lena pass indoors?" I stayed to ask him, in going back.

No: Mack had not noticed her; and I went round to the front again, and whispered to Tod.

"What a muff you are, Johnny! She's between the ricks fast enough. No danger that she'd come out when I told her to stay!"

"But she's not there indeed, Tod. You go and look."

Tod vaulted off, his long legs seeming to take flying leaps, like a deer's, on his way to the ricks.

To make short of the story, Lena was gone. Lost. The house, the outdoor buildings, the gardens were searched for her, and she was not to be found. Mrs. Todhetley's fears flew to the ponds at first; but it was impossible she could have come to grief in either of the two, as they were both in view of the barn-door where I and Mack had been. Tod avowed that he had put her amid the ricks to hide her; and it was not to be imagined she had gone away. The most feasible conjecture was, that she had run from between the ricks when Hannah called to her, and was hiding in the lane.

Tod was in a fever, loudly threatening Lena with unheard-of

whippings, to cover his real concern. Hannah looked red, Mrs. Todhetley white. I was standing by him when the cook came up; a sharp woman, with red-brown eyes. We called her Molly.

"Mr. Joseph," said she, "I have heard of gipsies stealing children."

"Well?" returned Tod.

"There was one at the door a while agone—an insolent one, too. Perhaps Miss Lena–"

"Which way did she go?—which door was she at?" burst forth Tod.

"'Twas a man, sir. He came up to the kitchen-door, and steps inside as bold as brass, asking me to buy some wooden skewers he'd cut, and saying something about a sick child. When I told him to march, that we never encouraged tramps here, he wanted to answer me, and I just shut the door in his face. A regular gipsy, if ever I see one," continued Molly; "his skin tawny and his wild hair jet-black. Maybe, in revenge, he have stole off the little miss."

Tod took up the notion, and his face turned white. "Don't say anything of this to Mrs. Todhetley," he said to Molly. "We must just scour the country."

But in departing from the kitchen-door, the gipsy man could not by any possibility have made his way to the rick-field without going through the fold-yard. And he had not done that. It was true that Lena might have run round and got into the gipsy's way. Unfortunately, none of the men were about, except Mack

and old Thomas. Tod sent these off in different directions; Mrs. Todhetley drove away in her pony-chaise to the lanes round, saying the child might have strayed there; Molly and the maids started elsewhere; and I and Tod went flying along a by-road that branched off in a straight line, as it were, from the kitchen-door. Nobody could keep up with Tod, he went so fast; and I was not tall and strong as he was. But I saw what Tod in his haste did not see—a dark man with some bundles of skewers and a stout stick, walking on the other side of the hedge. I whistled Tod back again.

"What is it, Johnny?" he said, panting. "Have you seen her?"

"Not her. But look there. That must be the man Molly spoke of."

Tod crashed through the hedge as if it had been so many cobwebs, and accosted the gipsy. I followed more carefully, but got my face scratched.

"Were you up at the great house, begging, a short time ago?" demanded Tod, in an awful passion.

The man turned round on Tod with a brazen face. I say brazen, because he did it so independently; but it was not an insolent face in itself; rather a sad one, and very sickly.

"What's that you ask me, master?"

"I ask whether it was you who were at the Manor-house just now, begging?" fiercely repeated Tod.

"I was at a big house offering wares for sale, if you mean that, sir. I wasn't begging."

"Call it what you please," said Tod, growing white again.

"What have you done with the little girl?"

For, you see, Tod had caught up the impression that the gipsy *had* stolen Lena, and he spoke in accordance with it.

"I've seen no little girl, master."

"You have," and Tod gave his foot a stamp. "What have you done with her?"

The man's only answer was to turn round and walk off, muttering to himself. Tod pursued him, calling him a thief and other names; but nothing more satisfactory could he get out of him.

"He can't have taken her, Tod. If he had, she'd be with him now. He couldn't eat her, you know."

"He may have given her to a confederate."

"What to do? What do gipsies steal children for?"

Tod stopped in a passion, lifting his hand. "If you torment me with these frivolous questions, Johnny, I'll strike you. How do I know what's done with stolen children? Sold, perhaps. I'd give a hundred pounds out of my pocket at this minute if I knew where those gipsies were encamped."

We suddenly lost the fellow. Tod had been keeping him in sight in the distance. Whether he disappeared up a gum-tree, or into a rabbit-hole, Tod couldn't tell; but gone he was.

Up this lane, down that one; over this moor, across that common; so raced Tod and I. And the afternoon wore away, and we had changed our direction a dozen times: which possibly was not wise.

The sun was getting low as we passed Ragley gates, for we had finally got into the Alcester road. Tod was going to do what we ought to have done at first: report the loss at Alcester. Some one came riding along on a stumpy pony. It proved to be Gruff Blossom, groom to the Jacobsons. They called him "Gruff" because of his temper. He did touch his hat to us, which was as much as you could say, and spurred the stumpy animal on. But Tod made a sign to him, and he was obliged to stop and listen.

"The gipsies stole off little Miss Lena!" cried old Blossom, coming out of his gruffness. "That's a rum go! Ten to one if you find her for a year to come."

"But, Blossom, what do they do with the children they steal?" I asked, in a sort of agony.

"They cuts their hair off and dyes their skins brown, and then takes 'em out to fairs a ballad-singing," answered Blossom.

"But why need they do it, when they have children of their own?"

"Ah, well, that's a question I couldn't answer," said old Blossom. "Maybe their'n arn't pretty children—Miss Lena, she is pretty."

"Have you heard of any gipsies being encamped about here?" Tod demanded of him.

"Not lately, Mr. Joseph. Five or six months ago, there was a lot 'camped on the Markis's ground. They warn't there long."

"Can't you ride about, Blossom, and see after the child?"

asked Tod, putting something into his hand.

Old Blossom pocketed it, and went off with a nod. He was riding about, as we knew afterwards, for hours. Tod made straight for the police-station at Alcester, and told his tale. Not a soul was there but Jenkins, one of the men.

"I haven't seen no suspicious characters about," said Jenkins, who seemed to be eating something. He was a big man, with short black hair combed on his forehead, and he had a habit of turning his face upwards, as if looking after his nose—a square ornament, that stood up straight.

"She is between four and five years old; a very pretty child, with blue eyes and a good deal of curling auburn hair," said Tod, who was growing feverish.

Jenkins wrote it down—"Name, Todhetley. What Christian name?"

"Adalena, called 'Lena.'"

"Recollect the dress, sir?"

"Pale blue silk; straw hat with wreath of daisies round it; open-worked white stockings, and thin black shoes; white drawers," recounted Tod, as if he had prepared the list by heart coming along.

"That's bad, that dress is," said Jenkins, putting down the pen.

"Why is it bad?"

"'Cause the things is tempting. Quite half the children that gets stole is stole for what they've got upon their backs. Tramps and that sort will run a risk for a blue silk that they'd not run

for a brown holland pinafore. Auburn curls, too," added Jenkins, shaking his head; "that's a temptation also. I've knowed children sent back home with bare heads afore now. Any ornaments, sir?"

"She was safe to have on her little gold neck-chain and cross. They are very small, Jenkins—not worth much."

Jenkins lifted his nose—not in disdain, it was a habit he had. "Not worth much to you, sir, who could buy such any day, but an uncommon bait to professional child-stealers. Were the cross a coral, or any stone of that sort?"

"It was a small gold cross, and the chain was thin. They could only be seen when her cloak was off. Oh, I forgot the cloak; it was white: llama, I think they call it. She was going to a child's party."

Some more questions and answers, most of which Jenkins took down. Handbills were to be printed and posted, and a reward offered on the morrow, if she was not previously found. Then we came away; there was nothing more to do at the station.

"Wouldn't it have been better, Tod, had Jenkins gone out seeking her and telling of the loss abroad, instead of waiting to write all that down?"

"Johnny, if we don't find her to night, I shall go mad," was all he answered.

He went back down Alcester Street at a rushing pace—not a run but a quick walk.

"Where are you going now?" I asked.

"I'm going up hill and down dale until I find that gipsies'

encampment. You can go on home, Johnny, if you are tired."

I had not felt tired until we were in the police-station. Excitement keeps off fatigue. But I was not going to give in, and said I should stay with him.

"All right, Johnny."

Before we were clear of Alcester, Budd the land-agent came up. He was turning out of the public-house at the corner. It was dusk then. Tod laid hold of him.

"Budd, you are always about, in all kinds of nooks and by-lanes: can you tell me of any encampment of gipsies between here and the Manor-house?"

The agent's business took him abroad a great deal, you know, into the rural districts around.

"Gipsies' encampment?" repeated Budd, giving both of us a stare. "There's none that I know of. In the spring, a lot of them had the impudence to squat down on the Marquis's–"

"Oh, I know all that," interrupted Tod. "Is there nothing of the sort about now?"

"I saw a miserable little tent to-day up Cookhill way," said Budd. "It might have been a gipsy's or a travelling tinker's. 'Twasn't of much account, whichever it was."

Tod gave a spring. "Whereabouts?" was all he asked. And Budd explained where. Tod went off like a shot, and I after him.

If you are familiar with Alcester, or have visited at Ragley or anything of that sort, you must know the long green lane leading to Cookhill; it is dark with overhanging trees, and uphill all the

way. We took that road—Tod first, and I next; and we came to the top, and turned in the direction Budd had described the tent to be in.

It was not to be called dark; the nights never are at midsummer; and rays from the bright light in the west glimmered through the trees. On the outskirts of the coppice, in a bit of low ground, we saw the tent, a little mite of a thing, looking no better than a funnel turned upside down. Sounds were heard within it, and Tod put his finger on his lip while he listened. But we were too far off, and he took his boots off, and crept up close.

Sounds of wailing—of some one in pain. But that Tod had been three parts out of his senses all the afternoon, he might have known at once that they did not come from Lena, or from any one so young. Words mingled with them in a woman's voice; uncouth in its accents, nearly unintelligible, an awful sadness in its tones.

"A bit longer! a bit longer, Corry, and he'd ha' been back. You needn't ha' grudged it to us. Oh–h! if ye had but waited a bit longer!"

I don't write it exactly as she spoke; I shouldn't know how to spell it: we made a guess at half the words. Tod, who had grown white again, put on his boots, and lifted up the opening of the tent.

I had never seen any scene like it; I don't suppose I shall ever see another. About a foot from the ground was a raised surface of some sort, thickly covered with dark green rushes, just the size and shape of a gravestone. A little child, about as old as Lena, lay

on it, a white cloth thrown over her, and just touching the white, still face. A torch, blazing and smoking away, was thrust into the ground and lighted up the scene. Whiter the face looked now, because it had been tawny in life. I would rather see one of our faces in death than a gipsy's. The contrast between the white face and dress of the child, and the green bed of rushes it lay on was something remarkable. A young woman, dark too, and handsome enough to create a commotion at the fair, knelt down, her brown hands uplifted; a gaudy ring on one of the fingers, worth sixpence perhaps when new, sparkled in the torchlight. Tod strode up to the dead face and looked at it for full five minutes. I do believe he thought at first that it was Lena.

"What is this?" he asked.

"It is my dead child!" the woman answered. "She did not wait that her father might see her die!"

But Tod had his head full of Lena, and looked round. "Is there no other child here?"

As if to answer him, a bundle of rags came out of a corner and set up a howl. It was a boy of about seven, and our going in had wakened him up. The woman sat down on the ground and looked at us.

"We have lost a child—a little girl," explained Tod. "I thought she might have been brought here—or have strayed here."

"I've lost *my* girl," said the woman. "Death has come for her!" And, when speaking to us, she spoke more intelligibly than when alone.

"Yes; but this child has been lost—lost out of doors! Have you seen or heard anything of one?"

"I've not been in the way o' seeing or hearing, master; I've been in the tent alone. If folks had come to my aid, Corry might not have died. I've had nothing but water to put to her lips all day?"

"What was the matter with her?" Tod asked, convinced at length that Lena was not there.

"She have been ailing long—worse since the moon come in. The sickness took her with the summer, and the strength began to go out. Jake have been down, too. He couldn't get out to bring us help, and we have had none."

Jake was the husband, we supposed. The help meant food, or funds to get it with.

"He sat all yesterday cutting skewers, his hands a'most too weak to fashion 'em. Maybe he'd sell 'em for a few ha'pence, he said; and he went out this morning to try, and bring home a morsel of food."

"Tod," I whispered, "I wish that hard-hearted Molly had–"

"Hold your tongue, Johnny," he interrupted sharply. "Is Jake your husband?" he asked of the woman.

"He is my husband, and the children's father."

"Jake would not be likely to steal a child, would he?" asked Tod, in a hesitating manner, for him.

She looked up, as if not understanding. "Steal a child, master! What for?"

"I don't know," said Tod. "I thought perhaps he had done it,

and had brought the child here."

Another comical stare from the woman. "We couldn't feed these of ours; what should we do with another?"

"Well: Jake called at our house to sell his skewers; and, directly afterwards, we missed my little sister. I have been hunting for her ever since."

"Was the house far from here!"

"A few miles."

"Then he have sunk down of weakness on his way, and can't get back."

Putting her head on her knees, she began to sob and moan. The child—the living one—began to bawl; one couldn't call it anything else; and pulled at the green rushes.

"He knew Corry was sick and faint when he went out. He'd have got back afore now if his strength hadn't failed him; though, maybe, he didn't think of death. Whist, then, whist, then, Dor," she added, to the boy.

"Don't cry," said Tod to the little chap, who had the largest, brightest eyes I ever saw. "That will do no good, you know."

"I want Corry," said he. "Where's Corry gone?"

"She's gone up to God," answered Tod, speaking very gently. "She's gone to be a bright angel with Him in heaven."

"Will she fly down to me?" asked Dor, his great eyes shining through their tears at Tod.

"Yes," affirmed Tod, who had a theory of his own on the point, and used to think, when a little boy, that his mother was

always near him, one of God's angels keeping him from harm. "And after a while, you know, if you are good, you'll go to Corry, and be an angel, too."

"God bless you, master!" interposed the woman. "He'll think of that always."

"Tod," I said, as we went out of the tent, "I don't think they are people to steal children."

"Who's to know what the man would do?" retorted Tod.

"A man with a dying child at home wouldn't be likely to harm another."

Tod did not answer. He stood still a moment, deliberating which way to go. Back to Alcester?—where a conveyance might be found to take us home, for the fatigue was telling on both of us, now that disappointment was prolonged, and I, at least, could hardly put one foot before another. Or down to the high-road, and run the chance of some vehicle overtaking us? Or keep on amidst these fields and hedgerows, which would lead us home by a rather nearer way, but without chance of a lift? Tod made up his mind, and struck down the lane the way we had come up. He was on first, and I saw him suddenly halt, and turn to me.

"Look here, Johnny!"

I looked as well as I could for the night and the trees, and saw something on the ground. A man had sunk down there, apparently from exhaustion. His face was a tawny white, just like the dead child's. A stout stick and the bundles of skewers lay beside him.

"Do you see the fellow, Johnny? It is the gipsy."

"Has he fainted?"

"Fainted, or shamming it. I wonder if there's any water about?"

But the man opened his eyes; perhaps the sound of voices revived him. After looking at us a minute or two, he raised himself slowly on his elbow. Tod—the one thought uppermost in his mind—said something about Lena.

"The child's found, master!"

Tod seemed to give a leap. I know his heart did. "Found!"

"Been safe at home this long while."

"Who found her?"

"'Twas me, master."

"Where was she?" asked Tod, his tone softening. "Let us hear about it."

"I was making back for the town" (we supposed he meant Alcester), "and missed the way; land about here's strange to me. A-going through a bit of a groove, which didn't seem as if it was leading to nowhere, I heard a child crying. There was the little thing tied to a tree, stripped, and–"

"Stripped!" roared Tod.

"Stripped to the skin, sir, save for a dirty old skirt that was tied round her. A woman carried her off to that spot, she told me, robbed her of her clothes, and left her there. Knowing where she must ha' been stole from—through you're accusing *me* of it, master—I untied her to lead her home, but her feet warn't used

to the rough ground, and I made shift to carry her. A matter of two miles it were, and I be not good for much. I left her at home safe, and set off back. That's all, master."

"What were you doing here?" asked Tod, as considerately as if he had been speaking to a lord. "Resting?"

"I suppose I fell, master. I don't remember nothing, since I was tramping up the lane, till your voices came. I've had naught inside my lips to-day but a drink o' water."

"Did they give you nothing to eat at the house when you took the child home?"

He shook his head. "I saw the woman again, nobody else. She heard what I had to say about the child, and she never said 'Thank ye.'"

The man had been getting on his feet, and took up the skewers, that were all tied together with string, and the stick. But he reeled as he stood, and would have fallen again but for Tod. Tod gave him his arm.

"We are in for it, Johnny," said he aside to me. "Pity but I could be put in a picture—the Samaritan helping the destitute!"

"I'd not accept of ye, sir, but that I have a child sick at home, and want to get to her. There's a piece of bread in my pocket that was give me at a cottage to-day."

"Is your child sure to get well?" asked Tod, after a pause; wondering whether he could say anything of what had occurred, so as to break the news.

The man gazed right away into the distance, as if searching

for an answer in the far-off star shining there.

"There's been a death-look in her face this day and night past, master. But the Lord's good to us all."

"And sometimes, when He takes children, it is done in mercy," said Tod. "Heaven is a better place than this."

"Ay," rejoined the man, who was leaning heavily on Tod, and could never have got home without him, unless he had crawled on hands and knees. "I've been sickly on and off for this year past; worse lately; and I've thought at times that if my own turn was coming, I'd be glad to see my children gone afore me."

"Oh, Tod!" I whispered, in a burst of repentance, "how could we have been so hard with this poor fellow, and roughly accused him of stealing Lena?" But Tod only gave me a knock with his elbow.

"I fancy it must be pleasant to think of a little child being an angel in heaven—a child that we have loved," said Tod.

"Ay, ay," said the man.

Tod had no courage to say more. He was not a parson. Presently he asked the man what tribe he belonged to—being a gipsy.

"I'm not a gipsy, master. Never was one yet. I and my wife are dark-complexioned by nature; living in the open air has made us darker; but I'm English born; Christian, too. My wife's Irish; but they do say she comes of a gipsy tribe. We used to have a cart, and went about the country with crockery; but a year ago, when I got ill and lay in a lodging, the things were seized for rent and

debt. Since then it's been hard lines with us. Yonder's my bit of a tent, master, and now I can get on alone. Thanking ye kindly."

"I am sorry I spoke harshly to you to-day," said Tod. "Take this: it is all I have with me."

"I'll take it, sir, for my child's sake; it may help to put the strength into her. Otherwise I'd not. We're honest; we've never begged. Thank ye both, masters, once again."

It was only a shilling or two. Tod spent, and never had much in his pockets. "I wish it had been sovereigns," said he to me; "but we will do something better for them to-morrow, Johnny. I am sure the Pater will."

"Tod," said I, as we ran on, "had we seen the man close before, and spoken with him, I should never have suspected him. He has a face to be trusted."

Tod burst into a laugh. "There you are Johnny, at your faces again!"

I was always reading people's faces, and taking likes and dislikes accordingly. They called me a muff for it at home (and for many other things), Tod especially; but it seemed to me that I could read people as easily as a book. Duffham, our surgeon at Church Dykely, bade me *trust to it* as a good gift from God. One day, pushing my straw hat up to draw his fingers across the top of my brow, he quaintly told the Squire that when he wanted people's characters read, to come to me to read them. The Squire only laughed in answer.

As luck had it, a gentleman we knew was passing in his dog-

cart when we got to the foot of the hill. It was old Pitchley. He drove us home: and I could hardly get down, I was so stiff.

Lena was in bed, safe and sound. No damage, except fright and the loss of her clothes. From what we could learn, the woman who took her off must have been concealed amidst the ricks, when Tod put her there. Lena said the woman laid hold of her very soon, caught her up, and put her hand over her mouth, to prevent her crying out; she could only give one scream. I ought to have heard it, only Mack was making such an awful row, hammering that iron. How far along fields and by-ways the woman carried her, Lena could not be supposed to tell: "Miles!" she said. Then the thief plunged amidst a few trees, took the child's things off, put on an old rag of a petticoat, and tied her loosely to a tree. Lena thought she could have got loose herself, but was too frightened to try; and just then the man, Jake, came up.

"I liked *him*," said Lena. "He carried me all the way home, that my feet should not be hurt; but he had to sit down sometimes. He said he had a poor little girl who was nearly as badly off for clothes as that, but she did not want them now, she was too sick. He said he hoped my papa would find the woman, and put her in prison."

It is what the Squire intended to do, chance helping him. But he did not reach home till after us, when all was quiet again: which was fortunate.

"I suppose you blame me for that?" cried Tod, to his step-

mother.

"No, I don't, Joseph," said Mrs. Todhetley. She called him Joseph nearly always, not liking to shorten his name, as some of us did. "It is so very common a thing for the children to be playing in the three-cornered field amidst the ricks; and no suspicion that danger could arise from it having ever been glanced at, I do not think any blame attaches to you."

"I am very sorry now for having done it," said Tod. "I shall never forget the fright to the last hour of my life."

He went straight to Molly, from Mrs. Todhetley, a look on his face that, when seen there, which was rare, the servants did not like. Deference was rendered to Tod in the household. When anything should take off the good old Pater, Tod would be master. What he said to Molly no one heard; but the woman was banging at her brass things in a tantrum for three days afterwards.

And when we went to see after poor Jake and his people, it was too late. The man, the tent, the living people, and the dead child—all were gone.

II.
FINDING BOTH OF THEM

Worcester Assizes were being held, and Squire Todhetley was on the grand jury. You see, although Dyke Manor was just within the borders of Warwickshire, the greater portion of the Squire's property lay in Worcestershire. This caused him to be summoned to serve. We were often at his house there, Crabb Cot. I forget who was foreman of the jury that time: either Sir John Pakington, or the Honourable Mr. Coventry.

The week was jolly. We put up at the Star-and-Garter when we went to Worcester, which was two or three times a-year; generally at the assizes, or the races, or the quarter-sessions; one or other of the busy times.

The Pater would grumble at the bills—and say we boys had no business to be there; but he would take us, if we were at home, for all that. The assizes came on this time the week before our summer holidays were up; the Squire wished they had not come on until the week after. Anyway, there we were, in clover; the Squire about to be stewed up in the county courts all day; I and Tod flying about the town, and doing what we liked.

The judges came in from Oxford on the usual day, Saturday. And, to make clear what I am going to tell about, we must go back to that morning and to Dyke Manor. It was broiling hot

weather, and Mrs. Todhetley, Hugh, and Lena, with old Thomas and Hannah, all came on the lawn after breakfast to see us start. The open carriage was at the door, with the fine dark horses. When the Squire did come out, he liked to do things well; and Dwarf Giles, the groom, had gone on to Worcester the day before with the two saddle-horses, the Pater's and Tod's. They might have ridden them in this morning, but the Squire chose to have his horses sleek and fresh when attending the high sheriff.

"Shall I drive, sir?" asked Tod.

"No," said the Pater. "These two have queer tempers, and must be handled carefully." He meant the horses, Bob and Blister. Tod looked at me; he thought he could have managed them quite as well as the Pater.

"Papa," cried Lena, as we were driving off, running up in her white pinafore, with her pretty hair flying, "if you can catch that naughty kidnapper at Worcester, you put her in prison."

The Squire nodded emphatically, as much as to say, "Trust me for that." Lena alluded to the woman who had taken her off and stolen her clothes two or three weeks before. Tod said, afterwards, there must have been some prevision on the child's mind when she said this.

We reached Worcester at twelve. It is a long drive, you know. Lots of country-people had arrived, and the Squire went off with some of them. Tod and I thought we'd order luncheon at the Star —a jolly good one; stewed lampreys, kidneys, and cherry-tart; and let it go into the Squire's bill.

I'm afraid I envied Tod. The old days of travelling post were past, when the sheriff's procession would go out to Whittington to meet the judges' carriage. They came now by rail from Oxford, and the sheriff and his attendants received them at the railway station. It was the first time Tod had been allowed to make one of the gentlemen-attendants. The Squire said now he was too young; but he looked big, and tall, and strong. To see him mount his horse and go cantering off with the rest sent me into a state of envy. Tod saw it.

"Don't drop your mouth, Johnny," said he. "You'll make one of us in another year or two."

I stood about for half-an-hour, and the procession came back, passing the Star on its way to the county courts. The bells were ringing, the advanced heralds blew their trumpets, and the javelin-guard rode at a foot-pace, their lances in rest, preceding the high sheriff's grand carriage, with its four prancing horses and their silvered harness. Both the judges had come in, so we knew that business was over at Oxford; they sat opposite to the sheriff and his chaplain. I used to wonder whether they travelled all the way in their wigs and gowns, or robed outside Worcester. Squire Todhetley rode in the line next the carriage, with some more old ones of consequence; Tod on his fine bay was nearly at the tail, and he gave me a nod in passing. The judges were going to open the commission, and Foregate Street was crowded.

The high sheriff that year was a friend of ours, and the Pater had an invitation to the banquet he gave that evening. Tod thought

he ought to have been invited too.

"It's sinfully stingy of him, Johnny. When I am pricked for sheriff—and I suppose my turn will come some time, either for Warwickshire or Worcestershire—I'll have more young fellows to my dinner than old ones."

The Squire, knowing nothing of our midday luncheon, was surprised that we chose supper at eight instead of dinner at six; but he told the waiter to give us a good one. We went out while it was getting ready, and walked arm-in-arm through the crowded streets. Worcester is always full on a Saturday evening; it is market-day there, as every one knows; but on Assize Saturday the streets are almost impassable. Tod, tall and strong, held on his way, and asked leave of none.

"Now, then, you two gents, can't you go on proper, and not elbow respectable folks like that?"

"Holloa!" cried Tod, turning at the voice. "Is it you, old Jones?"

Old Jones, the constable of our parish, touched his hat when he saw it was us, and begged pardon. We asked what he was doing at Worcester; but he had only come on his own account. "On the spree," Tod suggested to him.

"Young Mr. Todhetley," cried he—the way he chiefly addressed Tod—"I'd not be sure but that woman's took—her that served out little Miss Lena."

"That woman!" said Tod. "Why do you think it?"

Old Jones explained. A woman had been apprehended near

Worcester the previous day, on a charge of stripping two little boys of their clothes in Perry Wood. The description given of her answered exactly, old Jones thought, to that given by Lena.

"She stripped 'em to the skin," groaned Jones, drawing a long face as he recited the mishap, "two poor little chaps of three years, they was, living in them cottages under the Wood—not as much as their boots did she leave on 'em. When they got home their folks didn't know 'em; quite naked they was, and bleating with terror, like a brace of shorn sheep."

Tod put on his determined look. "And she is taken, you say, Jones?"

"She was took yesterday, sir. They had her before the justices this morning, and the little fellows knowed her at once. As the 'sizes was on, leastways as good as on, their worships committed her for trial there and then. Policeman Cripp told me all about it; it was him that took her. She's in the county gaol."

We carried the tale to the Pater that night, and he despatched a messenger to Mrs. Todhetley, to say that Lena must be at Worcester on the Monday morning. But there's something to tell about the Sunday yet.

If you have been in Worcester on Assize Sunday, you know how the cathedral is on that morning crowded. Enough strangers are in the town to fill it: the inhabitants who go to the churches at other times attended it then; and King Mob flocks in to see the show.

Squire Todhetley was put in the stalls; Tod and I scrambled

for places on a bench. The alterations in the cathedral (going on for years before that, and going on for years since, and going on still) caused space to be limited, and it was no end of a cram. While people fought for standing-places, the procession was played in to the crash of the organ. The judges came, glorious in their wigs and gowns; the mayor and aldermen were grand as scarlet and gold chains could make them; and there was a large attendance of the clergy in their white robes. The Bishop had come in from Hartlebury, and was on his throne, and the service began. The Rev. Mr. Wheeler chanted; the Dean read the lessons. Of course the music was all right; they put up fine services on Assize Sundays now; and the sheriff's chaplain went up in his black gown to preach the sermon. Three-quarters of an hour, if you'll believe me, before that sermon came to an end!

Ere the organ had well played its Amen to the Bishop's blessing, the crowd began to push out. We pushed with the rest and took up our places in the long cathedral nave to see the procession pass back again. It came winding down between the line of javelin-men. Just as the judges were passing, Tod motioned me to look opposite. There stood a young boy in dreadful clothes, patched all over, but otherwise clean; with great dark wondering eyes riveted on the judges, as if they had been stilted peacocks; on their wigs, their solemn countenances, their held-up scarlet trains.

Where had I seen those eyes, and their brightness? Recollection flashed over me before Tod's whisper: "Jake's boy;

the youngster we saw in the tent."

To get across the line was impossible: manners would not permit it, let alone the javelin-guard. And when the procession had passed, leaving nothing but a crowd of shuffling feet and the dust on the white cathedral floor, the boy was gone.

"I say, Johnny, it is rather odd we should come on those tent-people, just as the woman has turned up," exclaimed Tod, as we got clear of the cathedral.

"But you don't think they can be connected, Tod?"

"Well, no; I suppose not. It's a queer coincidence, though."

This we also carried to the Squire, as we had the other news. He was standing in the Star gateway.

"Look here, you boys," said he, after a pause given to thought; "keep your eyes open; you may come upon the lad again, or some of his folk. I should like to do something for that poor man; I've wished it ever since he brought home Lena, and that confounded Molly drove him out by way of recompense."

"And if they should be confederates, sir?" suggested Tod.

"Who confederates? What do you mean, Joe?"

"These people and the female-stripper. It seems strange they should both turn up again in the same spot."

The notion took away the Pater's breath. "If I thought that; if I find it is so," he broke forth, "I'll—I'll—transport the lot."

Mrs. Todhetley arrived with Lena on Sunday afternoon. Early on Monday, the Squire and Tod took her to the governor's house at the county prison, where she was to see the woman, as if

accidentally, nothing being said to Lena.

The woman was brought in: a bold jade with a red face: and Lena nearly went into convulsions at the sight of her. There could be no mistake the woman was the same: and the Pater became redhot with anger; especially to think he could not punish her in Worcester.

As the fly went racing up Salt Lane after the interview, on its way to leave the Squire at the county courts, a lad ran past. It was Jake's boy; the same we had seen in the cathedral. Tod leaped up and called to the driver to stop, but the Pater roared out an order to go on. His appearance at the court could not be delayed, and Tod had to stay with Lena. So the clue was lost again. Tod brought Lena to the Star, and then he and I went to the criminal court, and bribed a fellow for places. Tod said it would be a sin not to hear the kidnapper tried.

It was nearly the first case called on. Some of the lighter cases were taken first, while the grand jury deliberated on their bills for the graver ones. Her name, as given in, was Nancy Cole, and she tried to excite the sympathies of the judge and jury by reciting a whining account of a deserting husband and other ills. The evidence was quite clear. The two children (little shavers in petticoats) set up a roar in court at sight of the woman, just as Lena had done in the governor's house; and a dealer in marine stores produced their clothes, which he had bought of her. Tod whispered to me that he should go about Worcester after this in daily dread of seeing Lena's blue-silk frock and open-worked

stockings hanging in a shop window. Something was said during the trial about the raid the prisoner had also recently made on the little daughter of Mr. Todhetley, of Dyke Manor, Warwickshire, and of Crabb Cot, Worcestershire, "one of the gentlemen of the grand jury at present sitting in deliberation in an adjoining chamber of the court." But, as the judge said, that could not be received in evidence.

Mrs. Cole brazened it out: testimony was too strong for her to attempt denial. "And if she *had* took a few bits o' things, 'cause she was famishing, she didn't hurt the childern. She'd never hurt a child in her life; couldn't do it. Just contrairy to that; she gave 'em sugar plums—and candy—and a piece of a wig,[1] she did. What was she to do? Starve? Since her wicked husband, that she hadn't seen for this five year, deserted of her, and her two boys, fine grown lads both of 'em, had been accused of theft and got put away from her, one into prison, t'other into a 'formitory, she hadn't no soul to care for her nor help her to a bit o' bread. Life was hard, and times was bad; and—there it was. No good o' saying more."

"Guilty," said the foreman of the jury, without turning round. "We find the prisoner guilty, my lord."

The judge sentenced her to six months' imprisonment with hard labour. Mrs. Cole brazened it out still.

"Thank you," said she to his lordship, dropping a curtsey as they were taking her from the dock; "and I hope you'll sit there,

[1] A small plain bun sold in Worcester.

old gentleman, till I come out again."

When the Squire was told of the sentence that evening, he said it was too mild by half, and talked of bringing her also to book at Warwick. But Mrs. Todhetley said, "No; forgive her." After all, it was only the loss of the clothes.

Nothing whatever had come out during the trial to connect Jake with the woman. She appeared to be a waif without friends. "And I watched and listened closely for it, mind you, Johnny," remarked Tod.

It was a day or two after this—I think, on the Wednesday evening. The Squire's grand-jury duties were over, but he stayed on, intending to make a week of it; Mrs. Todhetley and Lena had left for home. We had dined late, and Tod and I went for a stroll afterwards; leaving the Pater, and an old clergyman, who had dined with us, to their wine. In passing the cooked-meat shop in High-street, we saw a little chap looking in, his face flattened against the panes. Tod laid hold of his shoulder, and the boy turned his brilliant eyes and their hungry expression upon us.

"Do you remember me, Dor?" You see, Tod had not forgotten his name.

Dor evidently did remember. And whether it was that he felt frightened at being accosted, or whether the sight of us brought back to him the image of the dead sister lying on the rushes, was best known to himself; but he burst out crying.

"There's nothing to cry for," said Tod; "you need not be afraid. Could you eat some of that meat?"

Something like a shiver of surprise broke over the boy's face at the question; just as though he had had no food for weeks. Tod gave him a shilling, and told him to go in and buy some. But the boy looked at the money doubtingly.

"A whole shilling! They'd think I stole it."

Tod took back the money, and went in himself. He was as proud a fellow as you'd find in the two counties, and yet he would do all sorts of things that many another glanced askance at.

"I want half-a-pound of beef," said he to the man who was carving, "and some bread, if you sell it. And I'll take one of those small pork-pies."

"Shall I put the meat in paper, sir?" asked the man: as if doubting whether Tod might prefer to eat it there.

"Yes," said Tod. And the customers, working-men and a woman in a drab shawl, turned and stared at him.

Tod paid; took it all in his hands, and we left the shop. He did not mind being seen carrying the parcels; but he would have minded letting them know that he was feeding a poor boy.

"Here, Dor, you can take the things now," said he, when we had gone a few yards. "Where do you live?"

Dor explained after a fashion. We knew Worcester well, but failed to understand. "Not far from the big church," he said; and at first we thought he meant the cathedral.

"Never mind," said Tod; "go on, and show us."

He went skimming along, Tod keeping him within arm's-length, lest he should try to escape. Why Tod should have

suspected he might, I don't know; nothing, as it turned out, could have been farther from Dor's thoughts. The church he spoke of proved to be All Saints'; the boy turned up an entry near to it, and we found ourselves in a regular rookery of dirty, miserable, tumble-down houses. Loose men stood about, pipes in their mouths, women, in tatters, their hair hanging down.

Dor dived into a dark den that seemed to be reached through a hole you had to stoop under. My patience! what a close place it was, with a smell that nearly knocked you backwards. There was not an earthly thing in the room that we could see, except some straw in a corner, and on that Jake was lying. The boy appeared with a piece of lighted candle, which he had been upstairs to borrow.

Jake was thin enough before; he was a skeleton now. His eyes were sunk, the bones of his face stood out, the skin glistened on his shapely nose, his voice was weak and hollow. He knew us, and smiled.

"What's the matter?" asked Tod, speaking gently. "You look very ill."

"I be very ill, master; I've been getting worse ever since."

His history was this. The same night that we had seen the tent at Cookhill, some travelling people of Jake's fraternity happened to encamp close to it for the night. By their help, the dead child was removed as far as Evesham, and there buried. Jake, his wife, and son, went on to Worcester, and there the man was taken worse; they had been in this room since; the wife had found a

place to go to twice a week washing, earning her food and a shilling each time. It was all they had to depend upon, these two shillings weekly; and the few bits o' things they had, to use Jake's words, had been taken by the landlord for rent. But to see Jake's resignation was something curious.

"He was very good," he said, alluding to the landlord and the seizure; "he left me the straw. When he saw how bad I was, he wouldn't take it. We had been obliged to sell the tent, and there was a'most nothing for him."

"Have you had no medicine? no advice?" cried Tod, speaking as if he had a lump in his throat.

Yes, he had had medicine; the wife went for it to the free place (he meant the dispensary) twice a week, and a young doctor had been to see him.

Dor opened the paper of meat, and showed it to his father. "The gentleman bought it me," he said; "and this, and this. Couldn't you eat some?"

I saw the eager look that arose for a moment to Jake's face at sight of the meat: three slices of nice cold boiled beef, better than what we got at school. Dor held out one of them; the man broke off a morsel, put it into his mouth, and had a choking fit.

"It's of no use, Dor."

"Is his name 'Dor'?" asked Tod.

"His name is James, sir; same as mine," answered Jake, panting a little from the exertion of swallowing. "The wife, she has called him 'Dor' for 'dear,' and I've fell into it. She has called

me Jake all along."

Tod felt something ought to be done to help him, but he had no more idea what than the man in the moon. I had less. As Dor piloted us to the open street, we asked him where his mother was. It was one of her working-days out, he answered; she was always kept late.

"Could he drink wine, do you think, Dor?"

"The gentleman said he was to have it," answered Dor, alluding to the doctor.

"How old are you, Dor?"

"I'm anigh ten." He did not look it.

"Johnny, I wonder if there's any place where they sell beef-tea?" cried Tod, as we went up Broad Street. "My goodness! lying there in that state, with no help at hand!"

"I never saw anything so bad before, Tod."

"Do you know what I kept thinking of all the time? I could not get it out of my head."

"What?"

"Of Lazarus at the rich man's gate. Johnny, lad, there seems an awful responsibility lying on some of us."

To hear Tod say such a thing was stranger than all. He set off running, and burst into our sitting-room in the Star, startling the Pater, who was alone and reading one of the Worcester papers with his spectacles on. Tod sat down and told him all.

"Dear me! dear me!" cried the Pater, growing red as he listened. "Why, Joe, the poor fellow must be dying!"

"He may not have gone too far for recovery, father," was Tod's answer. "If we had to lie in that close hole, and had nothing to eat or drink, we should probably soon become skeletons also. He may get well yet with proper care and treatment."

"It seems to me that the first thing to be done is to get him into the Infirmary," remarked the Pater.

"And it ought to be done early to-morrow morning, sir; if it's too late to-night."

The Pater got up in a bustle, put on his hat, and went out. He was going to his old friend, the famous surgeon, Henry Carden. Tod ran after him up Foregate Street, but was sent back to me. We stood at the door of the hotel, and in a few moments saw them coming along, the Pater arm-in-arm with Mr. Carden. He had come out as readily to visit the poor helpless man as he would to visit a rich one. Perhaps more so. They stopped when they saw us, and Mr. Carden asked Tod some of the particulars.

"You can get him admitted to the Infirmary at once, can you not?" said the Pater, impatiently, who was all on thorns to have something done.

"By what I can gather, it is not a case for the Infirmary," was the answer of its chief surgeon. "We'll see."

Down we went, walking fast: the Pater and Mr. Carden in front, I and Tod at their heels; and found the room again with some difficulty. The wife was in then, and had made a handful of fire in the grate. What with the smoke, and what with the other agreeable accompaniments, we were nearly stifled.

If ever I wished to be a doctor, it was when I saw Mr. Carden with that poor sick man. He was so gentle with him, so cheery and so kind. Had Jake been a duke, I don't see that he could have been treated differently. There was something superior about the man, too, as though he had seen better days.

"What is your name?" asked Mr. Carden.

"James Winter, sir, a native of Herefordshire. I was on my way there when I was taken ill in this place."

"What to do there? To get work?"

"No, sir; to die. It don't much matter, though; God's here as well as there."

"You are not a gipsy?"

"Oh dear no, sir. From my dark skin, though, I've been taken for one. My wife's descended from a gipsy tribe."

"We are thinking of placing you in the Infirmary, Jake," cried the Pater. "You will have every comfort there, and the best of attendance. This gentleman–"

"We'll see—we'll see," interposed Mr. Carden, breaking in hastily on the promises. "I am not sure that the Infirmary will do for him."

"It is too late, sir, I think," said Jake, quietly, to Mr. Carden.

Mr. Carden made no reply. He asked the woman if she had such a thing as a tea-cup or wine-glass. She produced a cracked cup with the handle off and a notch in the rim. Mr. Carden poured something into it that he had brought in his pocket, and stooped over the man. Jake began to speak in his faint voice.

"Sir, I'd not seem ungrateful, but I'd like to stay here with the wife and boy to the last. It can't be for long now."

"Drink this; it will do you good," said Mr. Carden, holding the cup to his lips.

"This close place is a change from the tent," I said to the woman, who was stooping over the bit of fire.

Such a look of regret came upon her countenance as she lifted it: just as if the tent had been a palace. "When we got here, master, it was after that two days' rain, and the ground was sopping. It didn't do for *him*"—glancing round at the straw. "He was getting mighty bad then, and we just put our heads into this place—bad luck to us!"

The Squire gave her some silver, and told her to get anything in she thought best. It was too late to do more that night. The church clocks were striking ten as we went out.

"Won't it do to move him to the Infirmary?" were the Pater's first words to Mr. Carden.

"Certainly not. The man's hours are numbered."

"There is no hope, I suppose?"

"Not the least. He may be said to be dying now."

No time was lost in the morning. When Squire Todhetley took a will to heart he carried it out, and speedily. A decent room with an airy window was found in the same block of buildings. A bed and other things were put in it; some clothes were redeemed; and by twelve o'clock in the day Jake was comfortably lying there. The Pater seemed to think that this was not enough: he wanted

to do more.

"His humanity to my child kept him from seeing the last moments of his," said he. "The little help we can give him now is no return for that."

Food and clothes, and a dry, comfortable room, and wine and proper things for Jake—of which he could not swallow much. The woman was not to go out to work again while he lasted, but to stay at home and attend to him.

"I shall be at liberty by the hop-picking time," she said, with a sigh. Ah, poor creature! long before that.

When Tod and I went in later in the afternoon, she had just given Jake some physic, ordered by Mr. Carden. She and the boy sat by the fire, tea and bread-and-butter on the deal table between them. Jake lay in bed, his head raised on account of his breathing, I thought he was better; but his thin white face, with the dark, earnest, glistening eyes, was almost painful to look upon.

"The reading-gentleman have been in," cried the woman suddenly. "He's coming again, he says, the night or the morning."

Tod looked puzzled, and Jake explained. A good young clergyman, who had found him out a day or two before, had been in each day since with his Bible, to read and pray. "God bless him!" said Jake.

"Why did you go away so suddenly?" Tod asked, alluding to the hasty departure from Cookhill. "My father was intending to do something for you."

"I didn't know that, sir. Many thanks all the same. I'd like

to thank *you* too, sir," he went on, after a fit of coughing. "I've wanted to thank you ever since. When you gave me your arm up the lane, and said them pleasant things to me about having a little child in heaven, you knew she was gone."

"Yes."

"It broke the trouble to me, sir. My wife heard me coughing afar off, and came out o' the tent. She didn't say at first what there was in the tent, but began telling how you had been there. It made me know what had happened; and when she set on a-grieving, I told her not to: Carry was gone up to be an angel in heaven."

Tod touched the hand he put out, not speaking.

"She's waiting for me, sir," he continued, in a fainter voice. "I'm as sure of it as if I saw her. The little girl I found and carried to the great house has rich friends and a fine home to shelter her; mine had none, and so it was for the best that she should go. God has been very good to me. Instead of letting me fret after her, or murmur at lying helpless like this, He only gives me peace."

"That man must have had a good mother," cried out Tod, as we went away down the entry. And I looked up at him, he spoke so queerly.

"Do you think he will get better, Tod? He does not seem as bad as he did last night."

"Get better!" retorted Tod. "You'll always be a muff, Johnny. Why, every breath he takes threatens to be his last. He is miles worse than he was when we found him. This is Thursday: I don't believe he can last out longer than the week; and I think Mr.

Carden knows it."

He did not last so long. On the Saturday morning, just as we were going to start for home, the wife came to the Star with the news. Jake had died at ten the previous night.

"He went off quiet," said she to the Squire. "I asked if he'd not like a dhrink; but he wouldn't have it: the good gentleman had been there giving him the bread and wine, and he said he'd take nothing, he thought, after that. 'I'm going, Mary,' he suddenly says to me about ten o'clock, and he called Dor up and shook hands with him, and bade him be good to me, and then he shook hands with me. 'God bless ye both,' says he, 'for Christ's sake; and God bless the friends who have been kind to us!' And with that he died."

That's all, for now. And I hope no one will think I invented this account of Jake's death, for I should not like to do it. The wife related it to us in the exact words written.

"And I able to do so little for him," broke forth the Squire, suddenly, when we were about half-way home; and he lashed up Bob and Blister regardless of their tempers. Which the animals did not relish.

And so that assize week ended the matter. Bringing imprisonment to the kidnapping woman, and to Jake death.

III.
WOLFE BARRINGTON'S TAMING

This is an incident of our school life; one that I never care to look back upon. All of us have sad remembrances of some kind living in the mind; and we are apt in our painful regret to say, "If I had but done this, or had but done the other, things might have turned out differently."

The school was a large square house, built of rough stone, gardens and playgrounds and fields extending around it. It was called Worcester House: a title of the fancy, I suppose, since it was some miles away from Worcester. The master was Dr. Frost, a tall, stout man, in white frilled shirt, knee-breeches and buckles; stern on occasion, but a gentleman to the back-bone. He had several under-masters. Forty boys were received; we wore the college cap and Eton jacket. Mrs. Frost was delicate: and Hall, a sour old woman of fifty, was manager of the eatables.

Tod and I must have been in the school two years, I think, when Archie Hearn entered. He was eleven years old. We had seen him at the house sometimes before, and liked him. A regular good little fellow was Archie.

Hearn's father was dead. His mother had been a Miss Stockhausen, sister to Mrs. Frost. The Stockhausens had a name in Worcestershire: chiefly, I think, for dying off. There had been

six sisters; and the only two now left were Mrs. Frost and Mrs. Hearn: the other four quietly faded away one after another, not living to see thirty. Mr. Hearn died, from an accident, when Archie was only a year old. He left no will, and there ensued a sharp dispute about his property. The Stockhausens said it all belonged to the little son; the Hearn family considered that a portion of it ought to go back to them. The poor widow was the only quiet spirit amongst them, willing to be led either way. What the disputants did was to put it into Chancery: and I don't much think it ever came out again.

It was the worst move they could have made for Mrs. Hearn. For it reduced her to a very slender income indeed, and the world wondered how she got on at all. She lived in a cottage about three miles from the Frosts, with one servant and the little child Archibald. In the course of years people seemed to forget all about the property in Chancery, and to ignore her as quite a poor woman.

Well, we—I and Tod—had been at Dr. Frost's two years or so, when Archibald Hearn entered the school. He was a slender little lad with bright brown eyes, a delicate face and pink cheeks, very sweet-tempered and pleasant in manner. At first he used to go home at night, but when the winter weather set in he caught a cough, and then came into the house altogether. Some of the big ones felt sure that old Frost took him for nothing: but as little Hearn was Mrs. Frost's nephew and we liked *her*, no talk was made about it. The lad did not much like coming into the house:

we could see that. He seemed always to be hankering after his mother and old Betty the servant. Not in words: but he'd stand with his arms on the play-yard gate, his eyes gazing out towards the quarter where the cottage was; as if he would like his sight to penetrate the wood and the two or three miles beyond, and take a look at it. When any of us said to him as a bit of chaff, "You are staring after old Betty," he would say Yes, he wished he could see her and his mother; and then tell no end of tales about what Betty had done for him in his illnesses. Any way, Hearn was a straightforward little chap, and a favourite in the school.

He had been with us about a year when Wolfe Barrington came. Quite another sort of pupil. A big, strong fellow who had never had a mother: rich and overbearing, and cruel. He was in mourning for his father, who had just died: a rich Irishman, given to company and fast living. Wolfe came in for all the money; so that he had a fine career before him and might be expected to set the world on fire. Little Hearn's stories had been of home; of his mother and old Betty. Wolfe's were different. He had had the run of his father's stables and knew more about horses and dogs than the animals knew about themselves. Curious things, too, he'd tell of men and women, who had stayed at old Barrington's place: and what he said of the public school he had been at might have made old Frost's hair stand on end. Why he left the public school we did not find out: some said he had run away from it, and that his father, who'd indulged him awfully, would not send him back to be punished; others said the head-master would not receive

him back again. In the nick of time the father died; and Wolfe's guardians put him to Dr. Frost's.

"I shall make you my fag," said Barrington, the day he entered, catching hold of little Hearn in the playground, and twisting him round by the arm.

"What's that?" asked Hearn, rubbing his arm—for Wolfe's grasp had not been a light one.

"What's that!" repeated Barrington, scornfully. "What a precious young fool you must be, not to know. Who's your mother?"

"She lives over there," answered Hearn, taking the question literally, and nodding beyond the wood.

"Oh!" said Barrington, screwing up his mouth. "What's her name? And what's yours?"

"Mrs. Hearn. Mine's Archibald."

"Good, Mr. Archibald. You shall be my fag. That is, my servant. And you'll do every earthly thing that I order you to do. And mind you do it smartly, or may be that girl's face of yours will show out rather blue sometimes."

"I shall not be anybody's servant," returned Archie, in his mild, inoffensive way.

"Won't you! You'll tell me another tale before this time to-morrow. Did you ever get licked into next week?"

The child made no answer. He began to think the new fellow might be in earnest, and gazed up at him in doubt.

"When you can't see out of your two eyes for the swelling

round them, and your back's stiff with smarting and aching —*that's* the kind of licking I mean," went on Barrington. "Did you ever taste it?"

"No, sir."

"Good again. It will be all the sweeter when you do. Now look you here, Mr. Archibald Hearn. I appoint you my fag in ordinary. You'll fetch and carry for me: you'll black my boots and brush my clothes; you'll sit up to wait on me when I go to bed, and read me to sleep; you'll be dressed before I am in the morning, and be ready with my clothes and hot water. Never mind whether the rules of the house are against hot water, *you'll have to provide it*, though you boil it in the bedroom grate, or out in the nearest field. You'll attend me at my lessons; look out words for me; copy my exercises in a fair hand—and if you were old enough to *do* them, you'd *have* to. That's a few of the items; but there are a hundred other things, that I've not time to detail. If I can get a horse for my use, you'll have to groom him. And if you don't put out your mettle to serve me in all these ways, and don't hold yourself in readiness to fly and obey me at any minute or hour of the day, you'll get daily one of the lickings I've told you of, until you are licked into shape."

Barrington meant what he said. Voice and countenance alike wore a determined look, as if his words were law. Lots of the fellows, attracted by the talking, had gathered round. Hearn, honest and straightforward himself, did not altogether understand what evil might be in store for him, and grew

seriously frightened.

The captain of the school walked up—John Whitney. "What is that you say Hearn has to do?" he asked.

"*He* knows now," answered Barrington. "That's enough. They don't allow servants here: I must have a fag in place of one."

In turning his fascinated eyes from Barrington, Hearn saw Blair standing by, our mathematical master—of whom you will hear more later. Blair must have caught what passed: and little Hearn appealed to him.

"Am I obliged to be his fag, sir?"

Mr. Blair put us leisurely aside with his hands, and confronted the new fellow. "Your name is Barrington, I think," he said.

"Yes, it is," said Barrington, staring at him defiantly.

"Allow me to tell you that 'fags' are not permitted here. The system would not be tolerated by Dr. Frost for a moment. Each boy must wait on himself, and be responsible for himself: seniors and juniors alike. You are not at a public-school now, Barrington. In a day or two, when you shall have learnt the customs and rules here, I dare say you will find yourself quite sufficiently comfortable, and see that a fag would be an unnecessary appendage."

"Who is that man?" cried Barrington, as Blair turned away.

"Mathematical master. Sees to us out of hours," answered Bill Whitney.

"And what the devil did you mean by making a sneaking appeal to *him*?" continued Barrington, seizing Hearn roughly.

"I did not mean it for sneaking; but I could not do what you wanted," said Hearn. "He had been listening to us."

"I wish to goodness that confounded fool, Taptal, had been sunk in his horse-pond before he put me to such a place as this," cried Barrington, passionately. "As to you, you sneaking little devil, it seems I can't make you do what I wanted, fags being forbidden fruit here, but it shan't serve you much. There's to begin with."

Hearn got a shake and a kick that sent him flying. Blair was back on the instant.

"Are you a coward, Mr. Barrington?"

"A coward!" retorted Barrington, his eyes flashing. "You had better try whether I am or not."

"It seems to me that you act like one, in attacking a lad so much younger and weaker than yourself. Don't let me have to report you to Dr. Frost the first day of your arrival. Another thing —I must request you to be a little more careful in your language. You have come amidst gentlemen here, not blackguards."

The matter ended here; but Barrington looked in a frightful rage. It was unfortunate that it should have occurred the day he entered; but it did so, word for word, as I have written it. It set some of us rather against Barrington, and it set *him* against Hearn. He didn't "lick him into next week," but he gave him many a blow that the boy did nothing to deserve.

Barrington won his way, though, as the time went on. He had a liberal supply of money, and was open-handed with it; and he

would often do a generous turn for one and another. The worst of him was his roughness. At play he was always rough; and, when put out, savage as well. His strength and activity were something remarkable; he would not have minded hard blows himself, and he showered them out on others with no more care than if we had been made of pumice-stone.

It was Barrington who introduced the new system at football. We had played it before in a rather mild way, speaking comparatively, but he soon changed that. Dr. Frost got to know of it in time, and he appeared amongst us one day when we were in the thick of it, and stopped the game with a sweep of his hand. They play it at Rugby now very much as Barrington made us play it then. The Doctor—standing with his face unusually red, and his shirt and necktie unusually white, and his knee-buckles gleaming—asked whether we were a pack of cannibals, that we should kick at one another in that dangerous manner. If we ever attempted it again, he said, football should be stopped.

So we went back to the old way. But we had tried the new, you see: and the consequence was that a great deal of rough play would creep into it now and again. Barrington led it on. No cannibal (as old Frost put it) could have been more carelessly furious at it than he. To see him with his sallow face in a heat, his keen black eyes flashing, his hat off, and his straight hair flung back, was not the pleasantest sight to my mind. Snepp said one day that he looked just like the devil at these times. Wolfe Barrington overheard him, and kicked him right over the hillock.

I don't think he was ill-intentioned; but his strong frame had been untamed; it required a vent for its superfluous strength: his animal spirits led him away, and he had never been taught to put a curb on himself or his inclinations. One thing was certain—that the name, Wolfe, for such a nature as his, was singularly appropriate. Some of us told him so. He laughed in answer; never saying that it was only shortened from Wolfrey, his real name, as we learnt later. He could be as good a fellow and comrade as any of them when he chose, and on the whole we liked him a great deal better than we had thought we should at first.

As to his animosity against little Hearn, it was wearing off. The lad was too young to retaliate, and Barrington grew tired of knocking him about: perhaps a little ashamed of it when there was no return. In a twelvemonth's time it had quite subsided, and, to the surprise of many of us, Barrington, coming back from a visit to old Taptal, his guardian, brought Hearn a handsome knife with three blades as a present.

And so it would have gone on but for an unfortunate occurrence. I shall always say and think so. But for that, it might have been peace between them to the end. Barrington, who was defiantly independent, had betaken himself to Evesham, one half-holiday, without leave. He walked straight into some mischief there, and broke a street boy's head. Dr. Frost was appealed to by the boy's father, and of course there was a row. The Doctor forbade Barrington ever to stir beyond bounds again without first obtaining permission; and Blair had orders that

for a fortnight to come Barrington was to be confined to the playground in after-hours.

Very good. A day or two after that—on the next Saturday afternoon—the school went to a cricket-match; Doctor, masters, boys, and all; Barrington only being left behind.

Was he one to stand this? No. He coolly walked away to the high-road, saw a public conveyance passing, hailed it, mounted it, and was carried to Evesham. There he disported himself for an hour or so, visited the chief fruit and tart shops; and then chartered a gig to bring him back to within half-a-mile of the school.

The cricket-match was not over when he got in, for it lasted up to the twilight of the summer evening, and no one would have known of the escapade but for one miserable misfortune—Archie Hearn happened to have gone that afternoon to Evesham with his mother. They were passing along the street, and he saw Barrington amidst the sweets.

"There's Wolfe Barrington!" said Archie, in the surprise of the moment, and would have halted at the tart-shop; but Mrs. Hearn, who was in a hurry, did not stop. On the Monday, she brought Archie back to school: he had been at home, sick, for more than a week, and knew nothing of Barrington's punishment. Archie came amongst us at once, but Mrs. Hearn stayed to take tea with her sister and Dr. Frost. Without the slightest intention of making mischief, quite unaware that she was doing so, Mrs. Hearn mentioned incidentally that they had seen one of the boys

—Barrington—at Evesham on the Saturday. Dr. Frost pricked up his ears at the news; not believing it, however: but Mrs. Hearn said yes, for Archie had seen him eating tarts at the confectioner's. The Doctor finished his tea, went to his study, and sent for Barrington. Barrington denied it. He was not in the habit of telling lies, was too fearless of consequences to do anything of the sort; but he denied it now to the Doctor's face; perhaps he began to think he might have gone a little too far. Dr. Frost rang the bell and ordered Archie Hearn in.

"Which shop was Barrington in when you saw him on Saturday?" questioned the Doctor.

"The pastrycook's," said Archie, innocently.

"What was he doing?" blandly went on the Doctor.

"Oh! no harm, sir; only eating tarts," Archie hastened to say.

Well—it all came out then, and though Archie was quite innocent of wilfully telling tales; would have cut out his tongue rather than have said a word to injure Barrington, he received the credit of it now. Barrington took his punishment without a word; the hardest caning old Frost had given for many a long day, and heaps of work besides, and a promise of certain expulsion if he ever again went off surreptitiously in coaches and gigs. But Barrington thrashed Hearn worse when it was over, and branded him with the name of Sneak.

"He will never believe otherwise," said Archie, the tears of pain and mortification running down his cheeks, fresh and delicate as a girl's. "But I'd give the world not to have gone that

afternoon to Evesham."

A week or two later we went in for a turn at "Hare and Hounds." Barrington's term of punishment was over then. Snepp was the hare; a fleet, wiry fellow who could outrun most of us. But the hare this time came to grief. After doubling and turning, as Snepp used to like to do, thinking to throw us off the scent, he sprained his foot, trying to leap a hedge and dry ditch beyond it. We were on his trail, whooping and halloaing like mad; he kept quiet, and we passed on and never saw him. But there was no more scent to be seen, and we found we had lost it, and went back. Snepp showed up then, and the sport was over for the day. Some went home one way, and some another; all of us were as hot as fire, and thirsting for water.

"If you'll turn down here by the great oak-tree, we shall come to my mother's house, and you can have as much water as you like," said little Hearn, in his good-nature.

So we turned down. There were only six or seven of us, for Snepp and his damaged foot made one, and most of them had gone on at a quicker pace. Tod helped Snepp on one side, Barrington on the other, and he limped along between them.

It was a narrow red-brick house, a parlour window on each side the door, and three windows above; small altogether, but very pretty, with jessamine and clematis climbing up the walls. Archie Hearn opened the door, and we trooped in, without regard to ceremony. Mrs. Hearn—she had the same delicate face as Archie, the same pink colour and bright brown eyes—came out

of the kitchen to stare at us. As well she might. Her cotton sleeves were turned up to the elbows, her fingers were stained red, and she had a coarse kitchen cloth pinned round her. She was pressing black currants for jelly.

We had plenty of water, and Mrs. Hearn made Snepp sit down, and looked at his foot, and put a wet bandage round it, kneeling before him to do it. I thought I had never seen so nice a face as hers; very placid, with a sort of sad look in it. Old Betty, that Hearn used to talk about, appeared in a short blue petticoat and a kind of brown print jacket. I have seen the homely servants in France, since, dressed very similarly. Snepp thanked Mrs. Hearn for giving his foot relief, and we took off our hats to her as we went away.

The same night, before Blair called us in for prayers, Archie Hearn heard Barrington giving a sneering account of the visit to some of the fellows in the playground.

"Just like a cook, you know. Might be taken for one. Some coarse bunting tied round her waist, and hands steeped in red kitchen stuff."

"My mother could never be taken for anything but a lady," spoke up Archie bravely. "A lady may make jelly. A great many ladies prefer to do it themselves."

"Now you be off," cried Barrington, turning sharply on him. "Keep at a distance from your betters."

"There's nobody in the world better than my mother," returned the boy, standing his ground, and flushing painfully:

for, in truth, the small way they were obliged to live in, through Chancery retaining the property, made a sore place in a corner of Archie's heart. "Ask Joseph Todhetley what he thinks of her. Ask John Whitney. *They* recognize her for a lady."

"But then they are gentlemen themselves."

It was I who put that in. I couldn't help having a fling at Barrington. A bit of applause followed, and stung him.

"If you shove in your oar, Johnny Ludlow, or presume to interfere with me, I'll pummel you to powder. There."

Barrington kicked out on all sides, sending us backward. The bell rang for prayers then, and we had to go in.

The game the next evening was football. We went out to it as soon as tea was over, to the field by the river towards Vale Farm. I can't tell much about its progress, except that the play seemed rougher and louder than usual. Once there was a regular skirmish: scores of feet kicking out at once; great struggling, pushing and shouting: and when the ball got off, and the tail after it in full hue and cry, one was left behind lying on the ground.

I don't know why I turned my head back; it was the merest chance that I did so: and I saw Tod kneeling on the grass, raising the boy's head.

"Holloa!" said I, running back. "Anything wrong? Who is it?"

It was little Hearn. He had his eyes shut. Tod did not speak.

"What's the matter, Tod? Is he hurt?"

"Well, I think he's hurt a little," was Tod's answer. "He has had a kick here."

Tod touched the left temple with his finger, drawing it down as far as the back of the ear. It must have been a good wide kick, I thought.

"It has stunned him, poor little fellow. Can you get some water from the river, Johnny?"

"I could if I had anything to bring it in. It would leak out of my straw hat long before I got here."

But little Hearn made a move then, and opened his eyes. Presently he sat up, putting his hands to his head. Tod was as tender with him as a mother.

"How do you feel, Archie?"

"Oh, I'm all right, I think. A bit giddy."

Getting on to his feet, he looked from me to Tod in a bewildered manner. I thought it odd. He said he wouldn't join the game again, but go in and rest. Tod went with him, ordering me to keep with the players. Hearn walked all right, and did not seem to be much the worse for it.

"What's the matter now?" asked Mrs. Hall, in her cranky way; for she happened to be in the yard when they entered, Tod marshalling little Hearn by the arm.

"He has had a blow at football," answered Tod. "Here"—indicating the place he had shown me.

"A kick, I suppose you mean," said Mother Hall.

"Yes, if you like to call it so. It was a blow with a foot."

"Did you do it, Master Todhetley?"

"No, I did not," retorted Tod.

"I wonder the Doctor allows that football to be played!" she went on, grumbling. "I wouldn't, if I kept a school; I know that. It is a barbarous game, only fit for bears."

"I am all right," put in Hearn. "I needn't have come in, but for feeling giddy."

But he was not quite right yet. For without the slightest warning, before he had time to stir from where he stood, he became frightfully sick. Hall ran for a basin and some warm water. Tod held his head.

"This is through having gobbled down your tea in such a mortal hurry, to be off to that precious football," decided Hall, resentfully. "The wonder is, that the whole crew of you are not sick, swallowing your food at the rate you do."

"I think I'll lie on the bed for a bit," said Archie, when the sickness had passed. "I shall be up again by supper-time."

They went with him to his room. Neither of them had the slightest notion that he was seriously hurt, or that there could be any danger. Archie took off his jacket, and lay down in his clothes. Mrs. Hall offered to bring him up a cup of tea; but he said it might make him sick again, and he'd rather be quiet. She went down, and Tod sat on the edge of the bed. Archie shut his eyes, and kept still. Tod thought he was dropping off to sleep, and began to creep out of the room. The eyes opened then, and Archie called to him.

"Todhetley?"

"I am here, old fellow. What is it?"

"You'll tell him I forgive him," said Archie, speaking in an earnest whisper. "Tell him I know he didn't think to hurt me."

"Oh, I'll tell him," answered Tod, lightly.

"And be sure give my dear love to mamma."

"So I will."

"And now I'll go to sleep, or I shan't be down to supper. You will come and call me if I am not, won't you?"

"All right," said Tod, tucking the counterpane about him. "Are you comfortable, Archie?"

"Quite. Thank you."

Tod came on to the field again, and joined the game. It was a little less rough, and there were no more mishaps. We got home later than usual, and supper stood on the table.

The suppers at Worcester House were always the same—bread and cheese. And not too much of it. Half a round off the loaf, with a piece of cheese, for each fellow; and a drop of beer or water. Our other meals were good and abundant; but the Doctor waged war with heavy suppers. If old Hall had had her way, we should have had none at all. Little Hearn did not appear; and Tod went up to look after him. I followed.

Opening the door without noise, we stood listening and looking. Not that there was much good in looking, for the room was in darkness.

"Archie," whispered Tod.

No answer. No sound.

"Are you asleep, old fellow?"

Not a word still. The dead might be there; for all the sound there was.

"He's asleep, for certain," said Tod, groping his way towards the bed. "So much the better, poor little chap. I won't wake him."

It was a small room, two beds in it; Archie's was the one at the end by the wall. Tod groped his way to it: and, in thinking of it afterwards, I wondered that Tod did go up to him. The most natural thing would have been to come away, and shut the door. Instinct must have guided him—as it guides us all. Tod bent over him, touching his face, I think. I stood close behind. Now that our eyes were accustomed to the darkness, it seemed a bit lighter.

Something like a cry from Tod made me start. In the dark, and holding the breath, one is easily startled.

"Get a light, Johnny. A light!-quick! for the love of Heaven."

I believe I leaped the stairs at a bound. I believe I knocked over Mother Hall at the foot. I know I snatched the candle that was in her hand, and she screamed after me as if I had murdered her.

"Here it is, Tod."

He was at the door waiting for it, every atom of colour gone clean out of his face. Carrying it to the bed, he let its light fall full on Archie Hearn. The face was white and cold; the mouth covered with froth.

"Oh, Tod! What is it that's the matter with him?"

"Hush', Johnny! I fear he's dying. Good Lord! to think we should have been such ignorant fools as to leave him by himself! —as not have sent for Featherstone!"

We were down again in a moment. Hall stood scolding still, demanding her candle. Tod said a word that silenced her. She backed against the wall.

"Don't play your tricks on me, Mr. Todhetley."

"Go and see," said Tod.

She took the light from his hand quietly, and went up. Just then, the Doctor and Mrs. Frost, who had been walking all the way home from Sir John Whitney's, where they had spent the evening, came in, and learnt what had happened.

Featherstone was there in no time, so to say, and shut himself into the bedroom with the Doctor and Mrs. Frost and Hall, and I don't know how many more. Nothing could be done for Archibald Hearn: he was not quite dead, but close upon it. He was dead before any one thought of sending to Mrs. Hearn. It came to the same. Could she have come upon telegraph wires, she would still have come too late.

When I look back upon that evening—and a good many years have gone by since then—nothing arises in my mind but a picture of confusion, tinged with a feeling of terrible sorrow; ay, and of horror. If a death happens in a school, it is generally kept from the pupils, as far as possible; at any rate they are not allowed to see any of its attendant stir and details. But this was different. Upon masters and boys, upon mistress and household, it came with the same startling shock. Dr. Frost said feebly that the boys ought to go up to bed, and then Blair told us to go; but the boys stayed on where they were. Hanging about the passages, stealing upstairs

and peeping into the room, questioning Featherstone (when we could get the chance of coming upon him), as to whether Hearn would get well or not. No one checked us.

I went in once. Mrs. Frost was alone, kneeling by the bed; I thought she must have been saying a prayer. Just then she lifted her head to look at him. As I backed away again, she began to speak aloud—and oh! what a sad tone she said it in!

"The only son of his mother, and she was a widow!"

There had to be an inquest. It did not come to much. The most that could be said was that he died from a kick at football. "A most unfortunate but an accidental kick," quoth the coroner. Tod had said that he saw the kick given: that is, had seen some foot come flat down with a bang on the side of little Hearn's head; and when Tod was asked if he recognized the foot, he replied No: boots looked very much alike, and a great many were thrust out in the skirmish, all kicking together.

Not one would own to having given it. For the matter of that, the fellow might not have been conscious of what he did. No end of thoughts glanced towards Barrington: both because he was so ferocious at the game, and that he had a spite against Hearn.

"I never touched him," said Barrington, when this leaked out; and his face and voice were boldly defiant. "It wasn't me. I never so much as saw that Hearn was down."

And as there were others quite as brutal at football as Barrington, he was believed.

We could not get over it any way. It seemed so dreadful that

he should have been left alone to die. Hall was chiefly to blame for that; and it cowed her.

"Look here," said Tod to us, "I have a message for one of you. Whichever the cap fits may take it to himself. When Hearn was dying he told me to say that he forgave the fellow who kicked him."

This was the evening of the inquest-day. We had all gathered in the porch by the stone bench, and Tod took the opportunity to relate what he had not related before. He repeated every word that Hearn had said.

"Did Hearn know who it was, then?" asked John Whitney.

"I think so."

"Then why didn't you ask him to name him!"

"Why didn't I ask him to name him," repeated Tod, in a fume. "Do you suppose I thought he was going to die, Whitney?—or that the kick was to turn out a serious one? Hearn was growing big enough to fight his own battles: and I never thought but he would be up again at supper-time."

John Whitney pushed his hair back, in his quiet, thoughtful way, and said no more. He was to die, himself, the following year—but that has nothing to do with the present matter.

I was standing away at the gate after this, looking at the sunset, when Tod came up and put his arms on the top bar.

"What are you gazing at, Johnny?"

"At the sunset. How red it is! I was thinking that if Hearn's up there now he is better off. It is very beautiful."

"I should not like to have been the one to send him there, though," was Tod's answer. "Johnny, I am certain Hearn knew who it was," he went on in a low tone. "I am certain he thought the fellow, himself, knew, and that it had been done for the purpose. I think I know also."

"Tell us," I said. And Tod glanced over his shoulders, to make sure no one was within hearing before he replied.

"Wolfe Barrington."

"Why don't you accuse him, Tod?"

"It wouldn't do. And I am not absolutely sure. What I saw, was this. In the rush, one of them fell: I saw his head lying on the ground. Before I could shout out to the fellows to take care, a boot with a grey trouser over it came stamping down (not kicking) on the side of the head. If ever anything was done deliberately, that stamp seemed to be; it could hardly have been chance. I know no more than that: it all passed in a moment. I didn't *see* that it was Barrington. But—what other fellow is there among us who would have wilfully harmed little Hearn? It is that thought that brings conviction to me."

I looked round to where a lot of them stood at a distance. "Wolfe has got on grey trousers, too."

"That does not tell much," returned Tod. "Half of us wear the same. Yours are grey; mine are grey. It's just this: While I am convinced in my own mind that it was Barrington, there's no sort of proof that it was so, and he denies it. So it must rest, and die away. Keep counsel, Johnny."

The funeral took place from the school. All of us went to it. In the evening, Mrs. Hearn, who had been staying at the house, surprised us by coming into the tea-room. She looked very small in her black gown. Her thin cheeks were more flushed than usual, and her eyes had a great sadness in them.

"I wished to say good-bye to you; and to shake hands with you before I go home," she began, in a kind tone, and we all got up from the table to face her.

"I thought you would like me to tell you that I feel sure it must have been an accident; that no harm was intended. My dear little son said this to Joseph Todhetley when he was dying—and I fancy that some prevision of death must have lain then upon his spirit and caused him to say it, though he himself might not have been quite conscious of it. He died in love and peace with all; and, if he had anything to forgive—he forgave freely. I wish to let you know that I do the same. Only try to be a little less rough at play—and God bless you all. Will you shake hands with me?"

John Whitney, a true gentleman always, went up to her first, meeting her offered hand.

"If it had been anything but an accident, Mrs. Hearn," he began in tones of deep feeling: "if any one of us had done it wilfully, I think, standing to hear you now, we should shrink to the earth in our shame and contrition. You cannot regret Archibald much more than we do."

"In the midst of my grief, I know one thing: that God has taken him from a world of care to peace and happiness; I try to *rest* in

that. Thank you all. Good-bye."

Catching her breath, she shook hands with us one by one, giving each a smile; but did not say more.

And the only one of us who did not feel her visit as it was intended, was Barrington. But he had no feeling: his body was too strong for it, his temper too fierce. He would have thrown a sneer of ridicule after her, but Whitney hissed it down.

Before another day had gone over, Barrington and Tod had a row. It was about a crib. Tod could be as overbearing as Barrington when he pleased, and he was cherishing ill-feeling towards him. They went and had it out in private—but it did not come to a fight. Tod was not one to keep in matters till they rankled, and he openly told Barrington that he believed it was he who had caused Hearn's death. Barrington denied it out-and-out; first of all swearing passionately that he had not, and then calming down to talk about it quietly. Tod felt less sure of it after that: as he confided to me in the bedroom.

Dr. Frost forbid football. And the time went on.

What I have further to relate may be thought a made-up story, such as we find in fiction. It is so very like a case of retribution. But it is all true, and happened as I shall put it. And somehow I never care to dwell long upon the calamity.

It was as nearly as possible a year after Hearn died. Jessup was captain of the school, for John Whitney was too ill to come. Jessup was almost as rebellious as Wolfe; and the two would ridicule Blair, and call him "Baked pie" to his face. One morning,

when they had given no end of trouble to old Frost over their Greek, and laid the blame upon the hot weather, the Doctor said he had a great mind to keep them in until dinner-time. However, they ate humble-pie, and were allowed to escape. Blair was taking us for a walk. Instead of keeping with the ranks, Barrington and Jessup fell out, and sat down on the gate of a field where the wheat was being carried. Blair said they might sit there if they pleased, but forbid them to cross the gate. Indeed, there was a standing interdiction against our entering any field whilst the crops were being gathered. We went on and left them.

Half-an-hour afterwards, before we got back, Barrington had been carried home, dying.

Dying, as was supposed. He and Jessup had disobeyed Blair, disregarded orders, and rushed into the field, shouting and leaping like a couple of mad fellows—as the labourers afterwards said. Making for the waggon, laden high with wheat, they mounted it, and started on the horses. In some way, Barrington lost his balance, slipped over the side and the hind wheel went over him.

I shall never forget the house when we got back. Jessup, in his terror, had made off for his home, running most of the way—seven miles. He was in the same boat as Wolfe, except that he escaped injury—had gone over the stile in defiance of orders, and got on the waggon. Barrington was lying in the blue-room; and Mrs. Frost, frightened out of bed, stood on the landing in her night-cap, a shawl wrapped round her loose white dressing-

gown. She was ill at the time. Featherstone came striding up the road wiping his hot face.

"Lord bless me!" cried Featherstone when he had looked at Wolfe and touched him. "I can't deal with this single-handed, Dr. Frost."

The doctor had guessed that. And Roger was already away on a galloping horse, flying for another. He brought little Pink: a shrimp of a man, with a fair reputation in his profession. But the two were more accustomed to treating rustic ailments than grave cases, and Dr. Frost knew that. Evening drew on, and the dusk was gathering, when a carriage with post-horses came thundering in at the front gates, bringing Mr. Carden.

They did not give to us boys the particulars of the injuries; and I don't know them to this day. The spine was hurt; the right ankle smashed: we heard that much. Taptal, Barrington's guardian, came over, and an uncle from London. Altogether it was a miserable time. The masters seized upon it to be doubly stern, and read us lectures upon disobedience and rebellion—as though we had been the offenders! As to Jessup, his father handed him back again to Dr. Frost, saying that in his opinion a taste of birch would much conduce to his benefit.

Barrington did not seem to suffer as keenly as some might have done; perhaps his spirits kept him up, for they were untamed. On the very day after the accident, he asked for some of the fellows to go in and sit with him, because he was dull. "By-and-by," the doctors said. And the next day but one, Dr. Frost

sent me in. The paid nurse sat at the end of the room.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Ludlow! Where's Jessup?"

"Jessup's under punishment."

His face looked the same as ever, and that was all that could be seen of him. He lay on his back, covered over. As to the low bed, it might have been a board, to judge by its flatness. And perhaps was so.

"I am very sorry about it, Barrington. We all are. Are you in much pain?"

"Oh, I don't know," was his impatient answer. "One has to grin and bear it. The cursed idiots had stacked the wheat sloping to the sides, or it would never have happened. What do you hear about me?"

"Nothing but regret that it–"

"I don't mean that stuff. Regret, indeed! regret won't undo it. I mean as to my getting about again. Will it be ages first?"

"We don't hear a word."

"If they were to keep me here a month, Ludlow, I should go mad. Rampant. You shut up, old woman."

For the nurse had interfered, telling him he must not excite himself.

"My ankle's hurt; but I believe it is not half as bad as a regular fracture: and my back's bruised. Well, what's a bruise? Nothing. Of course there's pain and stiffness, and all that; but so there is after a bad fight, or a thrashing. And they talk about my lying here for three or four weeks! Catch me."

One thing was evident: they had not allowed Wolfe to suspect the gravity of the case. Downstairs we had an inkling, I don't remember whence gathered, that it might possibly end in death. There was a suspicion of some internal injury that we could not get to know of; and it is said that even Mr. Carden, with all his surgical skill, could not get at it, either. Any way, the prospect of recovery for Barrington was supposed to be of the scantiest; and it threw a gloom over us.

A sad mishap was to occur. Of course no one in their senses would have let Barrington learn the danger he was in; especially while there was just a chance that the peril would be surmounted. I read a book lately—I, Johnny Ludlow—where a little child met with an accident; and the first thing the people around him did, father, doctors, nurses, was to inform him that he would be a cripple for the rest of his days. That was common sense with a vengeance: and about as likely to occur in real life as that I could turn myself into a Dutchman. However, something of the kind did happen in Barrington's case, but through inadvertence. Another uncle came over from Ireland; an old man; and in talking with Featherstone he spoke out too freely. They were outside Barrington's door, and besides that, supposed that he was asleep. But he had awakened then; and heard more than he ought. The blue-room always seemed to have an echo in it.

"So it's all up with me, Ludlow?"

I was by his bedside when he suddenly said this, in the twilight of the summer evening. He had been lying quite silent since I

entered, and his face had a white, still look on it, never before noticed there.

"What do you mean, Barrington?"

"None of your shamming here. I know; and so do you, Johnny Ludlow. I say, though it makes one feel queer to find the world's slipping away. I had looked for so much jolly *life* in it."

"Barrington, you may get well yet; you may, indeed. Ask Pink and Featherstone, else, when they next come; ask Mr. Carden. I can't think what idea you have been getting hold of."

"There, that's enough," he answered. "Don't bother. I want to be quiet."

He shut his eyes; and the darkness grew as the minutes passed. Presently some one came into the room with a gentle step: a lady in a black-and-white gown that didn't rustle. It was Mrs. Hearn. Barrington looked up at her.

"I am going to stay with you for a day or two," she said in a low sweet voice, bending over him and touching his forehead with her cool fingers. "I hear you have taken a dislike to the nurse: and Mrs. Frost is really too weakly just now to get about."

"She's a sly cat," said Barrington, alluding to the nurse, "and watches me out of the tail of her eye. Hall's as bad. They are in league together."

"Well, they shall not come in more than I can help. I will nurse you myself."

"No; not you," said Barrington, his face looking red and uneasy. "I'll not trouble *you*."

She sat down in my chair, just pressing my hand in token of greeting. And I left them.

In the ensuing days his life trembled in the balance; and even when part of the more immediate danger was surmounted, part of the worst of the pain, it was still a toss-up. Barrington had no hope whatever: I don't think Mrs. Hearn had, either.

She hardly left him. At first he seemed to resent her presence; to wish her away; to receive unwillingly what she did for him; but, in spite of himself he grew to look round for her, and to let his hand lie in hers whenever she chose to take it.

Who can tell what she said to him? Who can know how she softly and gradually awoke the better feelings within him, and won his heart from its hardness? She did do it, and that's enough. The way was paved for her. What the accident had not done, the fear of death had. Tamed him.

One evening when the sun had sunk, leaving only a fading light in the western sky, and Barrington had been watching it from his bed, he suddenly burst into tears. Mrs. Hearn busy amongst the physic bottles, was by his side in a moment.

"Wolfe!"

"It's very hard to have to die."

"Hush, my dear, you are not worse: a little better. I think you may be spared; I do indeed. And—in any case—you know what I read to you this evening: that to die is gain."

"Yes, for some. I've never had my thoughts turned that way."

"They are turned now. That is quite enough."

"It is such a little while to have lived," went on Barrington, after a pause. "Such a little while to have enjoyed earth. What are my few years compared with the ages that have gone by, with the ages and ages that are to come. Nothing. Not as much as a drop of water to the ocean."

"Wolfe, dear, if you live out the allotted years of man, three score and ten, what would even that be in comparison? As you say—nothing. It seems to me that our well-being or ill-being here need not much concern us: the days, whether short or long, will pass as a dream. Eternal life lasts for ever; soon we must all be departing for it."

Wolfe made no answer. The clear sky was assuming its pale tints, shading off one into another, and his eyes were looking at them. But it was as if he saw nothing.

"Listen, my dear. When Archibald died, *I* thought I should have died; died of grief and pain. I grieved to think how short had been his span of life on this fair earth; how cruel his fate in being taken from it so early. But, oh, Wolfe, God has shown me my mistake. I would not have him back again if I could."

Wolfe put up his hand to cover his face. Not a word spoke he.

"I wish you could see things as I see them, now that they have been cleared for me," she resumed. "It is so much better to be in heaven than on earth. We, who are here, have to battle with cares and crosses; and shall have to do so to the end. Archie has thrown-off all care. He is in happiness amidst the redeemed."

The room was growing dark. Wolfe's face was one of intense

pain.

"Wolfe, dear, do not mistake me; do not think me hard if I say that you would be happier there than here. There is nothing to dread, dying in Christ. Believe me, I would not for the world have Archie back again: how could I then make sure what the eventual ending would be? You and he will know each other up there."

"Don't," said Wolfe.

"Don't what?"

Wolfe drew her hand close to his face, and she knelt down to catch his whisper.

"I killed him."

A pause: and a sort of sob in her throat. Then, drawing away her hand, she laid her cheek to his.

"My dear, I think I have known it."

"You—have—known—it?" stammered Wolfe in disbelief.

"Yes. I thought it was likely. I felt nearly sure of it. Don't let it trouble you now. Archie forgave, you know, and I forgave; and God will forgive."

"How could you come here to nurse me—knowing that?"

"It made me the more anxious to come. You have no mother."

"No." Wolfe was sobbing bitterly. "She died when I was born. I've never had anybody. I've never had a chapter read to me, or a prayer prayed."

"No, no, dear. And Archie—oh, Archie had all that. From the time he could speak, I tried to train him for heaven. It has seemed to me, since, just as though I had foreseen he would go early, and

was preparing him for it."

"I never meant to kill him," sobbed Wolfe. "I saw his head down, and I put my foot upon it without a moment's thought. If I had taken thought, or known it would hurt him seriously, I wouldn't have done it."

"He is better off, dear," was all she said. "You have that comfort."

"Any way, I am paid out for it. At the best, I suppose I shall go upon crutches for life. That's bad enough: but dying's worse. Mrs. Hearn, I am not ready to die."

"Be you very sure God will not take you until you are ready, if you only wish and hope to be made so from your very heart," she whispered. "I pray to Him often for you, Wolfe."

"I think you must be one of heaven's angels," said Wolfe, with a burst of emotion.

"No, dear; only a weak woman. I have had so much sorrow and care, trial upon trial, one disappointment after another, that it has left me nothing but Heaven to lean upon. Wolfe, I am trying to show you a little bit of the way there; and I think—I do indeed—that this accident, which seems, and is, so dreadful, may have been sent by God in mercy. Perhaps, else, you might never have found Him: and where would you have been in all that long, long eternity? A few years here; never-ending ages hereafter!—Oh, Wolfe! bear up bravely for the little span, even though the cross may be heavy. Fight on manfully for the real life to come."

"If you will help me."

"To be sure I will."

Wolfe got about again, and came out upon crutches. After a while they were discarded, first one, then the other, and he took permanently to a stick. He would never go without that. He would never run or leap again, or kick much either. The doctors looked upon it as a wonderful cure—and old Featherstone was apt to talk to us boys as if it were he who had pulled him through. But not in Henry Carden's hearing.

The uncles and Taptal said he would be better now at a private tutor's. But Wolfe would not leave Dr. Frost's. A low pony-carriage was bought for him, and all his spare time he would go driving over to Mrs. Hearn's. He was as a son to her. His great animal spirits had been taken out of him, you see; and he had to find his happiness in quieter grooves. One Saturday afternoon he drove me over. Mrs. Hearn had asked me to stay with her until the Monday morning. Barrington generally stayed.

It was in November. Considerably more than a year after the accident. The guns of the sportsmen were heard in the wood; a pack of hounds and their huntsmen rode past the cottage at a gallop, in full chase after a late find. Barrington looked and listened, a sigh escaping him.

"These pleasures are barred to me now."

"But a better one has been opened to you," said Mrs. Hearn, with a meaning smile, as she took his hand in hers.

And on Wolfe's face, when he glanced at her in answer, there sat a look of satisfied rest that I am sure had never been seen on

it before he fell off the waggon.

IV.
MAJOR PARRIFER

He was one of the worst magistrates that ever sat upon the bench of justices. Strangers were given to wonder how he got his commission. But, you see, men are fit or unfit for a post according to their doings in it; and, generally speaking, people cannot tell what those doings will be beforehand.

They called him Major: Major Parrifer: but he only held rank in a militia regiment, and every one knows what that is. He had bought the place he lived in some years before, and christened it Parrifer Hall. The worst title he could have hit upon; seeing that the good old Hall, with a good old family in it, was only a mile or two distant. Parrifer Hall was only a stone's throw, so to say, beyond our village, Church Dykely.

They lived at a high rate; money was not wanting; the Major, his wife, six daughters, and a son who did not come home very much. Mrs. Parrifer was stuck-up: it is one of our county sayings, and it applied to her. When she called on people her silk gowns rustled as if lined with buckram; her voice was loud, her manner patronizing; the Major's voice and manner were the same; and the girls took after them.

Close by, at the corner of Piefinch Lane, was a cottage that belonged to me. To me, Johnny Ludlow. Not that I had as yet

control over that or any other cottage I might possess. George Reed rented the cottage. It stood in a good large garden which touched Major Parrifer's side fence. On the other side the garden, a high hedge divided it from the lane: but it had only a low hedge in front, with a low gate in the middle. Trim, well-kept hedges: George Reed took care of that.

There was quite a history attaching to him. His father had been indoor servant at the Court. When he married and left it, my grandfather gave him a lease of this cottage, renewable every seven years. George was the only son, had been very decently educated, but turned out wild when he grew up and got out of everything. The result was, that he was only a day-labourer, and never likely to be anything else. He took to the cottage after old Reed's death, and worked for Mr. Sterling; who had the Court now. George Reed was generally civil, but uncommonly independent. His first wife had died, leaving a daughter, Cathy; later on he married again. Reed's wild oats had been sown years ago; he was thoroughly well-conducted and industrious now, working in his own garden early and late.

When Cathy's mother died, she was taken to by an aunt, who lived near Worcester. At fifteen she came home again, for the aunt had died. Her ten years' training there had done very little for her, except make her into a pretty girl. Cathy had been trained to idleness, but to very little else. She could sing; self-taught of course; she could embroider handkerchiefs and frills; she could write a tolerable letter without many mistakes, and was great

at reading, especially when the literature was of the halfpenny kind issued weekly. These acquirements (except the last) were not bad things in themselves, but quite unsuited to Cathy Reed's condition and her future prospects in life. The best that she could aspire to, the best her father expected for her, was that of entering on a light respectable service, and later to become, perhaps, a labourer's wife.

The second Mrs. Reed, a quiet kind of young woman, had one little girl only when Cathy came home. She was almost struck dumb when she found what had been Cathy's acquirements in the way of usefulness; or rather what were her deficiencies. The facts unfolded themselves by degrees.

"Your father thinks he'd like you to get a service with some of the gentlefolks, Cathy," her step-mother said to her. "Perhaps at the Court, if they could make room for you; or over at Squire Todhetley's. Meanwhile you'll help me with the work at home for a few weeks first; won't you, dear? When another little one comes, there'll be a good deal on my hands."

"Oh, I'll help," answered Cathy, who was a good-natured, ready-speaking girl.

"That's right. Can you wash?"

"No," said Cathy, with a very decisive shake of the head.

"Not wash?"

"Oh dear, no."

"Can you iron?"

"Pocket-handkerchiefs."

"Your aunt was a seamstress; can you sew well?"

"I don't like sewing."

Mrs. Reed looked at her, but said no more then, rather leaving practice instead of theory to develop Cathy's capabilities. But when she came to put her to the test, she found Cathy could not, or would not, do any kind of useful work whatever. Cathy could not wash, iron, scour, cook, or sweep; or even sew plain coarse things, such as are required in labourers' families. Cathy could do several kinds of fancy-work. Cathy could idle away her time at the glass, oiling her hair, and dressing herself to the best advantage; Cathy had a smattering of history and geography and chronology; and of polite literature, as comprised in the pages of the aforesaid halfpenny and penny weekly romances. The aunt had sent Cathy to a cheap day-school where such learning was supposed to be taught: had let her run about when she ought to have been cooking and washing; and of course Cathy had acquired a distaste for work. Mrs. Reed sat down aghast, her hands falling helpless on her lap, a kind of fear of what might be Cathy's future stealing into her heart.

"Child, what is to become of you?"

Cathy had no qualms upon the point herself. She gave a laughing kiss to the little child, toddling round the room by the chairs, and took out of her pocket one of those halfpenny serials, whose thrilling stories of brigands and captive damsels she had learnt to make her chief delight.

"I shall have to teach her everything," sighed disappointed

Mrs. Reed. “Catherine, I don’t think the kind of useless things your aunt has taught you are good for poor folk like us.”

Good! Mrs. Reed might have gone a little further. She began her instruction, but Cathy would not learn. Cathy was always good-humoured; but of work she would do none. If she attempted it, Mrs. Reed had to do it over again.

“Where on earth will the gentlefolks get their servants from, if the girls are to be like you?” cried honest Mrs. Reed.

Well, time went on; a year or two. Cathy Reed tried two or three services, but did not keep them. Young Mrs. Sterling at the Court at length took her. In three months Cathy was home again, as usual. “I do not think Catherine will be kept anywhere,” Mrs. Sterling said to her step-mother. “When she ought to have been minding the baby, the nurse would find her with a strip of embroidery in her hand, or buried in the pages of some bad story that can only do her harm.”

Cathy was turned seventeen when the warfare set in between her father and Major Parrifer. The Major suddenly cast his eyes on the little cottage outside his own land and coveted it. Before this, young Parrifer (a harmless young man, with no whiskers, and sandy hair parted down the middle) had struck up an acquaintance with Cathy. When he left Oxford (where he got plucked twice, and at length took his name off the books) he would often be seen leaning over the cottage-gate, talking to Cathy in the garden, with the two little half-sisters that she pretended to mind. There was no harm: but perhaps Major

Parrifer feared it might grow into it; and he badly wanted the plot of ground, that he might pull down the cottage and extend his own boundaries to Piefinch Lane.

One fine day in the holidays, when Tod and I were indoors making flies for fishing, our old servant, Thomas, appeared, and said that George Reed had come over and wanted to speak to me. Which set us wondering. What could he want with me?

"Show him in here," said Tod.

Reed came in: a tall, powerful man of forty; with dark, curling hair, and a determined, good-looking face. He began saying that he had heard Major Parrifer was after his cottage, wanting to buy it; so he had come over to beg me to interfere and stop the sale.

"Why, Reed, what can I do?" I asked. "You know I have no power."

"You wouldn't turn me out of it yourself, I know, sir."

"That I wouldn't."

Neither would I. I liked George Reed. And I remembered that he used to have me in his arms sometimes when I was a little fellow at the Court. Once he carried me to my mother's grave in the churchyard, and told me she had gone to live in heaven.

"When a rich gentleman sets his mind on a poor man's bit of a cottage, and says, 'That shall be mine,' the poor man has not much chance against him, sir, unless he that owns the cottage will be his friend. I know you have no power at present, Master Johnny; but if you'd speak to Mr. Brandon, perhaps he would listen to you."

"Sit down, Reed," interrupted Tod, putting his catgut out of hand. "I thought you had the cottage on a lease."

"And so I have, sir. But the lease will be out at Michaelmas next, and Mr. Brandon can turn me from it if he likes. My father and mother died there, sir; my wife died there; my children were born there; and the place is as much like my homestead as if it was my own."

"How do you know old Parrifer wants it?" continued Tod.

"I have heard it from a safe source. I've heard, too, that his lawyer and Mr. Brandon's lawyer have settled the matter between their two selves, and don't intend to let me as much as know I'm to go out till the time comes, for fear I should make a row over it. Nobody on earth can stop it except Mr. Brandon," added Reed, with energy.

"Have you spoken to Mr. Brandon, Reed?"

"No, sir. I was going up to him; but the thought took me that I'd better come off at once to Master Ludlow; his word might be of more avail than mine. There's no time to be lost. If once the lawyers get Mr. Brandon's consent, he may not be able to recall it."

"What does Parrifer want with the cottage?"

"I fancy he covets the bit of garden, sir; he sees the order I've brought it into. If it's not that, I don't know what it can be. The cottage can be no eyesore to him; he can't see it from his windows."

"Shall I go with you, Johnny?" said Tod, as Reed went home,

after drinking the ale old Thomas had given him. "We will circumvent that Parrifer, if there's law or justice in the Brandon land."

We went off to Mr. Brandon's in the pony-carriage, Tod driving. He lived near Alcester, and had the management of my property whilst I was a minor. As we went along who should ride past, meeting us, but Major Parrifer.

"Looking like the bull-dog that he is," cried Tod, who could not bear the man. "Johnny, what will you lay that he has not been to Mr. Brandon's? The negotiations are becoming serious."

Tod did not go in. On second thought, he said it might be better to leave it to me. The Squire must try, if I failed. Mr. Brandon was at home; and Tod drove on into Alcester by way of passing the time.

"But I don't think you can see him," said the housekeeper, when she came to me in the drawing-room. "This is one of his bad days. A gentleman called just now, and I went in to the master, but it was of no use."

"I know; it was Major Parrifer. We thought he might have been calling here."

Mr. Brandon was thin and little, with a shrivelled face. He lived alone, except for three or four servants, and always fancied himself ill with one ailment or another. When I went in, for he said he'd see me, he was sitting in an easy-chair, with a geranium-coloured Turkish cap on his head, and two bottles of medicine at his elbow.

"Well, Johnny, an invalid as usual, you see. And what is it you so particularly want?"

"I want to ask you a favour, Mr. Brandon, if you'll be good enough to grant it me."

"What is it?"

"You know that cottage, sir, at the corner of Piefinch Lane. George Reed's."

"Well?"

"I have come to ask you not to let it be sold."

"Who wants to sell it?" asked he, after a pause.

"Major Parrifer wants to buy it; and to turn Reed out. The lawyers are going to arrange it."

Mr. Brandon pushed the cap up on his brow and gave the tassel over his ear a twirl as he looked at me. People thought him incapable; but it was only because he had no work to do that he seemed so. He would get a bit irritable sometimes; very rarely though; and he had a squeaky voice: but he was a good and just man.

"How did you hear this, Johnny?"

I told him all about it. What Reed had said, and of our having met the Major on horseback as we drove along.

"He came here, but I did not feel well enough to see him," said Mr. Brandon. "Johnny, you know that I stand in place of your father, as regards your property; to do the best I can with it."

"Yes, sir. And I am sure you do it."

"If Major Parrifer—I don't like the man," broke off Mr.

Brandon, "but that's neither here nor there. At the last magistrates' meeting I attended he was so overbearing as to shut us all up. My nerves were unstrung for four-and-twenty hours afterwards."

"And Squire Todhetley came home swearing," I could not help putting in.

"Ah," said Mr. Brandon. "Yes; some people can throw bile off in that way. I can't. But, Johnny, all that goes for nothing, in regard to the matter in hand: and I was about to point out to you that if Major Parrifer has set his mind upon buying Reed's cottage and the bit of land attached to it, he is no doubt prepared to offer a good price; more, probably, than it is worth. If so, I should not, in your interests, be justified in refusing this."

I could feel my face flush with the sense of injustice, and the tears come into my eyes. They called me a muff for many things.

"I would not touch the money myself, sir. And if you used it for me, I'm sure it would never bring any good."

"What's that, Johnny?"

"Money got by oppression or injustice never does. There was a fellow at school–"

"Never mind the fellow at school. Go on with your own argument."

"To turn Reed out of the place where he has always lived, out of the garden he has done so well by, just because a rich man wants to get possession of it, would be fearfully unjust, sir. It would be as bad as the story of Naboth's vineyard, that we heard

read in church last Sunday, for the First Lesson. Tod said so as we came along."

"Who's Tod?"

"Joseph Todhetley. If you turned Reed out, sir, for the sake of benefiting me, I should be ashamed to look people in the face when they talked of it. If you please, sir, I do not think my father would allow it if he were living. Reed says the place is like his homestead."

Mr. Brandon measured two tablespoonfuls of medicine into a glass, drank it off, and ate a French plum afterwards. The plums were on a plate, and he handed them to me. I took one, and tried to crack the stone.

"You have taken up a strong opinion on this matter, Master Johnny."

"Yes, sir. I like Reed. And if I did not, he has no more right to be turned out of his home than Major Parrifer has out of his. How would *he* like it, if some rich and powerful man came down on his place and turned him out?"

"Major Parrifer can't be turned out of his, Johnny. It is his own."

"And Reed's place is mine, sir—if you won't be angry with me for saying it. Please don't let it be done, Mr. Brandon."

The pony-carriage came rattling up at this juncture, and we saw Tod look at the windows impatiently. I got up, and Mr. Brandon shook hands with me.

"What you have said is all very good, Johnny, right in

principle; but I cannot let it quite outweigh your interests. When this proposal shall be put before me—as you say it will be—it must have my full consideration."

I stopped when I got to the door and turned to look at him. If he would only have given me an assurance! He read in my face what I wanted.

"No, Johnny, I can't do that. You may go home easy for the present, however; for I will promise not to accept the offer to purchase without first seeing you again and showing you my reasons."

"I may have gone back to school, sir."

"I tell you I will see you again if I decide to accept the offer," he repeated emphatically. And I went out to the pony-chaise.

"Old Brandon means to sell," said Tod, when I told him. And he gave the pony an angry cut, that made him fly off at a gallop.

Will anybody believe that I never heard another word upon the subject, except what people said in the way of gossip? It was soon known that Mr. Brandon had declined to sell the cottage; and when his lawyer wrote him word that the sum, offered for it, was increased to quite an unprecedented amount, considering the value of the cottage and garden in question, Mr. Brandon only sent a peremptory note back again, saying he was not in the habit of changing his decisions, and the place *was not for sale*. Tod threw up his hat.

"Bravo, old Brandon! I thought he'd not go quite over to the enemy."

George Reed wanted to thank me for it. One evening, in passing his cottage on my way home from the Court, I leaned over the gate to speak to his little ones. He saw me and came running out. The rays of the setting sun shone on the children's white corded bonnets.

"I have to thank you for this, sir. They are going to renew my lease."

"Are they? All right. But you need not thank me; I know nothing about it."

George Reed gave a decisive nod. "If you hadn't got the ear of Mr. Brandon, sir, I know what box I should have been in now. Look at them girls!"

It was not a very complimentary mode of speech, as applied to the Misses Parrifer. Three of them were passing, dressed outrageously in the fashion as usual. I lifted my straw hat, and one of them nodded in return, but the other two only looked out of the tail of their eyes.

"The Major has been trying it on with me now," remarked Reed, watching them out of sight. "When he found he could not buy the place, he thought he'd try and buy out me. He wanted the bit of land for a kitchen-garden, he said; and would give me a five-pound bank-note to go out of it. Much obliged, Major, I said; but I'd not go for fifty."

"As if he had not heaps of land himself to make kitchen-gardens of!"

"But don't you see, Master Johnny, to a man like Major

Parrifer, who thinks the world was made for him, there's nothing so mortifying as being balked. He set his mind upon this place; he can't get it; and he is just boiling over. He'd poison me if he could. Now then, what's wanted?"

Cathy had come up, with her pretty dark eyes, whispering some question to her father. I ran on; it was growing late, and the Manor ever-so-far off.

From that time the feud grew between Major Parrifer and George Reed. Not openly; not actively. It could not well be either when their relative positions were so different. Major Parrifer was a wealthy landed proprietor, a county magistrate (and an awfully overbearing one); and George Reed was a poor cottager who worked for his bread as a day-labourer. But that the Major grew to abhor and hate Reed; that the man, inhabiting the place at his very gates in spite of him, and looking at him independently, as if to say he knew it, every time he passed, had become an eyesore to him; was easily seen.

The Major resented it on us all. He was rude to Mr. Brandon when they met; he struck out his whip once when he was on horse-back, and I passed him, as if he would like to strike me. I don't know whether he was aware of my visit to Mr. Brandon; but the cottage was mine, I was friendly with Reed, and that was enough. Months, however, went on, and nothing came of it.

One Sunday morning in winter, when our church-bells were going for service, Major Parrifer's carriage turned out with the ladies all in full fig. The Major himself turned out after it,

walking, one of his daughters with him, a young man who was on a visit there, and a couple of servants. As they passed George Reed's, the sound of work being done in the garden at the back of the cottage caught the Major's quick ears. He turned softly down Piefinch Lane, stole on tiptoe to the high hedge, and stooped to peep through it.

Reed was doing something to his turnips; hoeing them, the Major said. He called the gentleman to him and the two servants, and bade them look through the hedge. Nothing more. Then the party came on to church.

On Tuesday, the Major rode out to take his place on the magisterial bench at Alcester. It was bitterly cold January weather, and only one magistrate besides himself was on it: *a clergyman*. Two or three petty offenders were brought before them, who were severely sentenced—as prisoners always were when Major Parrifer was presiding. Another magistrate came in afterwards.

Singular to say, Tod and I had gone to the town that day about a new saddle for his horse; singular on account of what happened. In saying we were there I am telling the truth; it is not invented to give colour to the tale. Upon turning out of the saddler's, which is near the justice-room, old Jones the constable was coming along with a prisoner handcuffed, a tail after him.

"Halloa!" cried Tod. "Here's fun!"

But I had seen what Tod did not, and rubbed my eyes, wondering if they saw double.

"*Tod!* It is George Reed!"

Reed's face was as white as a sheet, and he walked along, not unwillingly, but as one in a state of sad shame, of awful rage. Tod made only one bound to the prisoner; and old Jones knowing us, did not push him back again.

"As I'm a living man, I do not know what this is for, or why I am paraded through the town in disgrace," spoke Reed, in answer to Tod's question. "If I'm charged with wrong-doing, I am willing to appear and answer for it, without being turned into a felon in the face and eyes of folks, beforehand."

"Why do you bring Reed up in this manner—handcuffed?" demanded Tod of the constable.

"Because the Major telled me to, young Mr. Todhetley."

Be you very sure Tod pushed after them into the justice-room: the police saw him, but he was a magistrate's son. The crowd would have liked to push in also, but were sent to the right-about. I waited, and was presently admitted surreptitiously. Reed was standing before Major Parrifer and the other two, handcuffed still; and I gathered what the charge was.

It was preferred by Major Parrifer, who had his servants there and a gentleman as witnesses. George Reed had been working in his garden on the previous Sunday morning—which was against the law. Old Jones had gone to Mr. Sterling's and taken him on the Major's warrant, as he was thrashing corn.

Reed's answer was to the following effect.

He was *not* working. His wife was ill—her little boy being

only four days old—and Dr. Duffham ordered her some mutton broth. He went to the garden to get the turnips to put into it. It was only on account of her illness that he didn't go to church himself, he and Cathy. They might ask Dr. Duffham.

"Do you dare to tell me you were not hoeing turnips?" cried Major Parrifer.

"I dare to say I was not doing it as work," independently answered the man. "If you looked at me, as you say, Major, through the hedge, you must have seen the bunch of turnips I had got up, lying near. I took the hoe in my hand, and I did use it for two or three minutes. Some dead weeds had got thrown along the bed, by the children, perhaps, and I pulled them away. I went indoors directly: before the clock struck eleven the turnips were on, boiling with the scrag of mutton. I peeled them and put them in myself."

"I see the bunch of turnips," cried one of the servants. "They was lying–"

"Hold your tongue, sir," roared his master; "if your further evidence is wanted, you'll be asked for it. As to this defence"—and the Major turned to his brother-magistrates with a scornful smile—"it is quite ingenious; one of the clever excuses we usually get here. But it will not serve your turn, George Reed. When the sanctity of the Sabbath is violated–"

"Reed is not a man to say he did not do a thing if he did," interrupted Tod.

The Major glared at him for an instant, and then put out of

hand a big gold pencil he was waving majestically.

"Clear the room of spectators," said he to the policeman.

Which was all Tod got for interfering. We had to go out: and in a minute or two Reed came out also, handcuffed as before; not in charge of old Jones, but of the county police. He had been sentenced to a month's imprisonment. Major Parrifer had wanted to make it three months; he said something about six; but the other two thought they saw some slightly extenuating circumstances in the case. A solicitor who was intimate with the Sterlings, and knew Reed very well, had been present towards the end.

"Could you not have spoken in my defence, sir?" asked Reed, as he passed this gentleman in coming out.

"I would had I been able. But you see, my man, when the law gets broken–"

"The devil take the law," said Reed, savagely. "What I want is justice."

"And the administrators of it are determined to uphold it, what can be said?" went on the solicitor equably, as if there had been no interruption.

"You would make out that I broke the law, just doing what I did; and I swear it was no more? That I can be legally punished for it?"

"Don't, Reed; it's of no use. The Major and his witnesses swore you were at work. And it appears that you were."

"I asked them to take a fine—if I must be punished. I might

have found friends to advance it for me."

"Just so. And for that reason of course they did not take it," said the candid lawyer.

"What is my wife to do while I am in prison? And the children? I may come out to find them starved. A month's long enough to starve them in such weather as this."

Reed was allowed time for no more. He would not have been allowed that, but for having been jammed by the crowd at the doorway. He caught my eye as they were getting clear.

"Master Johnny, will you go to the Court for me—your own place, sir—and tell the master that I swear I am innocent? Perhaps he'll let a few shillings go to the wife weekly; tell him with my duty that I'll work it out as soon as I am released. All this is done out of revenge, sir, because Major Parrifer couldn't get me from my cottage. May the Lord repay him!"

It caused a commotion, I can tell you, this imprisonment of Reed's; the place was ringing with it between the Court and Dyke Manor. Our two houses seemed to have more to do with it than other people's; first, because Reed worked at the Court; secondly, because I, who owned both the Court and the cottage, lived at the Manor. People took it up pretty warmly, and Mrs. Reed and the children were cared for. Mr. Sterling paid her five shillings a week; and Mr. Brandon and the Squire helped her on the quiet, and there were others also. In small country localities gentlemen don't like to say openly that their neighbours are in the wrong: at any rate, they rarely *do* anything by way of remedy.

Some spoke of an appeal to the Home Secretary, but it came to nothing, and no steps were taken to liberate Reed. Bill Whitney, who was staying a week with us, wrote and told his mother about it; she sent back a sovereign for Mrs. Reed; we three took it to her, and went about saying old Parrifer ought to be kicked, which was a relief to our feelings.

But there's something to tell about Cathy. On the day that Reed was taken up, it was not known at his home immediately. The neighbours, aware that the wife was ill, said nothing to her—for old Duffham thought she was going to have a fever, and ordered her to be kept quiet. For one thing, they did not know what there was to tell; except that Reed had been marched off from his work in handcuffs by Jones the constable. In the evening, when news came of his committal, it was agreed that an excuse should be made to Mrs. Reed that her husband had gone out on a business job for his master; and that Cathy—who could not fail to hear the truth from one or another—should be warned not to say anything.

"Tell Cathy to come out here," said the woman, looking over the gate. It was the little girl they spoke to; who could talk well: and she answered that Cathy was not there. So Ann Perkins, Mrs. Reed's sister, was called out.

"Where's Cathy?" cried they.

Ann Perkins answered in a passion—that she did not know where Cathy was, but would uncommonly like to know, and she only wished she was behind her—keeping her there with

her sister when she ought to be at her own home! Then the women told Ann Perkins what they had intended to tell Cathy, and looked out for the latter.

She did not come back. The night passed, and the next day passed, and Cathy was not seen or heard of. The only person who appeared to have met her was Goody Picker. It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, Tuesday, and Cathy had her best bonnet on. Mother Picker remarked upon her looking so smart, and asked where she was going to. Cathy answered that her uncle (who lived at Evesham) had sent to say she must go over there at once. "But when she came to the two roads, she turned off quite on the contrairy way to Evesham, and I thought the young woman must be daft," concluded Mrs. Picker.

The month passed away, and Reed came out; but Cathy had not returned. He got home on foot, in the afternoon, his hair cut close, and seemed as quiet as a lamb. The man had been daunted. It was an awful insult to put upon him; a slur on his good name for life; and some of them said George Reed would never hold up his head again. Had he been cruel or vindictive, he might have revenged himself on Major Parrifer, personally, in a manner the Major would have found it difficult to forget.

The wife was about again, but sickly: the little ones did not at first know their father. One of the first people he asked after was Cathy. The girl was not at hand to welcome him, and he took it in the light of a reproach. When men come for the first time out of jail, they are sensitive.

"Mr. Sterling called in yesterday, George, to say you were to go to your work again as soon as ever you came home," said the wife, evading the question about Cathy. "Everybody has been so kind; they know you didn't deserve what you got."

"Ah," said Reed, carelessly. "Where's Cathy?"

Mrs. Reed felt obliged to tell him. No diplomatist, she brought out the news abruptly: Cathy had not been seen or heard of since the afternoon he was sent to prison. That aroused Reed: nothing else seemed to have done it: and he got up from his chair.

"Why, where is she? What's become of her?"

The neighbours had been indulging in sundry speculations on the same question, which they had obligingly favoured Mrs. Reed with; but she did not think it necessary to impart them to her husband.

"Cathy was a good girl on the whole, George; putting aside that she'd do no work, and spent her time reading good-for-nothing books. What I think is this—that she heard of your misfortune after she left, and wouldn't come home to face it. She is eighteen now, you know."

"Come home from where?"

Mrs. Reed had to tell the whole truth. That Cathy, dressed up in her best things, had left home without saying a word to any one, stealing out of the house unseen; she had been met in the road by Mrs. Picker, and told her what has already been said. But the uncle at Evesham had seen nothing of her.

Forgetting his cropped hair—as he would have to forget it

until it should grow again—George Reed went tramping off, there and then, the nearly two miles of way to Mother Picker's. She could not tell him much more than he already knew. "Cathy was all in her best, her curls 'iled, and her pink ribbons as fresh as her cheeks, and said in answer to questions that she had been sent for sudden to her uncle's at Evesham: but she had turned off quite the contrairy road." From thence, Reed walked on to his brother's at Evesham; and learnt that Cathy had not been sent for, and had not come.

When Reed got home, he was dead-beat. How many miles the man had walked that bleak February day, he did not stay to think—perhaps twenty. When excitement buoys up the spirit, the body does not feel fatigue. Mrs. Reed put supper before her husband, and he ate mechanically, lost in thought.

"It fairly 'mazes me," he said, presently, in local phraseology. "But for going out in her best, I should think some accident had come to her. There's ponds about, and young girls might slip in unawares. But the putting on her best things shows she was going somewhere."

"She put 'em on, and went off unseen," repeated Mrs. Reed, snuffing the candle. "*I* should have thought she'd maybe gone off to some wake—only there wasn't one agate within range."

"Cathy had no bad acquaintance to lead her astray," he resumed. "The girls about here are decent, and mind their work."

"Which Cathy didn't," thought Mrs. Reed. "Cathy held her head above 'em," she said, aloud. "It's my belief she used to fancy

herself one o' them fine ladies in her halfpenny books. She didn't seem to make acquaintance with nobody but that young Parrifer. She'd talk to him by the hour together, and I couldn't get her indoors."

Reed lifted his head. "Young Parrifer!—what—*his* son?" turning his thumb in the direction of Parrifer Hall. "Cathy talked to him?"

"By the hour together," reiterated Mrs. Reed. "He'd be on that side the gate, a-talking, and laughing, and leaning on it; and Cathy, she'd be in the path by the tall hollyhocks, talking back to him, and fondling the children."

Reed rose up, a strange look on his face. "How long was that going on?"

"Ever so long; I can't just remember. But young Parrifer is only at the Hall by fits and starts."

"And you never told me, woman!"

"I thought no harm of it. I don't think harm of it now," emphatically added Mrs. Reed. "The worst of young Parrifer, that I've seen, is that he's as soft as a tomtit."

Reed put on his hat without another word, and walked out. Late as it was, he was going to the Hall. He rang a peal at it, more like a lord than a labourer just let out of prison. There was some delay in opening the door: the household had gone upstairs; but a man came at last.

"I want to see Major Parrifer."

The words were so authoritative; the man's appearance so

strange, with his tall figure and his clipped hair, as he pushed forward into the hall, that the servant momentarily lost his wits. A light, in a room on the left, guided Reed; he entered it, and found himself face to face with Major Parrifer, who was seated in an easy-chair before a good fire, spirits on the table, and a cigar in his mouth. What with the smoke from that, what with the faint light—for all the candles had been put out but one—the Major did not at first distinguish his late visitor's face. When the bare head and the resolute eyes met his, he certainly paled a little, and the cigar fell on to the carpet.

"I want my daughter, Major Parrifer."

To hear a demand made for a daughter when the Major had possibly been thinking the demand might be for his life, was undoubtedly a relief. It brought back his courage.

"What do you mean, fellow?" he growled, stamping out the fire of the cigar. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Not quite. You might have driven some men out of theirs, though, by what you've done. *We'll let that part be*, Major. I have come to-night about my daughter. Where is she?"

They stood looking at each other. Reed stood just inside the door, hat in hand; he did not forget his manners even in the presence of his enemy; they were a habit with him. The Major, who had risen in his surprise, stared at him: he really knew nothing whatever of the matter, not even that the girl was missing; and he did think Reed's imprisonment must have turned his brain. Perhaps Reed saw that he was not understood.

"I come home from prison, into which you put me, Major Parrifer, to find my daughter Catherine gone. She went away the day I was taken up. Where she went, or what she's doing, Heaven knows; but you or yours are answerable for it, whichever way it may be."

"You have been drinking," said Major Parrifer.

"*You* have, maybe," returned Reed, glancing at the spirits on the table. "Either Cathy went out on a harmless jaunt, and is staying away because she can't face the shame at home which you have put there; or else she went out to meet your son, and has been taken away by him. I think it must be the last; my fears whisper it to me; and, if so, you can't be off knowing something of it. Major Parrifer, I must have my daughter."

Whether the hint given about his son alarmed the Major, causing him to forget his bluster for once, and answer civilly, he certainly did it. His son was in Ireland with his regiment, he said; had not been at the Hall for weeks and weeks; he could answer for it that Lieutenant Parrifer knew nothing of the girl.

"He was here at Christmas," said George Reed. "I saw him."

"And left two or three days after it. How dare you, fellow, charge him with such a thing? He'd wring your neck for you if he were here."

"Perhaps I might find cause to wring his first. Major Parrifer, I want my daughter."

"If you do not get out of my house, I'll have you brought before me to-morrow for trespassing, and give you a second month's

imprisonment," roared the Major, gathering bluster and courage. "You want another month of it: this one does not appear to have done you the good it ought. Now—go!"

"I'll go," said Reed, who began to see the Major really did not know anything of Cathy—and it had not been very probable that he did. "But I'd like to leave a word behind me. You have succeeded in doing me a great injury, Major Parrifer. You are rich and powerful, I am poor and lowly. You set your mind on my bit of a home, and because you could not drive me from it, you took advantage of your magistrate's post to sentence me to prison, and so be revenged. It has done me a great deal of harm. What good has it done you?"

Major Parrifer could not speak for rage.

"It will come home to you, sir, mark me if it does not. God has seen my trouble, and my wife's trouble, and I don't believe He ever let such a wrong pass unrewarded. *It will come home to you, Major Parrifer.*"

George Reed went out, quietly shutting the hall-door behind him, and walked home through the thick flakes of snow that had begun to fall.

V.
COMING HOME TO HIM

The year was getting on. Summer fruits were ripening. It had been a warm spring, and hot weather was upon us early.

One fine Sunday morning, George Reed came out of his cottage and turned up Piefinch Lane. His little girls were with him, one in either hand, in their clean cotton frocks and pinafores and straw hats. People had gone into church, and the bells had ceased. Reed had not been constant in attendance since the misfortune in the winter, when Major Parrifer put him into prison. The month's imprisonment had altered him; his daughter Cathy's mysterious absence had altered him more; he seemed unwilling to face people, and any trifle was made an excuse to himself for keeping away from service. To-day it was afforded by the baby's illness. Reed said to his wife that he would take the little girls out a bit to keep the place quiet.

Rumours were abroad that he had heard once from Cathy; that she told him she should come back some day and surprise him and the neighbours, that she was "all right, and he had no call to fret after her." Whether this was true or pure fiction, Reed did not say: he was a closer man than he used to be.

Lifting the children over a stile in Piefinch Lane, just beyond his garden, Reed strolled along the by-path of the field. It brought

him to the high hedge skirting the premises of Major Parrifer. The man had taken it by chance, because it was a quiet walk. He was passing along slowly, the children running about the field, on which the second crop of grass was beginning to grow, when voices on the other side of the hedge struck on his ear. Reed quietly put some of the foliage aside, and looked through; just as Major Parrifer had looked through the hedge in Piefinch Lane at him, that Sunday morning some few months before.

Major Parrifer had been suffering from a slight temporary indisposition. He did not consider himself sufficiently recovered to attend service, but neither was he ill enough to lie in bed. With the departure of his family for church, the Major had come strolling out in the garden in an airy dressing-gown, and there saw his gardener picking peas.

"Halloa, Hotty! This ought to have been done before."

"Yes, sir, I know it; I'm a little late," answered Hotty; "I shall have done in two or three minutes. The cook makes a fuss if I pick 'em too early; she says they don't eat so well."

The peas were for the gratification of the Major's own palate, so he found no more fault. Hotty went on with his work, and the Major gave a general look round. On a near wall, at right angles with the hedge through which Reed was then peering, some fine apricots were growing, green yet.

"These apricots want thinning, Hotty," observed the Major.

"I have thinned 'em some, sir."

"Not enough. Our apricots were not as fine last year as they

ought to have been. I said then they had not had sufficient room to grow. Green apricots are always useful; they make the best tart known."

Major Parrifer walked to the greenhouse, outside which a small basket was hanging, brought it back, and began to pick some of the apricots where they looked too thick. Reed, outside, watched the process—not alone. As luck had it, a man appeared on the field-path, who proved to be Gruff Blossom, the Jacobsons' groom, coming home to spend Sunday with his friends. Reed made a sign to Blossom to be silent, and caused him to look on also.

With the small basket half full, the Major desisted, thinking possibly he had plucked enough, and turned away carrying it. Hotty came out from the peas, his task finished. They strolled slowly down the path by the hedge; the Major first, Hotty a step behind, talking about late and early peas, and whether Prussian blues or marrowfats were the best eating.

"Do you see those weeds in the onion-bed?" suddenly asked the Major, stopping as they were passing it.

Hotty turned his head to look. A few weeds certainly had sprung up. He'd attend to it on the morrow, he told his master; and then said something about the work accumulating almost beyond him, since the under-gardener had been at home ill.

"Pick them out now," said the Major; "there's not a dozen of them."

Hotty stooped to do as he was bid. The Major made no more

ado but stooped also, uprooting quite half the weeds himself. Not much more, in all, than the dozen he had spoken of: and then they went on with their baskets to the house.

Never had George Reed experienced so much gratification since the day he came out of prison. "Did you see the Major at it?—thinning his apricots and pulling up his weeds?" he asked of Gruff Blossom. And Blossom's reply, gruff as usual, was to ask what might be supposed to ail his eyes that he shouldn't see it.

"Very good," said Reed.

One evening in the following week, when we were sitting out on the lawn, the Squire smoking, Mrs. Todhetley nursing her face in her hand, with toothache as usual, Tod teasing Hugh and Lena, and I up in the beech-tree, a horseman rode in. It proved to be Mr. Jacobson. Giles took his horse, and he came and sat down on the bench. The Squire asked him what he'd take, and being thirsty, he chose cider. Which Thomas brought.

"Here's a go," began Mr. Jacobson. "Have you heard what's up?"

"I've not heard anything," answered the Squire.

"Major Parrifer has a summons served on him for working in his garden on a Sunday, and is to appear before the magistrates at Alcester to-morrow," continued old Jacobson, drinking off a glass of cider at a draught.

"No!" cried Squire Todhetley.

"It's a fact. Blossom, our groom, has also a summons served on him to give evidence."

Mrs. Todhetley lifted her face; Tod left Hugh and Lena to themselves: I slid down from the beech-tree; and we listened for more.

But Mr. Jacobson could not give particulars, or say much more than he had already said. All he knew was, that on Monday morning George Reed had appeared before the magistrates and made a complaint. At first they were unwilling to grant a summons; laughed at it; but Reed, in a burst of reproach, civilly delivered, asked why there should be a law for the poor and not for the rich, and in what lay the difference between himself and Major Parrifer; that the one should be called to account and punished for doing wrong, and the other was not even to be accused when he had done it.

"Brandon happened to be on the bench," continued Jacobson. "He appeared struck with the argument, and signed the summons."

The Squire nodded.

"My belief is," continued old Jacobson, with a wink over the rim of the cider glass, "that granting that summons was as good as a play to Brandon and the rest. I'd as lieve, though, that they'd not brought Blossom into it."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Todhetley, who had been grieved at the time at the injustice done to Reed.

"Well, Parrifer is a disagreeable man to offend. And he is sure to visit Blossom's part in this on me."

"Let him," said Tod, with enthusiasm. "Well done, George

Reed!"

Be you very sure we went over to the fight. Squire Todhetley did not appear: at which Tod exploded a little: he only wished *he* was a magistrate, wouldn't he take his place and judge the Major! But the Pater said that when people had lived to his age, they liked to be at peace with their neighbours—not but what he hoped Parrifer would "get it," for having been so cruelly hard upon Reed.

Major Parrifer came driving to the Court-house in his high carriage with a great bluster, his iron-grey hair standing up, and two grooms attending him. Only the magistrates who had granted the summons sat. The news had gone about like wild-fire, and several of them were in and about the town, but did not take their places. I don't believe there was one would have lifted his finger to save the Major from a month's imprisonment; but they did not care to sentence him to it.

It was a regular battle. Major Parrifer was in an awful passion the whole time; asking, when he came in, how they dared summon him. *Him!* Mr. Brandon, cool as a cucumber, answered in his squeaky voice, that when a complaint of breaking the law was preferred before them and sworn to by witnesses, they could only act upon it.

First of all, the Major denied the facts. *He* work in his garden on a Sunday!—the very supposition was preposterous! Upon which George Reed, who was in his best clothes, and looked every bit as good as the Major, and far pleasanter, testified to

what he had seen.

Major Parrifer, dancing with temper when he found he had been looked at through the hedge, and that it was Reed who had looked, gave the lie direct. He called his gardener, Richard Hotty, ordering him to testify whether he, the Major, ever worked in his garden, either on Sundays or week-days.

"Hotty was working himself, gentlemen," interposed George Reed. "He was picking peas; and he helped to weed the onion-bed. But it was done by his master's orders, so it would be unjust to punish him."

The Major turned on Reed as if he would strike him, and demanded of the magistrates why they permitted the fellow to interrupt. They ordered Reed to be quiet, and told Hotty to proceed.

But Hotty was one of those slow men to whom anything like evasion is difficult. His master had thinned the apricot tree that Sunday morning; he had helped to weed the onion-bed; Hotty, conscious of the fact, but not liking to admit it, stammered and stuttered, and made a poor figure of himself. Mr. Brandon thought he would help him out.

"Did you see your master pick the apricots?"

"I see him pick—just a few; green 'uns," answered Hotty, shuffling from one leg to the other in his perplexity. "'Twarn't to be called work, sir."

"Oh! And did he help you to weed the onion-bed?"

"There warn't a dozen weeds in it in all, as the Major said

to me at the time," returned Hotty. "He see 'em, and stooped down on the spur o' the moment, and me too. We had 'em up in a twinkling. 'Twarn't work, sir; couldn't be called it nohow. The Major, he never do work at no time."

Blossom had not arrived, and it was hard to tell how the thing would terminate: the Major had this witness, Hotty, such as he was, protesting that nothing to be called work was done. Reed had no witness, as yet.

"Old Jacobson is keeping Blossom back, Johnny," whispered Tod. "It's a sin and a shame."

"No, he is not," I said. "Look there!"

Blossom was coming in. He had walked over, and not hurried himself. Major Parrifer plunged daggers into him, if looks could do it, but it made no difference to Blossom.

He gave his evidence in his usual surly manner. It was clear and straightforward. Major Parrifer had thinned the apricot tree for its own benefit; and had weeded the onion-bed, Hotty helping at the weeds by order.

"What brought *you* spying at the place, James Blossom?" demanded a lawyer on the Major's behalf.

"Accident," was the short answer.

"Indeed! You didn't go there on purpose, I suppose?—and skulk under the hedge on purpose?—and peer into the Major's garden on purpose?"

"No, I didn't," said Blossom. "The field is open to every one, and I was crossing it on my way to old father's. George Reed

made me a sign afore I came up to him, to look in, as he was doing; and I did so, not knowing what there might be to see. It would be nothing to me if the Major worked in his garden of a Sunday from sunrise to sunset; he's welcome to do it; but if you summon me here and ask me, did I see him working, I say yes, I did. Why d'you send me a summons if you don't want me to tell the truth? Let me be, and I'd ha' said nothing to mortal man."

Evidently nothing favourable to the defence could be got out of James Blossom. Mr. Brandon began saying to the Major that he feared there was no help for it; they should be obliged to convict him: and he was met by a storm of reproach.

Convict him! roared the Major. For having picked two or three green apricots—and for stooping to pull up a couple or so of worthless weeds? He would be glad to ask which of them, his brother-magistrates sitting there, would not pick an apricot, or a peach, or what not, on a Sunday, if he wanted to eat one. The thing was utterly preposterous.

"And what was it *I* did?" demanded George Reed, drowning voices that would have stopped him. "I went to the garden to get up a bunch of turnips for my sick wife, and seeing some withered weeds flung on the bed I drew them off with the hoe. What was that, I ask? And it was no more. No more, gentlemen, in the sight of Heaven."

No particular answer was given to this; perhaps the justices had none ready. Mr. Brandon was beginning to confer with the other two in an undertone, when Reed spoke again.

"I was dragged up here in handcuffs, and told I had broken the law; Major Parrifer said to me himself that I had violated the sanctity of the Sabbath (those were the words), and therefore I must be punished; there was no help for it. What has he done? I did not do as much as he has."

"Now you know, Reed, this is irregular," said one of the justices. "You must not interrupt the Court."

"You put me in prison for a month, gentlemen," resumed Reed, paying no attention to the injunction. "They cut my hair close in the prison, and they kept me to hard labour for the month, as if I did not have enough of hard labour out of it. My wife was sick and disabled at the time, my three little children are helpless: it was no thanks to the magistrates who sentenced me, gentlemen, or to Major Parrifer, that they did not starve."

"Will you be quiet, Reed?"

"If I deserved one month of prison," persisted Reed, fully bent on saying what he had to say, "Major Parrifer must deserve two months, for his offence is greater than mine. The law is the same for both of us, I suppose. He–"

"Reed, if you say another word, I will order you at once from the room," interrupted Mr. Brandon, his thin voice sharp and determined. "How dare you persist in addressing the Bench when told to be quiet!"

Reed fell back and said no more. He knew that Mr. Brandon had a habit of carrying out his own authority, in spite of his nervous health and querulous way of speaking. The justices

spoke a few words together, and then said they found the offence proved, and inflicted a fine on Major Parrifer.

He dashed the money down on the table, in too great a rage to do it politely, and went out to his carriage. No other case was on, that day, and the justices got up and mixed with the crowd. Mr. Brandon, who felt chilly on the hottest summer's day, and was afraid of showers, buttoned on a light overcoat.

"Then there are *two* laws, sir?" said Reed to him, quite civilly, but in a voice that every one might hear. "When the law was made against Sabbath-breaking, those that made it passed one for the rich and another for the poor!"

"Nonsense, Reed."

"*Nonsense*, sir? I don't see it. *I* was put in prison; Major Parrifer has only to pay a bit of money, which is of no more account to him than dirt, and that he can't feel the loss of. And my offence—if it was an offence—was less than his."

"Two wrongs don't make a right," said Mr. Brandon, dropping his voice to a low key. "You ought not to have been put in prison, Reed; had I been on the bench it should not have been done."

"But it was done, sir, and my life got a blight on it. It's on me yet; will never be lifted off me."

Mr. Brandon smiled one of his quiet smiles, and spoke in a whisper. "He has got it too, Reed, unless I am mistaken. He'll carry that fine about with him always. Johnny, are you there? Don't go and repeat what you've heard me say."

Mr. Brandon was right. To have been summoned before the

Bench, where he had pompously sat to summon others, and for working on a Sunday above all things, to have been found guilty and fined, was as the most bitter potion to Major Parrifer. The bench would never again be to him the seat it had been; the remembrance of the day when he was before it would, as Mr. Brandon expressed it, be carried about with him always.

They projected a visit to the sea-side at once. Mrs. Parrifer, with three of the Miss Parrifers, came dashing up to people's houses in the carriage, finer and louder than ever; she said that she had not been well, and was ordered to Aberystwith for six weeks. The next day they and the Major were off; and heaps of cards were sent round with "P. P. C." in the corner. I think Mr. Brandon must have laughed when he got his.

The winter holidays came round again. We went home for Christmas, as usual, and found George Reed down with some sort of illness. There's an old saying, "When the mind's at ease the body's delicate," but Mr. Duffham always maintained that though that might apply to a short period of time, in the long-run mind and body sympathized together. George Reed had been a very healthy man, and as free from care as most people; this last year care and trouble and mortification had lain on his mind, and at the beginning of winter his health broke down. It was quite a triumph (in the matter of opinion) for old Duffham.

The illness began with a cough and low fever, neither of which can labourers afford time to lie up for. It went on to more fever, and to inflammation of the lungs. There was no choice then,

and Reed took to his bed. For the most part, when our poor people fell ill, they had to get well again without notice being taken of them; but events had drawn attention to Reed, and made him a conspicuous character. His illness was talked of, and so he received help. Ever since the prison affair I had felt sorry for Reed, as had Mrs. Todhetley.

"I have had some nice strong broth made for Reed, Johnny," she said to me one day in January; "it's as good and nourishing as beef-tea. If you want a walk, you might take it to him."

Tod had gone out with the Squire; I felt dull, as I generally did without him, and put on my hat and coat. Mrs. Todhetley had the broth put into a bottle, and brought it to me wrapped in paper.

"I would send him a drop of wine as well, Johnny, if you'd take care not to break the bottles, carrying two of them."

No fear. I put the one bottle in my breast-pocket, and took the other in my hand. It was a cold afternoon, the sky of a steely-blue, the sun bright, the ground hard. Major Parrifer and two of his daughters, coming home from a ride, were cantering in at the gates as I passed, the groom riding after them. I lifted my hat to the girls, but they only tossed their heads.

Reed was getting over the worst then, and I found him sitting by the kitchen fire, muffled in a bed-rug. Mrs. Reed took the bottles from me in the back'us—as they called the place where the washing was done—for Reed was sensitive, and did not like things to be sent to him.

"Please God, I shall be at work next week," said Reed, with a

groan: and I saw he knew that I had brought something.

He had been saying that all along; four or five weeks now. I sat down opposite to him, and took up the boy, Georgy. The little shaver had come round to me, holding by the chairs.

"It's going to be a hard frost, Reed."

"Is it, sir? Out-o'-door weather don't seem to be of much odds to me now."

"And a fall o' some sort's not far off, as my wrist tells me," put in Mrs. Reed. Years ago she had broken her wrist, and felt it always in change of weather. "Maybe some snow's coming."

I gave Georgy a biscuit; the two little girls, who had been standing against the press, began to come slowly forward. They guessed there was a supply in my pocket. I had dipped into the biscuit-basket at home before coming away. The two put out a hand each without being told, and I dropped a biscuit into them.

It had taken neither time nor noise, and yet there was some one standing inside the door when I looked up again, who must have come in stealthily; some one in a dark dress, and a black and white plaid shawl. Mrs. Reed looked and the children looked; and then Reed turned his head to look also.

I think I was the first to know her. She had a thick black veil before her face, and the room was not light. Reed's illness had left him thin, and his eyes appeared very large: they assumed a sort of frightened stare.

"Father! you are sick!"

Before he could answer, she had run across the brick floor

and thrown her arms round his neck. Cathy! The two girls were frightened and flew to their mother; one began to scream and the other followed suit. Altogether there was a good deal of noise and commotion. Georgy, like a brave little man, sucked his biscuit through it all with great composure.

What Reed said or did, I had not noticed; I think he tried to fling Cathy from him—to avoid suffocation perhaps. She burst out laughing in her old light manner, and took something out of the body of her gown, under the shawl.

"No need, father: I am as honest as anybody," said she. "Look at this."

Reed's hand shook so that he could not open the paper, or understand it at first when he had opened it. Cathy flung off her bonnet and caught the children to her. They began to know her then and ceased their cries. Presently Reed held the paper across to me, his hand trembling more than before, and his face, that illness had left white enough, yet more ghastly with emotion.

"Please read it, sir."

I did not understand it at first either, but the sense came to me soon. It was a certificate of the marriage of Spencer Gervoise Daubeney Parrifer and Catherine Reed. They had been married at Liverpool the very day after Cathy disappeared from home; now just a year ago.

A sound of sobbing broke the stillness. Reed had fallen back in his chair in a sort of hysterical fit. Defiant, hard, strong-minded Reed! But the man was three parts dead from weakness. It lasted

only a minute or two; he roused himself as if ashamed, and swallowed down his sobs.

"How came he to marry you, Cathy?"

"Because I would not go away with him without it father. We have been staying in Ireland."

"And be you repenting of it yet?" asked Mrs. Reed, in ungracious tones.

"Pretty near," answered Cathy, with candour.

It appeared that Cathy had made her way direct to Liverpool when she left home the previous January, travelling all night. There she met young Parrifer, who had preceded her and made arrangements for the marriage. They were married that day, and afterwards went on to Ireland, where he had to join his regiment.

To hear all this, sounding like a page out of a romance, would be something wonderful for our quiet place when it came to be told. You meet with marvellous stories in towns now and then, but with us they are almost unknown.

"Where's your husband?" asked Reed.

Cathy tossed her head. "Ah! Where! That's what I've come home about," she answered: and it struck me at once that something was wrong.

What occurred next we only learnt from hearsay. I said good day to them, and came away, thinking it might have been better if Cathy had not married and left home. It was a fancy of mine, and I don't know why it should have come to me, but it proved to be a right one. Cathy put on her bonnet again to go to Parrifer

Hall: and the particulars of her visit were known abroad later.

It was growing rather dark when she approached it; the sun had set, the grey of evening was drawing on. Two of the Misses Parrifer were at the window and saw her coming, but Cathy had her veil down and they did not recognize her. The actions and manners and air of a lady do not come suddenly to one who has been differently bred; and the Misses Parrifer supposed the visitor to be for the servants.

"Like her impudence!" said Miss Jemima. "Coming to the front entrance!"

For Cathy, whose year's experience in Ireland had widely changed her, had no notion of taking up her old position. She meant to hold her own; and was capable of doing it, not being deficient in the quality just ascribed to her by Miss Jemima Parrifer.

"What next!" cried Miss Jemima, as a ring and a knock resounded through the house, waking up the Major: who had been dozing over the fire amongst his daughters.

The next was, that a servant came to the room and told the Major a lady wanted him. She had been shown into the library.

"What name?" asked the Major.

"She didn't give none, sir. I asked, but she said never mind the name."

"Go and ask it again."

The man went and came back. "It is Mrs. Parrifer, sir."

"Mrs. who?"

"Mrs. Parrifer, sir."

The Major turned and stared at his servant. They had no relatives whatever. Consequently the only Mrs. Parrifer within knowledge was his wife.

Staring at the man would not bring him any elucidation. Major Parrifer went to the library, and there saw the lady standing on one side of the fender, holding her foot to the fire. She had her back to him, did not turn, and so the Major went round to the other side of the hearth-rug where he could see her.

"My servant told me a Mrs. Parrifer wanted me. Did he make a mistake in the name?"

"No mistake at all, sir," said Cathy, throwing up her thick veil, and drawing a step or two back. "I am Mrs. Parrifer."

The Major recognized her then. Cathy Reed! He was a man whose bluster rarely failed him, but he had none ready at that moment. Three-parts astounded, various perplexities held him tongue-tied.

"That is to say, Mrs. Spencer Parrifer," continued Cathy. "And I have come over from Ireland on a mission to you, sir, from your son."

The Major thought that of all the audacious women it had ever been his lot to meet, this one was the worst: at least as much as he could think anything, for his wits were a little confused just then. A moment's pause, and then the storm burst forth.

Cathy was called various agreeable names, and ordered out of the room and the house. The Major put up his hands to "hurrish"

her out—as we say in Worcestershire by the cows, though I don't think you would find the word in the dictionary. But Cathy stood her ground. He then went ranting towards the door, calling for the servants to come and put her forth. Cathy, quicker than he, gained it first and turned to face him, her back against it.

"You needn't call me those names, Major Parrifer. Not that I care—as I might if I deserved them. I am your son's wife, and have been such ever since I left father's cottage last year; and my baby, your grandson, sir, which it's seven weeks old he is, is now at the Red Lion, a mile off. I've left it there with the landlady."

He could not put her out of the room unless by force; he looked ready to kick and strike her; but in the midst of it a horrible dread rose up in his heart that the calmly spoken words were true. Perhaps from the hour when Reed had presented himself at the house to ask for his daughter, the evening of the day he was discharged from prison, up to this time, Major Parrifer had never thought of the girl. It had been said in his ears now and again that Reed was grieving for his daughter; but the matter was altogether too contemptible for Major Parrifer to take note of. And now to hear that the girl had been with his son all the time, his wife! But that utter disbelief came to his aid, the Major might have fallen into a fit on the spot. For young Mr. Parrifer had cleverly contrived that neither his father away at home nor his friends on the spot should know anything about Cathy. He had been with his regiment in quarters; she had lived privately in another part of the town. Mrs. Reed had once called Lieutenant

Parrifer as soft as a tomtit. He was a great deal softer.

"Woman! if you do not quit my house, with your shameless lies, you shall be flung out of it."

"I'll quit it as soon as I have told you what I came over the sea to tell. Please to look at this first, sir?"

Major Parrifer snatched the paper that she held out, carried it to the window, and put his glasses across his nose. It was a copy of the certificate of marriage. His hands shook as he read it, just as Reed's had shaken a short time before; and he tore it passionately in two.

"It is only the copy," said Cathy calmly, as she picked up the pieces. "Your son—if he lives—is about to be tried for his life, sir. He is in custody for wilful murder!"

"How dare you!" shrieked Major Parrifer.

"It is what they have charged him with. I have come all the way to tell it you, sir."

Major Parrifer, brought to his senses by fright, could only listen. Cathy, her back against the door still, gave him the heads of the story.

Young Parrifer was so soft that he had been made a butt of by sundry of his brother-officers. They might not have tolerated him at all, but for winning his money. He drank, and played cards, and bet upon horses; they encouraged him to drink, and then made him play and bet, and altogether cleared him out: not of brains, he had none to be cleared of: but of money. Ruin stared him in the face: his available cash had been parted with long ago; his

commission (it was said) was mortgaged: how many promissory notes, bills, I O U's he had signed could not even be guessed at. In a quarrel a few nights before, after a public-house supper, when some of them were the worse for drink, young Parrifer, who could on rare occasions go into frightful passions, flung a carving-knife at one of the others, a lieutenant named Cook; it struck a vital part and killed him. Mr. Parrifer was arrested by the police at once; he was in plain clothes and there was nothing to show that he was an officer. They had to strap him down to carry him to prison: between drink, rage, and fever, he was as a maniac. The next morning he was lying in brain fever, and when Cathy left he had been put into a strait-waistcoat.

She gave the heads of this account in as few words as it is written. Major Parrifer stood like a helpless man. Taking one thing with another, the blow was horrible. Parents don't often see the defects in their own children, especially if they are only sons. Far from having thought his son soft, unfit (as he nearly was) to be trusted about, the Major had been proud of him as his heir, and told the world he was perfection. Soft as young Parrifer was, he had contrived to keep his ill-doings from his father.

Of course it was only natural that the Major's first relief should be abuse of Cathy. He told her all that had happened to his son *she* was the cause of, and called her a few more genteel names in doing it.

"Not at all," said Cathy; "you are wrong there, sir. His marriage with me was a little bit of a stop-gap and served to keep

him straight for a month or two; but for that, he would have done for himself before now. Do you think I've had a bargain in him, sir? No. Marriage is a thing that can't be undone, Major Parrifer: but I wish to my heart that I was at home again in father's cottage, light-hearted Cathy Reed."

The Major made no answer. Cathy went on.

"When the news was brought to me by his servant, that he had killed a man and was lying raving, I thought it time to go and see about him. They would not let me into the lock-up where he was lying—and you might have heard his ravings outside. *I* did. I said I was his wife; and then they told me I had better see Captain Williams. I went to head-quarters and saw Captain Williams. He seemed to doubt me; so I showed him the certificate, and told him my baby was at home, turned six weeks old. He was very kind then, sir; took me to see my husband; and advised me to come over here at once and give you the particulars. I told him what was the truth—that I had no money, and the lodgings were owing for. He said the lodgings must wait: and he would lend me enough money for the journey."

"Did you see him?" growled Major Parrifer.

Cathy knew that he alluded to his son, though he would not speak the name.

"I saw him, sir; I told you so. He did not know me or anybody else; he was raving mad, and shaking so that the bed shook under him."

"How is it that they have not written to me?" demanded Major

Parrifer.

"I don't think anybody liked to do it. Captain Williams said the best plan would be for me to come over. He asked me if I'd like to hear the truth of the past as regarded my husband; or if I would just come here and tell you the bare facts that were known about his illness and the charge against him. I said I'd prefer to hear the truth—it couldn't be worse than I suspected. Then he went on to the drinking and the gambling and the debts, just as I have repeated it to you, sir. He was very gentle; but he said he thought it would be mistaken kindness not to let me fully understand the state of things. He said Mr. Parrifer's father, or some other friend, had better go over to Ireland."

In spite of himself, a groan escaped Major Parrifer. The blow was the worst that could have fallen upon him. He had not cared much for his daughters; his ambition was centred in his son. Visions of a sojourn at Dublin, and of figuring off at the Vice-Regal Court, himself, his wife, and his son, had floated occasionally in rose-coloured clouds before his eyes, poor pompous old simpleton. And now—to picture the visit he must set out upon ere the night was over, nearly drove him wild with pain. Cathy unlatched the door, but waited to speak again before she opened it.

"I'll rid the house of me now that I have broke it to you, sir. If you want me I shall be found at father's cottage; I suppose they'll let me stay there: if not, you can hear of me at the place where I've left my baby. And if your son should ever wake out of his

delirium, Major Parrifer, he will be able to tell you that if he had listened to me and heeded me, or even only come to spend his evenings with me—which it's months since he did—he would not have been in this plight now. Should they try him for murder; and nothing can save him from it if he gets well; I–"

A succession of screams cut short what Cathy was about to add. In her surprise she drew wide the door, and was confronted by Miss Jemima Parrifer. That young lady, curious upon the subject of the visit and visitor, had thought it well to put her ear to the library door. With no effect, however, until Cathy unlatched it. And then she heard more than she had thought for.

"Is it *you*!" roughly cried Miss Jemima, recognizing her for the ill-talked-of Cathy Reed, the daughter of the Major's enemy. "What do you want here?"

Cathy did not answer. She walked to the hall-door and let herself out. Miss Jemima went on into the library.

"Papa, what was it she was saying about Spencer, that vile girl? What did she do here? Why did she send in her name as Mrs. Parrifer?"

The Major might have heard the questions, or he might not; he didn't respond to them. Miss Jemima, looking closely at him in the darkness of the room, saw a grey, worn, terror-stricken face, that looked as her father's had never looked yet.

"Oh, papa! what is the matter? Are you ill?"

He walked towards her in the quietest manner possible, took her arm and pushed her out at the door. Not rudely; softly, as one

might do who is in a dream.

"Presently, presently," he muttered in quite an altered voice, low and timid. And Miss Jemima found the door bolted against her.

It must have been an awful moment with him. Look on what side he would, there was no comfort. Spencer Parrifer was ruined past redemption. He might die in this illness, and then, what of his soul? Not that the Major was given to that kind of reflection. Escaping the illness, he must be tried—for his life, as Cathy had phrased it. And escaping that, if the miracle were possible, there remained the miserable debts and the miserable wife he had clogged himself with.

Curiously enough, as the miserable Major, most miserable in that moment, pictured these things, there suddenly rose up before his mind's eye another picture. A remembrance of Reed, who had stood in that very room less than twelve months ago, in the dim light of late night, with his hair cut close, and his warning: "*It will come home to you, Major Parrifer.*" *Had* it come home to him? Home to him already? The drops of agony broke out on his face as he asked the question. It seemed to him, in that moment of excitement, so very like some of Heaven's own lightning.

One grievous portion of the many ills had perhaps not fallen, but for putting Reed in prison—the marriage; and that one was more humiliating to Major Parrifer's spirit than all the rest. Had Reed been at liberty, Cathy might not have made her escape untracked, and the bitter marriage might, in that case, have been

avoided.

A groan, and now another, broke from the Major. How it had come home to him! not his selfishness and his barbarity and his pride, but this sorrowful blow. Reed's month in prison, compared with this, was as a drop of water to the ocean. As to the girl—when Reed had come asking for tidings of her, it had seemed to the Major not of the least moment whither she had gone or what ill she had entered on: was she not a common labourer's daughter, and that labourer George Reed? Even then, at that very time, she was his daughter-in-law, and his son the one to be humiliated. Major Parrifer ground his teeth, and only stopped when he remembered that something must be done about that disgraceful son.

He started that night for Ireland. Cathy, affronted at some remark made by Mrs. Reed, took herself off from her father's cottage. She had a little money still left from her journey, and could spend it.

Spencer Gervoise Daubeney Parrifer (the Major and his wife had bestowed the fine names upon him in pride at his baptism) died in prison. He lived only a day after Major Parrifer's arrival, and never recognized him. Of course it saved the trial, when he would probably have been convicted of manslaughter. It saved the payment of his hundreds of debts too; post-obits and all; he died before his father. But it could not save exposure; it could not keep the facts from the world. Major and Mrs. Parrifer, so to say, would never lift up their heads again; the sun of their life had set.

Neither would Cathy lift hers yet awhile. She contrived to quarrel with her father; the Parrifers never took the remotest notice of her; she was nearly starved and her baby too. What little she earned was by hard work: but it would not keep her, and she applied to the parish. The parish in turn applied to Major Parrifer, and forced from him as much as the law allowed, a few shillings a week. Having to apply to the parish was, for Cathy, a humiliation never to be forgotten. The neighbours made their comments.

"Cathy Reed had brought her pigs to a fine market!"

So she had; and she felt it more than the loss of her baby, who died soon after. Better that she had married an honest day-labourer: and Cathy knew it now.

VI.
LEASE, THE POINTSMAN

It happened when we were staying at our other house, Crabb Cot. In saying "we" were staying at it, I mean the family, for Tod and I were at school.

Crabb Cot lay beyond the village of Crabb. Just across the road, a few yards higher up, was the large farm of Mr. Coney; and his house and ours were the only two that stood there. Crabb Cot was a smaller and more cosy house than Dyke Manor; and, when there, we were not so very far from Worcester: less than half-way, comparing it with the Manor.

Crabb was a large and straggling parish. North Crabb, which was nearest to us, had the church and schools in it, but very few houses. South Crabb, further off, was more populous. Nearly a mile beyond South Crabb, there was a regular junction of rails. Lines, crossing each other in a most bewildering manner, led off in all directions: and it required no little manœuvring to send the trains away right at busy times. Which of course was the pointsman's affair.

The busiest days had place in summer, when excursion trains were in full swing: but they would come occasionally at other times, driving the South Crabb station people off their heads with bother before night.

The pointsman was Harry Lease. I dare say you have noticed how certain names seem to belong to certain places. At North Crabb and South Crabb, and in the district round about, the name of Lease was as common as blackberries in a hedge; and if the different Leases had been cousins in the days gone by, the relationship was lost now. There might be seven-and-twenty Leases, in and out, but Harry Lease was not, so far as he knew, akin to any of them.

South Crabb was not much of a place at best. A part of it, Crabb Lane, branching off towards Massock's brickfields, was crowded as a London street. Poor dwellings were huddled together, and children jostled each other on the door-steps. Squire Todhetley said he remembered it when it really was a lane, hedges on either side and a pond that was never dry. Harry Lease lived in the last house, a thatched hut with three rooms in it. He was a steady, civil, hard-working man, superior to some of his neighbours, who were given to reeling home at night and beating their wives on arrival. His wife, a nice sort of woman to talk to, was a bad manager; but the five children were better behaved and better kept than the other grubbers in the gutter.

Lease was the pointsman at South Crabb Junction, and helped also in the general business there. He walked to his work at six in the morning, carrying his breakfast with him; went home to dinner at twelve, the leisure part of the day at the station, and had his tea taken to him at four; leaving in general at nine. Sometimes his wife arrived with the tea; sometimes the eldest child, Polly,

an intelligent girl of six. But, one afternoon in September, a crew of mischievous boys from the brickfields espied what Polly was carrying. They set upon her, turned over the can of tea in fighting for it, ate the bread-and-butter, tore her pinafore in the skirmish, and frightened her nearly to death. After that, Lease said that the child should not be sent with the tea: so, when his wife could not take it, he went without tea. Polly and her father were uncommonly alike, too quiet to battle much with the world: sensitive, in fact: though it sounds odd to say that.

During the month of November one of the busy days occurred at South Crabb Junction. There was a winter meeting on Worcester race-course, a cattle and pig show in a town larger than Worcester, and two or three markets and other causes of increased traffic, all falling on the same day. What with cattle-trains, ordinary and special trains, and goods-trains, and the grunting of obstinate pigs, Lease had plenty to do to keep his points in order.

How it fell out he never knew. Between eight and nine o'clock, when a train was expected in on its way to Worcester, Lease forgot to shift the points. A goods-train had come in ten minutes before, for which he had had to turn the points, and he never turned them back again. On came the train, almost as quickly as though it had not to pull up at South Crabb Junction. Watson, the station-master, came out to be in readiness.

"The engine has her steam on to-night," he remarked to Lease as he watched the red lights, like two great eyes, come tearing

on. “She’ll have to back.”

She did something worse than back. Instead of slackening on the near lines, she went flying off at a tangent to some outer ones on which the goods-train stood, waiting until the passenger train should pass. There was a short, sharp sound from the whistle, a great collision, a noise of steam hissing, a sense of dire confusion: and for one minute afterwards a dead lull, as if every one and everything were paralyzed.

“You never turned the points!” shouted the station-master to Lease.

Lease made no rejoinder. He backed against the wall like a man helpless, his arms stretched out, his face and eyes wild with horror. Watson thought he was going to have a fit, and shook him roughly.

“*You’ve* done it nicely, you have!” he added, as he flew off to the scene of disaster, from which the steam was beginning to clear away. But Lease reached it before him.

“God forgive me! God have mercy upon me!”

A porter, running side by side with Lease, heard him say it. In telling it afterwards the man described the tone as one of intense, piteous agony.

The Squire and Mrs. Todhetley, who had been a few miles off to spend the day, were in the train with Lena. The child did nothing but cry and sob; not with damage, but fright. Mr. Coney also happened to be in it; and Massock, who owned the brickfields. They were not hurt at all, only a little shaken, and

(as the Squire put it afterwards,) mortally scared. Massock, an under-bred man, who had grown rich by his brickfields, was more pompous than a lord. The three seized upon the station-master.

"Now then, Watson," cried Mr. Coney, "what was the cause of all this?"

"If there have been any negligence here—and I know there have—you shall be transported for it, Watson, as sure as I'm a living man," roared Massock.

"I'm afraid, gentlemen, that something was wrong with the points," acknowledged Watson, willing to shift the blame from himself, and too confused to consider policy. "At least that's all I can think."

"With the points!" cried Massock. "Them's Harry Lease's work. Was he on to-night?"

"Lease is here as usual, Mr. Massock. I don't say this lies at his door," added Watson, hastily. "The points might have been out of order; or something else wrong totally different. I should like to know, for my part, what possessed Roberts to bring up his train at such speed."

Darting in and out of the heap of confusion like a mad spirit; now trying by his own effort to lift the broken parts of carriages off some sufferer, now carrying a poor fellow away to safety, but always in the thick of danger went Harry Lease. Braving the heat and steam as though he felt them not, he flew everywhere, himself and his lantern alike trembling with agitation.

"Come and look here, Harry; I'm afraid he's dead," said a porter, throwing his light upon a man's face. The words arrested Mr. Todhetley, who was searching for Lease to let off a little of his anger. It was Roberts, the driver of the passenger-train, who lay there, his face white and still. Somehow the sight made the Squire still, too. Raising Roberts's head, the men put a drop of brandy between his lips, and he moved. Lease broke into a low glad cry.

"He is not dead! he is not dead!"

The angry reproaches died away on the Squire's tongue: it did not seem quite the time to speak them. By-and-by he came upon Lease again. The man had halted to lean against some palings, feeling unaccountably strange, much as though the world around were closing to him.

"Had you been drinking to-night, Lease?"

The question was put quietly: which was, so to say, a feather in the hot Squire's cap. Lease only shook his head by way of answer. He had a pale, gentle kind of face, with brown eyes that always wore a sad expression. He never drank, and the Squire knew it.

"Then how came you to neglect the points, Lease, and cause this awful accident?"

"I don't know, sir," answered Lease, rousing out of his lethargy, but speaking as one in a dream. "I can't think but what I turned them as usual."

"You knew the train was coming? It was the ordinary train."

"I knew it was coming," assented Lease. "I watched it come

along, standing by the side of Mr. Watson. If I had not set the points right, why, I should have thought surely of them then; it stands to reason I should. But never such a thought came into my mind, sir. I waited there, just as if all was right; and I believe I *did* shift the points."

Lease did not put this forth as an excuse: he only spoke aloud the problem that was working in his mind. Having shifted the points regularly for five years, it seemed simply impossible that he could have neglected it now. And yet the man could not *remember* to have done it this evening.

"You can't call it to mind?" said Squire Todhetley, repeating his last words.

"No, I can't, sir: and no wonder, with all this confusion around me and the distress I'm in. I may be able to do so to-morrow."

"Now look you here, Lease," said the Squire, getting just a little cross: "if you had put the points right you couldn't fail to remember it. And what causes your distress, I should like to ask, but the knowledge that you *didn't*, and that all this wreck is owing to you?"

"There is such a thing as doing things mechanically, sir, without the mind being conscious of it."

"Doing things wilfully," roared the Squire. "Do you want to tell me I am a fool to my face?"

"It has often happened, sir, that when I have wound up the mantel-shelf clock at night in our sleeping-room, I'll not know the next minute whether I've wound it or not, and I have to try

it again, or else ask the wife," went on Lease, looking straight out into the darkness, as if he could see the clock then. "I can't think but what it must have been just in that way that I put the points right to-night."

Squire Todhetley, in his anger, which was growing hot again, felt that he should like to give Lease a sound shaking. He had no notion of such talk as this.

"I don't know whether you are a knave or a fool, Lease. Killing men and women and children; breaking arms and legs; putting a whole trainful into mortal fright; smashing property and engines to atoms; turning the world, in fact, upside down, so that people don't know whether they stand on their heads or their heels! You may think you can do this with impunity perhaps, but the law will soon teach you better. I should not like to go to bed with human lives on my soul."

The Squire disappeared in a whirlwind. Lease—who seemed to have taken a leaf out of his own theory, and listened mechanically—closed his eyes and put his head back against the palings, like one who has had a shock. He went home when there was nothing more to be done. Not down the highway, but choosing the field-path, where he would not be likely to meet a soul. Crabb Lane, accustomed to put itself into a state of commotion for nothing at all, had got something at last, and was up in arms. All the men employed at the station lived in Crabb Lane. The wife and children of Bowen, the stoker of the passenger-train,—dead—also inhabited a room in that noisy

locality. So that when Lease came in view of the place, he saw an excited multitude, though it was then long after ordinary bed-time. Groups stood in the highway; heads, thrust forth at upper windows, were shouting remarks across the street and back again. Keeping on the far side of the hedge, Lease got in by the back-door unseen. His wife was sitting by the fire, trembling and frightened. She started up.

"Oh, Harry! what is the truth of this?"

He did not answer. Not in neglect; Lease was as civil indoors as out, which can't be said of every one; but as if he did not hear. The supper, bread and half a cold red-herring, was on the table. Generally he was hungry enough for supper, but he never glanced at it this evening.

Sitting down, he looked into the fire and remained still, listening perhaps to the outside hubbub. His wife, half dead with fear and apprehension, could keep silence no longer, and asked again.

"I don't know," he answered then. "They say that I never turned the points; I'm trying to remember doing it, Mary. My senses have been scared out of me."

"But *don't* you remember doing it?"

He put his hands to his temples, and his eyes took that far-off, sad look, often seen in eyes when the heart is troubled. With all his might and main, the man was trying to recall the occurrence which would not come to him. A dread conviction began to dawn within him that it never would or could come; and Lease's face

grew damp with drops of agony.

"I turned the points for the down goods-train," he said presently; "I remember that. When the goods came in, I know I was in the signal-house. Then I took a message to Hoar; and next I stepped across with some oil for the engine of an up-train that dashed in; they called out that it wanted some. I helped to do it, and took the oil back again. It would be then that I went to put the points right," he added after a pause. "I *hope* I did."

"But, Harry, don't you remember doing it?"

"No, I don't; there's where it is."

"You always put the points straight at once after the train has passed?"

"Not if I'm called off by other work. It ought to be done. A pointsman should stand while the train passes, and then step off to right the points at once. But when you are called off half-a-dozen ways to things crying out to be done, you can't spend time in waiting for the points. We've never had a harder day's work at the station than this has been, Mary; trains in, trains out; the place has hardly been free a minute together. And the extra telegraphing!—half the passengers that stopped seemed to want to send messages. When six o'clock came I was worn out; done up; fit to drop."

Mrs. Lease gave a start. An idea flashed into her mind, causing her to ask mentally whether *she* could have had indirectly a hand in the calamity. For that had been one of the days when her husband had had no tea taken to him. She had been very busy

washing, and the baby was sick and cross: that had been quite enough to fill incapable Mrs. Lease's hands, without bothering about her husband's tea. And, of all days in the year, it seemed that he had, on this one, most needed tea. Worn out! done up!

The noise in Crabb Lane was increasing, voices sounded louder, and Mrs. Lease put her hands to her ears. Just then a sudden interruption occurred. Polly, supposed to be safe asleep upstairs, burst into the kitchen in her night-gown, and flew into her father's arms, sobbing and crying.

"Oh, father, is it true?—is it true?"

"Why—Polly!" cried the man, looking at her, in astonishment. "What's this?"

She hid her face on his waistcoat, her hands clinging round him. Polly had awakened and heard the comments outside. She was too nervous and excitable for Crabb Lane.

"They are saying you have killed Kitty Bowen's father. It isn't true, father! Go out and tell them that it isn't true!"

His own nerves were unstrung; his strength had gone out of him; it only needed something of this kind to finish up Lease; and he broke into sobs. Holding the child to him with a tight grasp, they cried together. If Lease had never known agony before in his life, he knew it then.

The days went on. There was no longer any holding-out on Lease's part on the matter of points: all the world said he had been guilty of neglecting to turn them; and he supposed he had. He accepted the fate meekly, without resistance, his manner

strangely still, as one who has been utterly subdued. When talked to, he freely avowed that it remained a puzzle to him how he could have forgotten the points, and what made him forget them. He shrank neither from reproach nor abuse; listening patiently to all who chose to attack him, as if he had no longer any right to claim a place in the world.

He was not spared. Coroner and jury, friends and foes, all went on at him, painting his sins in flaring colours, and calling him names to his face. "Murderer" was one of the least of them. Four had died in all; Roberts was not expected to live; the rest were getting well. There would have been no trouble over the inquest (held at the Bull, between Crabb Lane and the station), it might have been finished in a day, and Lease committed for trial, but that one of those who had died was a lawyer; and his brother (also a lawyer) and other of his relatives (likewise lawyers) chose to make a commotion. Mr. Massock helped them. Passengers must be examined; rails tried; the points tested; every conceivable obstacle was put in the way of a conclusion. Fifteen times had the jury to go and look at the spot, and see the working of the points tested. And so the inquest was adjourned from time to time, and might be finished perhaps something under a year.

The public were like so many wolves, all howling at Lease; from the aforesaid relatives and Brickfield Massock, down to the men and women of Crabb Lane. Lease was at home on bail, surrendering himself at every fresh meeting of the inquest. A few wretched malcontents had begun to hiss him as he passed in and

out of Crabb Lane.

When we got home for the Christmas holidays, nothing met us but tales of Lease's wickedness, in having sent one train upon the other. The Squire grew hot in talking of it. Tod, given to be contrary, said he should like to have Lease's own version of the affair. A remark that affronted the Squire.

"You can go off and get it from him, sir. Lease won't refuse it; he'd give it to the dickens, for the asking. He likes nothing better than to talk about it."

"After all, it was only a misfortune," said Tod. "It was not wilfully done."

"Not wilfully done!" stuttered the Pater in his rage. "When I, and Lena, and her mother were in the train, and might have been smashed to atoms! When Coney, and Massock (not that I like the fellow), and scores more were put in jeopardy, and some were killed; yes, sir, killed. A misfortune! Johnny, if you stand there grinning like an idiot, I'll send you back to school: you shall both pack off this very hour. A misfortune, indeed! Lease deserves hanging."

The next morning we came upon Lease accidentally in the fields. He was leaning over the gate amongst the trees, as Tod and I crossed the rivulet bridge—which was nothing but a plank or two. A couple of bounds, and we were up with him.

"Now for it, Lease!" cried Tod. "Let us hear a bit about the matter."

How Lease was altered! His cheeks were thin and white, his

eyes had nothing but despair in them. Standing up he touched his hat respectfully.

"Ay, sir, it has been a sad time," answered Lease, in a low, patient voice, as if he felt worn out. "I little thought when I last shut you and Master Johnny into the carriage the morning you left, that misfortune was so close at hand." For, just before it happened, we had been at home for a day's holiday.

"Well, tell us about it."

Tod stood with his arm round the trunk of a tree, and I sat down on an opposite stump. Lease had very little to say; nothing, except that he must have forgotten to change the points.

And that made Tod stare. Tod, like the Pater, was hasty by nature. Knowing Lease's good character, he had not supposed him guilty; and to hear the man quietly admit that he *was* excited Tod's ire.

"What do you mean, Lease?"

"Mean, sir?" returned Lease, meekly.

"Do you mean to say that you did *not* attend to the points?—that you just let one train run on to the other?"

"Yes, sir; that is how it must have been. I didn't believe it, sir, for a long time afterwards: not for several hours."

"A long time, that," said Tod, an unpleasant sound of mockery in his tone.

"No, sir; I know it's not much, counting by time," answered Lease patiently. "But nobody can ever picture how long those hours seemed to me. They were like years. I couldn't get the idea

into me at all that I had not set the points as usual; it seemed a thing incredible; but, try as I would, I was unable to call to mind having done it."

"Well, I must say that is a nice thing to confess to, Lease! And there was I, yesterday afternoon, taking your part and quarrelling with my father."

"I am sorry for that, sir. I am not worth having my part taken in anything, since that happened."

"But how came you to *do* it?"

"It's a question I shall never be able to answer, sir. We had a busy day, were on the run from morning till night, and there was a great deal of confusion at the station: but it was no worse than many a day that has gone before it."

"Well, I shall be off," said Tod. "This has shut me up. I thought of going in for you, Lease, finding every one else was dead against you. A misfortune is a misfortune, but wilful carelessness is sin: and my father and his wife and my little sister were in the train. Come along, Johnny."

"Directly, Tod. I'll catch you up. I say, Lease, how will it end?" I asked, as Tod went on.

"It can't end better than two years' imprisonment for me, sir; and I suppose it may end worse. It is not *that* I think of."

"What else, then?"

"Four dead already, sir; four—and one soon to follow them, making five," he answered, his voice hushed to a whisper. "Master Johnny, it lies on me always, a dreadful weight never

to be got rid of. When I was young, I had a sort of low fever, and used to see in my dreams some dreadful task too big to be attempted, and yet I had to do it; and the weight on my mind was awful. I didn't think, till now, such a weight could fall in real life. Sleeping or waking, sir, I see those four before me dead. Squire Todhetley told me that I had their lives on my soul. And it is so."

I did not know what to answer.

"So you see, sir, I don't think much of the imprisonment; if I did, I might be wanting to get the suspense over. It's not any term of imprisonment, no, not though it were for life, that can wash out the past. I'd give my own life, sir, twice over if that could undo it."

Lease had his arm on the gate as he spoke, leaning forward. I could not help feeling sorry for him.

"If people knew how I'm punished within myself, Master Johnny, they'd perhaps not be so harsh upon me. I have never had a proper night's rest since it happened, sir. I have to get up and walk about in the middle of the night because I can't lie. The sight of the dawn makes me sick, and I say to myself, How shall I get through the day? When bed-time comes, I wonder how I shall lie till morning. Often I wish it had pleased God to take me before that day had happened."

"Why don't they get the inquest over, Lease?"

"There's something or other always brought up to delay it, sir. I don't see the need of it. If it would bring the dead back to life, why, they might delay it; but it won't. They might as well let it

end, and sentence me, and have done with it. Each time when I go back home through Crabb Lane, the men and women call out, 'What, put off again!' 'What, ain't he in gaol yet!' Which is the place they say I ought to have been in all along."

"I suppose the coroner knows you'll not run away, Lease."

"Everybody knows that, sir."

"Some would, though, in your place."

"I don't know where they'd run to," returned Lease. "They couldn't run away from their own minds—and that's the worst part of it. Sometimes I wonder whether I shall ever get it off mine, sir, or if I shall have it on me, like this, to the end of my life. The Lord knows what it is to me; nobody else does."

You cannot always make things fit into one another. I was thinking so as I left Lease and went after Tod. It was awful carelessness not to have set the points; causing death, and sorrow, and distress to many people. Looking at it from their side, the pointsman was detestable; only fit, as the Squire said, to be hanged. But looking at it side by side with Lease, seeing his sad face, his self-reproach, and his patient suffering, it seemed altogether different; and the two aspects would not by any means fit in together.

Christmas week, and the absence of a juror who had gone out visiting, made another excuse for putting off the inquest to the next week. When that came, the coroner was ill. There seemed to be no end to the delays, and the public steam was getting up in consequence. As to Lease, he went about like a man who is

looking for something that he has lost and cannot find.

One day, when the ice lay in Crabb Lane, and I was taking the slides on my way through it to join Tod, who had gone rabbit-shooting, a little girl ran across my feet, and was knocked down. I fell too; and the child began to cry. Picking her up, I saw it was Polly Lease.

"You little stupid! why did you run into my path like that?"

"Please, sir, I didn't see you," she sobbed. "I was running after father. Mother saw him in the field yonder, and sent me to tell him we'd got a bit o' fire."

Polly had grazed both her knees; they began to bleed just a little, and she nearly went into convulsions at sight of the blood. I carried her in. There was about a handful of fire in the grate. The mother sat on a low stool, close into it, nursing one of the children, and the rest sat on the floor.

"I never saw such a child as this in all my life, Mrs. Lease. Because she has hurt her knees a bit, and sees a drop of blood, she's going to die of fright. Look here."

Mrs. Lease put the boy down and took Polly, who was trembling all over with her deep low sobs.

"It was always so, sir," said Mrs. Lease; "always since she was a baby. She is the timorest-natured child possible. We have tried everything; coaxing and scolding too; but we can't get her out of it. If she pricks her finger her face turns white."

"I'd be more of a woman than cry at nothing, if I were you, Polly," said I, sitting on the window-ledge, while Mrs. Lease

washed the knees; which were hardly damaged at all when they came to be examined. But Polly only clung to her mother, with her face hidden, and giving a deep sob now and then.

"Look up, Polly. What's this!"

I put it into her hand as I spoke; a bath bun that I had been carrying with me, in case I did not get home to luncheon. Polly looked round, and the sight dried the tears on her swollen face. You never saw such a change all in a moment, or such eager, glad little eyes as hers.

"Divide it mother," said she. "Leave a bit for father."

Two of them came flocking round like a couple of young wolves; the youngest couldn't get up, and the one Mrs. Lease had been nursing stayed on the floor where she put him. He had a sickly face, with great bright grey eyes, and hot, red lips.

"What's the matter with him, Mrs. Lease?"

"With little Tom, sir? I think it's a kind of fever. He never was strong; none of them are: and of course these bad times can but tell upon us."

"Don't forget father, mother," said Polly. "Leave the biggest piece for father."

"Now I tell you all what it is," said I to the children, when Mrs. Lease began to divide it into half-a-dozen pieces, "that bun's for Polly, because she has hurt herself: you shall not take any of it from her. Give it to Polly, Mrs. Lease."

Of all the uproars ever heard, those little cormorants set up the worst. Mrs. Lease looked at me.

"They must have a bit, sir: they must indeed. Polly wouldn't eat all herself, Master Ludlow; you couldn't get her to do it."

But I was determined Polly should have it. It was through me she got hurt; and besides, I liked her.

"Now just listen, you little pigs. I'll go to Ford's, the baker's, and bring you all a bun a-piece, but Polly must have this one. They have lots of currants in them, those buns, for children that don't squeal. How many are there of you? One, two, three,–four."

Catching up my cap, I was going out when Mrs. Lease touched me. "Do you really mean it, sir?" she asked in a whisper.

"Mean what? That I am going to bring the buns? Of course I mean it. I'll be back with them directly."

"Oh, sir—but do forgive me for making free to ask such a thing—if you would only let it be a half-quartern loaf instead?"

"A half-quartern loaf!"

"They've not had a bit between their lips this day, Master Ludlow," she said, catching her breath, as her face, which had flushed, turned pale again. "Last night I divided between the four of them a piece of bread half the size of my hand; Tom, he couldn't eat."

I stared for a minute. "How is it, Mrs. Lease? can you not get enough food?"

"I don't know where we should get it from, sir. Lease has not broken his fast since yesterday at midday."

Dame Ford put the loaf in paper for me, wondering what on

earth I wanted with it, as I could see by her inquisitive eyes, but not liking to ask; and I carried it back with the four buns. They were little wolves and nothing else when they saw the food.

"How has this come about, Mrs. Lease?" I asked, while they were eating the bread she cut them, and she had taken Tom on her lap again.

"Why, sir, it is eight weeks now, or hard upon it, since my husband earned anything. They didn't even pay him for the last week he was at work, as the accident happened in it. We had nothing in hand; people with only eighteen shillings a week and five children to feed, can't save; and we have been living on our things. But there's nothing left now to make money of—as you may see by the bare room, sir."

"Does not any one help you?"

"Help us!" returned Mrs. Lease. "Why, Master Ludlow, people, for the most part, are so incensed against my husband, that they'd take the bread out of our mouths, instead of putting a bit into them. All their help goes to poor Nancy Bowen and her children: and Lease is glad it should be so. When I carried Tom to Mr. Cole's yesterday, he said that what the child wanted was nourishment."

"This must try Lease."

"Yes," she said, her face flushing again, but speaking very quietly. "Taking one thing with another, I am not sure but it is killing him."

After this break, I did not care to go to the shooting, but

turned back to Crabb Cot. Mrs. Todhetley was alone in the bow-windowed parlour, so I told her of the state the Leases were in, and asked if she would not help them.

"I don't know what to say about it, Johnny," she said, after a pause. "If I were willing, you know Mr. Todhetley would not be so. He can't forgive Lease for his carelessness. Every time Lena wakes up from sleep in a fright, fancying it is another accident, his anger returns to him. We often hear her crying out, you know, down here in an evening."

"The carelessness was no fault of Lease's children, that they should suffer for it."

"When you grow older, Johnny, you will find that the consequences of people's faults fall more on others than on themselves. It is very sad the Leases should be in this state; I am sorry for them."

"Then you'll help them a bit, good mother."

Mrs. Todhetley was always ready to help any one, not needing to be urged; on the other hand, she liked to yield implicitly to the opinions of the Squire. Between the two, she went into a dilemma.

"Suppose it were Lena, starving for want of food and warmth?" I said. "Or Hugh sick with fever, as that young Tom is? Those children have done no more harm than ours."

Mrs. Todhetley put her hand up to her face, and her mild eyes looked nearly as sad as Lease's.

"Will you take it to them yourself, Johnny, in a covered basket,

and not let it be seen? That is, make it your own doing?"

"Yes."

"Go to the kitchen then, and ask Molly. There are some odds and ends of things in the larder that will not be particularly wanted. You see, Johnny, I do not like to take an active part in this; it would seem like opposing the Squire."

Molly was stooping before the big fire, basting the meat, in one of her vile humours. If I wanted to rob the larder, I must do it, she cried; it was my business, not hers; and she dashed the basting spoon across the table by way of accompaniment.

I gave a good look round the larder, and took a raised pork-pie that had a piece cut out of it, and a leg of mutton three parts eaten. On the shelf were a dozen mince-pies, just out of their patty-pans; I took six and left six. Molly, screwing her face round the kitchen-door, caught sight of them as they went into the basket, and rushing after me out of the house, shrieked out for her mince-pies.

The race went on. She was a woman not to be daunted. Just as we turned round by the yellow barn, I first, she raving behind, the Squire pounced upon us, asking what the uproar meant. Molly told her tale. I was a thief, and had gone off with the whole larder, more particularly with her mince-pies.

"Open the basket, Johnny," said the Squire: which was the one Tod and I used when we went fishing.

No sooner was it done than Molly marched off with the pies in triumph. The Pater regarded the pork-pie and the meat with

a curious gaze.

"This is for you and Joe, I suppose. I should like to know for how many more."

I was one of the worst to conceal things, when taken-to like this, and he got it all out of me in no time. And then he put his hand on my shoulder and ordered me to say *who* the things were for. Which I had to do.

Well, there was a row. He wanted to know what I meant by being wicked enough to give food to Lease. I said it was for the children. I'm afraid I almost cried, for I did not like him to be angry with me, but I know I promised not to eat any dinner at home for three days if he would let me take the meat. Molly's comments, echoing through the house, betrayed to Mrs. Todhetley what had happened, and she came down the road with a shawl over her head. She told the Squire the truth then: that she had sanctioned it. She said she feared the Leases were quite in extremity, and begged him to let the meat go.

"Be off for this once, you young thief," stamped the Squire, "but don't let me catch you at anything of this sort again."

So the meat went to the Leases, and two loaves that Mrs. Todhetley whispered me to order for them at Ford's. When I reached home with the empty basket, they were going in to dinner. I took a book and stayed in the parlour. In a minute or two the Squire sent to ask what I was doing that for.

"It's all right, Thomas. I don't want any dinner to-day."

Old Thomas went away and returned again, saying the master

ordered me to go in. But I wouldn't do anything of the sort. If he forgot the bargain, I did not.

Out came the Squire, his face red, napkin in hand, and laid hold of me by the shoulders.

"You obstinate young Turk! How dare you defy me? Come along."

"But it is not to defy you, sir. It was a bargain, you know; I promised."

"What was a bargain?"

"That I should not have any dinner for three days. Indeed I meant it."

The Squire's answer was to propel me into the dining-room. "Move down, Joe," he said, "I'll have him by me to-day. I'll see whether he is to starve himself out of bravado."

"Why, what's up?" asked Tod, as he went to a lower seat. "What have you been doing, Johnny?"

"Never mind," said the Squire, putting enough mutton on my plate for two. "You eat that, Mr. Johnny?"

It went on so throughout dinner. Mrs. Todhetley gave me a big share of apple pudding; and, when the macaroni came on, the Squire heaped my plate. And I know it was all done to show he was not really angry with me for having taken the things to the Leases.

Mr. Cole, the surgeon, came in after dinner, and was told of my wickedness. Lena ran up to me and said might she send her new sixpence to the poor little children who had no bread to eat.

"What's that Lease about, that he does not go to work?" asked the Squire, in loud tones. "Letting folks hear that his young ones are starving!"

"The man can't work," said Mr. Cole. "He is out on probation, you know, waiting for the verdict, and the sentence on him that is to follow."

"Then why don't they return their verdict and sentence him?" demanded the Squire, in his hot way.

"Ah!" said Mr. Cole, "it's what they ought to have done long ago."

"What will it be! Transportation?"

"I should take care it was *not*, if I were on the jury. The man had too much work on him that day, and had had nothing to eat or drink for too many hours."

"I won't hear a word in his defence," growled the Squire.

When the jury met for the last time, Lease was ill. A day or two before that, some one had brought Lease word that Roberts, who had been lingering all that time in the infirmary at Worcester, was going at last. Upon which Lease started to see him. It was not the day for visitors at the infirmary, but he gained admittance. Roberts was lying in the accident ward, with his head low and a blue look in his face; and the first thing Lease did, when he began to speak, was to burst out crying. The man's strength had gone down to nothing and his spirit was broken. Roberts made out that he was speaking of his distress at having been the cause of the calamity, and asking to be forgiven.

"Mate," said Roberts, putting out his hand that Lease might take it, "I've never had an ill thought to ye. Mishaps come to all of us that have to do with rail-travelling; us drivers get more nor you pointsmen. It might have happened to me to be the cause, just as well as to you. Don't think no more of it."

"Say you forgive me," urged Lease, "or I shall not know how to bear it."

"I forgive thee with my whole heart and soul. I've had a spell of it here, Lease, waiting for death, knowing it must come to me, and I've got to look for it kindly. I don't think I'd go back to the world now if I could. I'm going to a better. It seems just peace, and nothing less. Shake hands, mate."

They shook hands.

"I wish ye'd lift my head a bit," Roberts said, after a while. "The nurse she come and took away my pillow, thinking I might die easier, I suppose: I've seen her do it to others. Maybe I was a'most gone, and the sight of you woke me up again like."

Lease sat down on the bed and put the man's head upon his breast in the position that seemed most easy to him; and Roberts died there.

It was one of the worst days we had that winter. Lease had a night's walk home of many miles, the sleet and wind beating upon him all the way. He was not well clad either, for his best things had been pawned.

So that when the inquest assembled two days afterwards, Lease did not appear at it. He was in bed with inflammation

of the chest, and Mr. Cole told the coroner that it would be dangerous to take him out of it. Some of them called it bronchitis; but the Squire never went in for new names, and never would.

"I tell you what it is, gentlemen," broke in Mr. Cole, when they were quarrelling as to whether there should be another adjournment or not, "you'll put off and put off, until Lease slips through your fingers."

"Oh, will he, though!" blustered old Massock. "He had better try at it! We'd soon fetch him back again."

"You'd be clever to do it," said the doctor.

Any way, whether it was this or not, they thought better of the adjournment, and gave their verdict. "Manslaughter against Henry Lease." And the coroner made out his warrant of committal to Worcester county prison: where Lease would lie until the March assizes.

"I am not sure but it ought to have been returned Wilful Murder," remarked the Squire, as he and the doctor turned out of the Bull, and picked their way over the slush towards Crabb Lane.

"It might make no difference, one way or the other," answered Mr. Cole.

"Make no difference! What d'ye mean? Murder and manslaughter are two separate crimes, Cole, and must be punished accordingly. You see, Johnny, what your friend Lease has come to!"

"What I meant, Squire, was this: that I don't much think Lease

will live to be tried at all."

"Not live!"

"I fancy not. Unless I am much mistaken, his life will have been claimed by its Giver long before March."

The Squire stopped and looked at Cole. "What's the matter with him? This inflammation—that you went and testified to?"

"That will be the cause of death, as returned to the registrar."

"Why, you speak just as if the man were dying now, Cole!"

"And I think he is. Lease has been very low for a long time," added Mr. Cole; "half clad, and not a quarter fed. But it is not that, Squire: heart and spirit are alike broken: and when this cold caught him, he had no stamina to withstand it; and so it has seized upon a vital part."

"Do you mean to tell me to my face that he will die of it?" cried the Squire, holding on by the middle button of old Cole's great-coat. "Nonsense, man! you must cure him. We—we did not want him to die, you know."

"His life or his death, as it may be, are in the hands of One higher than I, Squire."

"I think I'll go in and see him," said the Squire, meekly.

Lease was lying on a bed close to the floor when we got to the top of the creaky stairs, which had threatened to come down with the Squire's weight and awkwardness. He had dozed off, and little Polly, sitting on the boards, had her head upon his arm. Her starting up awoke Lease. I was not in the habit of seeing dying people; but the thought struck me that Lease must be dying. His

pale weary face wore the same hue that Jake's had worn when he was dying: if you have not forgotten him.

"God bless me!" exclaimed the Squire.

Lease looked up with his sad eyes. He supposed they had come to tell him officially about the verdict—which had already reached him unofficially.

"Yes, gentlemen, I know it," he said, trying to get up out of respect, and falling back. "Manslaughter. I'd have been present if I could. Mr. Cole knows I wasn't able. I think God is taking me instead."

"But this won't do, you know, Lease," said the Squire. "We don't want you to die."

"Well, sir, I'm afraid I am not good for much now. And there'd be the imprisonment, and then the sentence, so that I could not work for my wife and children for some long years. When people come to know how I repented of that night's mistake, and that I have died of it, why, they'll perhaps befriend them and forgive me. I think God has forgiven me: He is very merciful."

"I'll send you in some port wine and jelly and beef-tea—and some blankets, Lease," cried the Squire quickly, as if he felt flurried. "And, Lease, poor fellow, I am sorry for having been so angry with you."

"Thank you for all favours, sir, past and present. But for the help from your house my little ones would have starved. God bless you all, and forgive me! Master Johnny, God bless *you*."

"You'll rally yet, Lease; take heart," said the Squire.

"No, sir, I don't think so. The great dark load seems to have been lifted off me, and light to be breaking. Don't sob, Polly! Perhaps father will be able to see you from up there as well as if he stayed here."

The first thing the Squire did when we got out, was to attack Mr. Cole, telling him he ought not to have let Lease die. As he was in a way about it, Cole excused it, quietly saying it was no fault of his.

"I should like to know what it is that has killed him, then?"

"Grief," said Mr. Cole. "The man has died of what we call a broken heart. Hearts don't actually sever, you know, Squire, like a china basin, and there's always some ostensible malady that serves as a reason to talk about. In this case it will be bronchitis. Which, in point of fact, is the final end, because Lease could not rally against it. He told me yesterday that his heart had ached so keenly since November, it seemed to have dried up within him."

"We are all a pack of hard-hearted sinners," groaned the Squire, in his repentance. "Johnny, why could you not have found them out sooner? Where was the use of your doing it at the eleventh hour, sir, I'd like to know?"

Harry Lease died that night. And Crabb Lane, in a fit of repentance as sudden as the Squire's, took the cost of the funeral off the parish (giving some abuse in exchange) and went in a body to the grave. I and Tod followed.

VII.
AUNT DEAN

Timberdale was a small place on the other side of Crabb Ravine. Its Rector was the Reverend Jacob Lewis. Timberdale called him Parson Lewis when not on ceremony. He had married a widow, Mrs. Tanerton: she had a good deal of money and two boys, and the parish thought the new lady might be above them. But she proved kind and good; and her boys did not ride roughshod over the land or break down the farmers' fences. She died in three or four years, after a long illness.

Timberdale talked about her will, deeming it a foolish one. She left all she possessed to the Rector, "in affectionate confidence," as the will worded it, "knowing he would do what was right and just by her sons." As Parson Lewis was an upright man with a conscience of his own, it was supposed he would do so; but Timberdale considered that for the boys' sake she should have made it sure herself. It was eight-hundred a year, good measure.

Parson Lewis had a sister, Mrs. Dean, a widow also, who lived near Liverpool. She was not left well-off at all; could but just make a living of it. She used to come on long visits to the Parsonage, which saved her cupboard at home; but it was said that Mrs. Lewis did not like her, thinking her deceitful, and they

did not get on very well together. Parson Lewis, the meekest man in the world and the most easily led, admitted to his wife that Rebecca had always been a little given to scheming, but he thought her true at heart.

When poor Mrs. Lewis was out of the way for good in Timberdale churchyard, Aunt Dean had the field to herself, and came and stayed as long as she pleased, with her child, Alice. She was a little woman with a mild face and fair skin, and had a sort of purring manner with her. Scarcely speaking above her breath, and saying "dear" and "love" at every sentence, and caressing people to their faces, the rule was to fall in love with her at once. The boys, Herbert and Jack, had taken to her without question from the first, and called her "Aunt." Though she was of course no relation whatever to them.

Both the boys made much of Alice—a bright-eyed, pretty little girl with brown curls and timid, winsome ways. Herbert, who was very studious himself, helped her with her lessons: Jack, who was nearer her age, but a few months older, took her out on expeditions, haymaking and blackberrying and the like, and would bring her home with her frock torn and her knees damaged. He told her that brave little girls never cried with him; and the child would ignore the smart of the grazed knees and show herself as brave as a martyr. Jack was so brave and fearless himself and made so little of hurts, that she felt a sort of shame at giving way to her natural timidity when with him. What Alice liked best was to sit indoors by Herbert's side while he was at

his lessons, and read story books and fairy tales. Jack was the opposite of all that, and a regular renegade in all kinds of study. He would have liked to pitch the books into the fire, and did not even care for fairy tales. They came often enough to Crabb Cot when we were there, and to our neighbours the Coneys, with whom the Parsonage was intimate. I was only a little fellow at the time, years younger than they were, but I remember I liked Jack better than Herbert. As Tod did also for the matter of that. Herbert was too clever for us, and he was to be a parson besides. He chose the calling himself. More than once he was caught muffled in the parson's white surplice, preaching to Jack and Alice a sermon of his own composition.

Aunt Dean had her plans and her plots. One great plot was always at work. She made it into a dream, and peeped into it night and day, as if it were a kaleidoscope of rich and many colours. Herbert Tanerton was to marry her daughter and succeed to his mother's property as eldest son: Jack must go adrift, and earn his own living. She considered it was already three parts as good as accomplished. To see Herbert and Alice poring over books together side by side and to know that they had the same tastes, was welcome to her as the sight of gold. As to Jack, with his roving propensities, his climbing and his daring, she thought it little matter if he came down a tree head-foremost some day, or pitched head over heels into the depths of Crabb Ravine, and so threw his life away. Not that she really wished any cruel fate for the boy; but she did not care for him; and he might be terribly in

the way, when her foolish brother, the parson, came to apportion the money. And he *was* foolish in some things; soft, in fact: she often said so.

One summer day, when the fruit was ripe and the sun shining, Mr. Lewis had gone into his study to write his next Sunday's sermon. He did not get on very quickly, for Aunt Dean was in there also, and it disturbed him a little. She was of restless habits, everlastingly dusting books, and putting things in their places without rhyme or reason.

"Do you wish to keep out all *three* of these inkstands, Jacob? It is not necessary, I should think. Shall I put one up?"

The parson took his eyes off his sermon to answer. "I don't see that they do any harm there, Rebecca. The children use two sometimes. Do as you like, however."

Mrs. Dean put one of the inkstands into the book-case, and then looked round the room to see what else she could do. A letter caught her eye.

"Jacob, I do believe you have never answered the note old Mullet brought this morning! There it is on the mantelpiece."

The parson sighed. To be interrupted in this way he took quite as a matter of course, but it teased him a little.

"I must see the churchwardens, Rebecca, before answering it. I want to know, you see, what would be approved of by the parish."

"Just like you, Jacob," she caressingly said. "The parish must approve of what you approve."

"Yes, yes," he said hastily; "but I like to live at peace with

every one."

He dipped his pen into the ink, and wrote a line of his sermon. The open window looked on to the kitchen-garden. Herbert Tanerton had his back against the walnut-tree, doing nothing. Alice sat near on a stool, her head buried in a book that by its canvas cover Mrs. Dean knew to be "Robinson Crusoe." Just then Jack came out of the raspberry bushes with a handful of fruit, which he held out to Alice. "Robinson Crusoe" fell to the ground.

"Oh, Jack, how good they are!" said Alice. And the words came distinctly to Aunt Dean's ears in the still day.

"They are as good again when you pick them off the trees for yourself," cried Jack. "Come along and get some, Alice."

With the taste of the raspberries in her mouth, the temptation was not to be resisted; and she ran after Jack. Aunt Dean put her head out at the window.

"Alice, my love, I cannot have you go amongst those raspberry bushes; you would stain and tear your frock."

"I'll take care of her frock, aunt," Jack called back.

"My darling Jack, it cannot be. That is her new muslin frock, and she must not go where she might injure it."

So Alice sat down again to "Robinson Crusoe," and Jack went his way amongst the raspberry bushes, or whither he would.

"Jacob, have you begun to think of what John is to be?" resumed Aunt Dean, as she shut down the window.

The parson pushed his sermon from him in a sort of patient hopelessness, and turned round on his chair. "To be?—In what

way, Rebecca?"

"By profession," she answered. "I fancy it is time it was thought of."

"Do you? I'm sure I don't know. The other day when something was being mentioned about it, Jack said he did not care what he was to be, provided he had no books to trouble him."

"I only hope you will not have trouble with him, Jacob, dear," observed Mrs. Dean, in ominous tones, that plainly intimated she thought the parson would.

"He has a good heart, though he is not so studious as his brother. Why have you shut the window, Rebecca? It is very warm."

Mrs. Dean did not say why. Perhaps she wished to guard against the conversation being heard. When any question not quite convenient to answer was put to her, she had a way of passing it over in silence; and the parson was too yielding or too inert to ask again.

"*Of course*, Brother Jacob, you will make Herbert the heir."

The parson looked surprised. "Why should you suppose that, Rebecca? I think the two boys ought to share and share alike."

"My dear Jacob, how *can* you think so? Your dead wife left you in charge, remember."

"That's what I do remember, Rebecca. She never gave me the slightest hint that she should wish any difference to be made: she was as fond of one boy as of the other."

"Jacob, you must do your duty by the boys," returned Mrs.

Dean, with affectionate solemnity. "Herbert must be his mother's heir; it is right and proper it should be so: Jack must be trained to earn his own livelihood. Jack—dear fellow!—is, I fear, of a roving, random disposition: were you to leave any portion of the money to him, he would squander it in a year."

"Dear me, I hope not! But as to leaving all to his brother—or even a larger portion than to Jack—I don't know that it would be right. A heavy responsibility lies on me in this charge, don't you see, Rebecca?"

"No doubt it does. It is full eight-hundred a year. And *you* must be putting something by, Jacob."

"Not much. I draw the money yearly, but expenses seem to swallow it up. What with the ponies kept for the boys, and the cost of the masters from Worcester, and a hundred a year out of it that my wife desired the poor old nurse should have till she died, there's not a great deal left. My living is a poor one, you know, and I like to help the poor freely. When the boys go to the university it will be all wanted."

Help the poor freely!—just like him! thought Aunt Dean.

"It would be waste of time and money to send Jack to college. You should try and get him some appointment abroad, Jacob. In India, say."

The clergyman opened his eyes at this, and said he should not like to see Jack go out of his own country. Jack's mother had not had any opinion of foreign places. Jack himself interrupted the conversation. He came flying up the path, put down a cabbage

leaf full of raspberries on the window-sill, and flung open the window with his stained fingers.

"Aunt Dean, I've picked these for you," he said, introducing the leaf, his handsome face and good-natured eyes bright and sparkling. "They've never been so good as they are this year. Father, just taste them."

Aunt Dean smiled sweetly, and called him her darling, and Mr. Lewis tasted the raspberries.

"We were just talking of you, Jack," cried the unsophisticated man—and Mrs. Dean slightly knitted her brows. "Your aunt says it is time you began to think of some profession."

"What, yet awhile?" returned Jack.

"That you may be suitably educated for it, my boy."

"I should like to be something that won't want education," cried Jack, leaning his arms on the window-sill, and jumping up and down. "I think I'd rather be a farmer than anything, father."

The parson drew a long face. This had never entered into his calculations.

"I fear that would not do, Jack. I should like you to choose something higher than that; some profession by which you may rise in the world. Herbert will go into the Church: what should you say to the Bar?"

Jack's jumping ceased all at once. "What, be a barrister, father? Like those be-wigged fellows that come on circuit twice a year to Worcester?"

"Like that, Jack."

"But they have to study all their lives for it, father; and read up millions of books before they can pass! I couldn't do it; I couldn't indeed."

"What do you think of being a first-class lawyer, then? I might place you with some good firm, such as–"

"Don't, there's a dear father!" interrupted Jack, all the sunshine leaving his face. "I'm afraid if I were at a desk I should kick it over without knowing it: I must be running out and about. —Are they all gone, Aunt Dean? Give me the leaf, and I'll pick you some more."

The years went on. Jack was fifteen: Herbert eighteen and at Oxford: the advanced scholar had gone to college early. Aunt Dean spent quite half her time at Timberdale, from Easter till autumn, and the parson never rose up against it. She let her house during her absence: it was situated on the banks of the river a little way from Liverpool, near the place they call New Brighton now. It might have been called New Brighton then for all I know. One family always took the house for the summer months, glad to get out of hot Liverpool.

As to Jack, nothing had been decided in regard to his future, for opinions about it differed. A little Latin and a little history and a great deal of geography (for he liked that) had been drilled into him: and there his education ended. But he was the best climber and walker and leaper, and withal the best-hearted young fellow that Timberdale could boast: and he knew about land thoroughly, and possessed a great stock of general and useful and practical

information. Many a day when some of the poorer farmers were in a desperate hurry to get in their hay or carry their wheat on account of threatening weather, had Jack Tanerton turned out to help, and toiled as hard and as long as any of the labourers. He was hail-fellow-well-met with everyone, rich and poor.

Mrs. Dean had worked on always to accomplish her ends. Slowly and imperceptibly, but surely; Herbert must be the heir; John must shift for himself. The parson had had this dinned into him so often now, in her apparently frank and reasoning way, that he began to lend an ear to it. What with his strict sense of justice, and his habit of yielding to his sister's views, he felt for the most part in a kind of dilemma. But Mrs. Dean had come over this time determined to get something settled, one way or the other.

She arrived before Easter this year. The interminable Jack (as she often called him in her heart) was at home; Herbert was not. Jack and Alice did not seem to miss him, but went out on their rambles together as they did when children. The morning before Herbert was expected, a letter came from him to his stepfather, saying he had been invited by a fellow-student to spend the Easter holidays at his home near London and had accepted it.

Mr. Lewis took it as a matter of course in his easy way; but it disagreed with Aunt Dean. She said all manner of things to the parson, and incited him to write for Herbert to return at once. Herbert's answer to this was a courteous intimation that he could not alter his plans; and he hoped his father, on consideration, would fail to see any good reason why he should do so. Herbert

Tanerton had a will of his own.

"Neither do I see any reason, good or bad, why he should not pay the visit, Rebecca," confessed the Rector. "I'm afraid it was foolish of me to object at all. Perhaps I have not the right to deny him, either, if I wished it. He is getting on for nineteen, and I am not his own father."

So Aunt Dean had to make the best and the worst of it; but she felt as cross as two sticks.

One day when the parson was abroad on parish matters, and the Rectory empty, she went out for a stroll, and reached the high steep bank where the primroses and violets grew. Looking over, she saw Jack and Alice seated below; Jack's arm round her waist.

"You are to be my wife, you know, Alice, when we are grown up. Mind that."

There was no answer, but Aunt Dean certainly thought she heard the sound of a kiss. Peeping over again, she saw Jack taking another.

"And if you don't object to my being a farmer, Alice, I should like it best of all. We'll keep two jolly ponies and ride about together. Won't it be good?"

"I don't object to farming, Jack. Anything you like. A successful farmer's home is a very pleasant one."

Aunt Dean drew away with noiseless steps. She was too calm and callous a woman to turn white; but she did turn angry, and registered a vow in her heart. That presuming, upstart Jack! They were only two little fools, it's true; no better than children; but

the nonsense must be stopped in time.

Herbert went back to Oxford without coming home. Alice, to her own infinite astonishment, was despatched to school until midsummer. The parson and his sister and Jack were left alone; and Aunt Dean, with her soft smooth manner and her false expressions of endearment, ruled all things; her brother's better nature amidst the rest.

Jack was asked what he would be. A farmer, he answered. But Aunt Dean had somehow caught up the most bitter notions possible against farming in general; and Mr. Lewis, not much liking the thing himself, and yielding to the undercurrent ever gently flowing, told Jack he must fix on something else.

"There's nothing I shall do so well at as farming, father," remonstrated Jack. "You can put me for three or four years to some good agriculturist, and I'll be bound at the end of the time I should be fit to manage the largest and best farm in the country. Why, I am a better farmer now than some of them are."

"Jack, my boy, you must not be self-willed. I cannot let you be a farmer."

"Then send me to sea, father, and make a sailor of me," returned Jack, with undisturbed good humour.

But this startled the parson. He liked Jack, and he had a horror of the sea. "Not that, Jack, my boy. Anything but that."

"I'm not sure but I should like the sea better than farming," went on Jack, the idea full in his head. "Aunt Dean lent me 'Peter Simple' one day. I know I should make a first-rate sailor."

"Jack, don't talk so. Your poor mother would not have liked it, and I don't like it; and I shall never let you go."

"Some fellows run away to sea," said Jack, laughing.

The parson felt as though a bucket of cold water had been thrown down his back. Did Jack mean that as a threat?

"John," said he, in as solemn a way as he had ever spoken, "disobedience to parents sometimes brings a curse with it. You must promise me that you will never go to sea."

"I'll not promise that, off-hand," said Jack. "But I will promise never to go without your consent. Think it well over, father; there's no hurry."

It was on the tip of Mr. Lewis's tongue to withdraw his objection to the farming scheme then and there: in comparison with the other it looked quite fair and bright. But he thought he might compromise his judgment to yield thus instantly: and, as easy Jack said, there was no hurry.

So Jack went rushing out of doors again to the uttermost bounds of the parish, and the parson was left to Aunt Dean. When he told her he meant to let Jack be a farmer, she laughed till the tears came into her eyes, and begged him to leave matters to her. *She* knew how to manage boys, without appearing directly to cross them: there was this kind of trouble with most boys, she had observed, before they settled satisfactorily in life, but it all came right in the end.

So the parson said no more about farming: but Jack talked a great deal about the sea. Mr. Lewis went over in his gig to

Worcester, and bought a book he had heard of, "Two Years before the Mast." He wrote Jack's name in it and gave it him, hoping its contents might serve to sicken him of the sea.

The next morning the book was missing. Jack looked high and low for it, but it was gone. He had left it on the sitting-room table when he went up to bed, and it mysteriously disappeared during the night. The servants had not seen it, and declared it was not on the table in the morning.

"It could not—I suppose—have been the cat," observed Aunt Dean, in a doubtful manner, her eyes full of wonder as to where the book could have got to. "I have heard of cats doing strange things."

"I don't think the cat would make away with a book of that size, Rebecca," said the parson. And if he had not been the least suspicious parson in all the Worcester Diocese, he might have asked his sister whether *she* had been the cat, and secured the book lest it should dissipate Jack's fancy for the sea.

The next thing she did was to carry Jack off to Liverpool. The parson objected at first: Liverpool was a seaport town, and might put Jack more in mind of the sea than ever. Aunt Dean replied that she meant him to see the worst sides of sea life, the dirty boats in the Mersey, the wretchedness of the crews, and the real discomfort and misery of a sailor's existence. That would cure him, she said: what he had in his head now was the romance picked up from books. The parson thought there was reason in this, and yielded. He was dreadfully anxious about Jack.

She went straight to her house near New Brighton, Jack with her, and a substantial sum in her pocket from the Rector to pay for Jack's keep. The old servant, Peggy, who took care of it, was thunderstruck to see her mistress come in. It was not yet occupied by the Liverpool people, and Mrs. Dean sent them word they could not have it this year: at least not for the present. While she put matters straight, she supplied Jack with all Captain Marryat's novels to read. The house looked on the river, and Jack would watch the fine vessels starting on their long voyages, their white sails trim and fair in the sunshine, or hear the joyous shouts from the sailors of a homeward-bound ship as Liverpool hove in view; and he grew to think there was no sight so pleasant to the eye as these wonderful ships; no fate so desirable as to sail in them.

But Aunt Dean had changed her tactics. Instead of sending Jack on to the dirtiest and worst managed boats in the docks, where the living was hard and the sailors were discontented, she allowed him to roam at will on the finest ships, and make acquaintance with their enthusiastic young officers, especially with those who were going to sea for the first time with just such notions as Jack's. Before Midsummer came, Jack Tanerton had grown to think that he could never be happy on land.

There was a new ship just launched, the *Rose of Delhi*; a magnificent vessel. Jack took rare interest in her. He was for ever on board; was for ever saying to her owners—friends of Aunt Dean's, to whom she had introduced him—how much he should like to sail in her. The owners thought it would be an

advantageous thing to get so active, open, and ready a lad into their service, although he was somewhat old for entering, and they offered to article him for four years, as "midshipman" on the *Rose of Delhi*. Jack went home with his tale, his eyes glowing; and Aunt Dean neither checked him nor helped him.

Not *then*. Later, when the ship was all but ready to sail, she told Jack she washed her hands of it, and recommended him to write and ask his stepfather whether he might sail in her, or not.

Now Jack was no letter writer; neither, truth to tell, was the parson. He had not once written home; but had contented himself with sending affectionate messages in Aunt Dean's letters. Consequently, Mr. Lewis only knew what Aunt Dean had chosen to tell him, and had no idea that Jack was getting the real sea fever upon him. But at her suggestion Jack sat down now and wrote a long letter.

Its purport was this. That he was longing and hoping to go to sea; was sure he should never like anything else in the world so well; that the *Rose of Delhi*, Captain Druce, was the most magnificent ship ever launched; that the owners bore the best character in Liverpool for liberality, and Captain Druce for kindness to his middies; and that he hoped, oh he hoped, his father would let him go; but that if he still refused, he (Jack) would do his best to be content to stay on shore, for he did not forget his promise of never sailing without his consent.

"Would you like to see the letter, Aunt Dean, before I close it?" he asked.

Aunt Dean, who had been sitting by, took the letter, and privately thought it was as good a letter and as much to the purpose as the best scribe in the land could have written. She disliked it, for all that.

"Jack, dear, I think you had better put a postscript," she said. "Your father detests writing, as you know. Tell him that if he consents he need not write any answer: you will know what it means—that you may go—and it will save him trouble."

"But, Aunt Dean, I should like him to wish me good-bye and God speed."

"He will be sure to do the one in his heart and the other in his prayers, my boy. Write your postscript."

Jack did as he was bid: he was as docile as his stepfather. Exactly as Mrs. Dean suggested, wrote he: and he added that if no answer arrived within two posts, he should take it for granted that he was to go, and should see about his outfit. There was no time to lose, for the ship would sail in three or four days.

"I will post it for you, Jack," she said, when it was ready. "I am going out."

"Thank you, Aunt Dean, but I can post it myself. I'd rather: and then I shall know it's off. Oh, shan't I be on thorns till the time for an answer comes and goes!"

He snatched his cap and vaulted off with the letter before he could be stopped. Aunt Dean had a curious look on her face, and sat biting her lips. She had not intended the letter to go.

The first post that could possibly bring an answer brought one.

Jack was not at home. Aunt Dean had sent him out on an early commission, watched for the postman, and hastened to the door herself to receive what he might bring. He brought two letters —as it chanced. One from the Rector of Timberdale; one from Alice Dean. Mrs. Dean locked up the one in her private drawer upstairs: the other she left on the breakfast-table.

"Peggy says the postman has been here, aunt!" cried the boy, all excitement, as he ran in.

"Yes, dear. He brought a letter from Alice."

"And nothing from Timberdale?"

"Well, I don't know that you could quite expect it by this post, Jack. Your father might like to take a little time for consideration. You may read Alice's letter, my boy: she comes home this day week for the summer holidays."

"Not till this day week!" cried Jack, frightfully disappointed. "Why, I shall have sailed then, if I go, Aunt Dean! I shall not see her."

"Well, dear, you will see her when you come home again."

Aunt Dean had no more commissions for Jack after that, and each time the postman was expected, he placed himself outside the door to wait for him. The man brought no other letter. The reasonable time for an answer went by, and none came.

"Aunt Dean, I suppose I may get my outfit now," said Jack, only half satisfied. "But I wish I had told him to write in any case: just a line."

"According to what you said, you know, Jack, silence must be

taken for consent."

"Yes, I know. I'd rather have had a word, though, and made certain. I wish there was time for me just to run over to Timberdale and see him!"

"But there's not, Jack, more's the pity: you would lose the ship. Get a piece of paper and make out a list of the articles the second mate told you you would want."

The *Rose of Delhi* sailed out of port for Calcutta, and John Tanerton with her, having signed articles to serve in her for four years. The night before his departure he wrote a short letter of farewell to his stepfather, thanking him for his tacit consent, and promising to do his best to get on, concluding it with love to himself and to Herbert, and to the Rectory servants. Which letter somehow got put into Aunt Dean's kitchen fire, and never reached Timberdale.

Aunt Dean watched the *Rose of Delhi* sail by; Jack, in his bran-new uniform, waving his last farewell to her with his gold-banded cap. The sigh of relief she heaved when the fine vessel was out of sight seemed to do her good. Then she bolted herself into her chamber, and opened Mr. Lewis's letter, which had lain untouched till then. As she expected, it contained a positive interdiction, written half sternly, half lovingly, for John to sail in the *Rose of Delhi*, or to think more of the sea. Moreover, it commanded him to come home at once, and it contained a promise that he should be placed to learn the farming without delay. Aunt Dean tripped down to Peggy's fire and burnt that too.

There was a dreadful fuss when Jack's departure became known at Timberdale. It fell upon the parson like a thunderbolt. He came striding through the ravine to Crabb Cot, and actually burst out crying while telling the news to the Squire. He feared he had failed somehow in bringing John up, he said, or he never would have repaid him with this base disobedience and ingratitude. For, you see, the poor man thought Jack had received his letter, and gone off in defiance of it. The Squire agreed with him that Jack deserved the cat-o'-nine tails, as did all other boys who traitorously decamped to sea.

Before the hay was all in, Aunt Dean was back at Timberdale, bringing Alice with her and the bills for the outfit. She let the parson think what he would about Jack, ignoring all knowledge of the letter, and affecting to believe that Jack could not have had it. But the parson argued that Jack must have had it, and did have it, or it would have come back to him. The only one to say a good word for Jack was Alice. She persisted in an opinion that Jack could not be either disobedient or ungrateful, and that there must have been some strange mistake somewhere.

Aunt Dean's work was not all done. She took the poor parson under her wing, and proved to him that he had no resource now but to disinherit Jack, and made Herbert the heir. To leave money to Jack would be wanton waste, she urged, for he would be sure to squander it: better bequeath all to Herbert, who would of course look after his brother in later life, and help him if he needed help. So Mr. Hill, one of the Worcester solicitors, was sent for to

Timberdale to receive instructions for making the parson's will in Herbert's favour, and to cut Jack off with a shilling.

That night, after Mr. Hill had gone back again, was one of the worst the parson had ever spent. He was a just man and a kind one, and he felt racked with fear lest he had taken too severe a measure, and one that his late wife, the true owner of the money and John's mother, would never have sanctioned. His bed was fevered, his pillow a torment; up he got, and walked the room in his night-shirt.

"My Lord and God knoweth that I would do what is right," he groaned. "I am sorely troubled. Youth is vain and desperately thoughtless; perhaps the boy, in his love of adventure, never looked at the step in the light of ingratitude. I cannot cut him quite off; I should never again find peace of mind if I did it. He shall have a little; and perhaps if he grows into a steady fellow and comes back what he ought to be, I may alter the will later and leave them equal inheritors."

The next day the parson wrote privately to Mr. Hill, saying he had reconsidered his determination and would let Jack inherit to the extent of a hundred and fifty pounds a year.

Herbert came home for the long vacation; and he and Alice were together as they had been before that upstart Jack stepped in. They often came to the Squire's and oftener to the Coneys'. Grace Coney, a niece of old Coney, had come to live at the farm; she was a nice girl, and she and Alice liked each other. You might see them with Herbert strolling about the fields any hour

in the day. At home Alice and Herbert seemed never to care to separate. Mrs. Dean watched them quietly, and thought how beautifully her plans had worked.

Aunt Dean did not go home till October. After she left, the parson had a stroke of paralysis. Charles Ashton, then just ordained to priest's orders, took the duty. Mrs. Dean came back again for Christmas. As if she would let Alice stay away from the Parsonage when Herbert was at home!

The *Rose of Delhi* did not come back for nearly two years. She was what is called a free ship, and took charters for any place she could make money by. One day Alice Dean was leaning out of the windows of her mother's house, gazing wistfully on the sparkling sea, when a grand and stately vessel came sailing homewards, and some brown-faced young fellow on the quarter deck set on to swing his cap violently by way of hailing her. She looked to the flag which happened to be flying, and read the name there, "*The Rose of Delhi*." It must be Jack who was saluting. Alice burst into tears of emotion.

He came up from the docks the same day. A great, brown, handsome fellow with the old single-hearted, open manners. And he clasped Alice in his arms and kissed her ever so many times before she could get free. Being a grown-up young lady now, she did not approve of unceremonious kissing, and told Jack so. Aunt Dean was not present, or she might have told him so more to the purpose.

Jack had given satisfaction, and was getting on. He told Alice

privately that he did not like the sea so much as he anticipated, and could not believe how any other fellow did like it; but as he had chosen it as his calling, he meant to stand by it. He went to Timberdale, in spite of Aunt Dean's advice and efforts to keep him away. Herbert was absent, she said; the Rector ill and childish. Jack found it all too true. Mr. Lewis's mind had failed and his health was breaking. He knew Jack and was very affectionate with him, but seemed not to remember anything of the past. So never a word did Jack hear of his own disobedience, or of any missing letters.

One person alone questioned him; and that was Alice. It was after he got back from Timberdale. She asked him to tell her the history of his sailing in the *Rose of Delhi*, and he gave it in detail, without reserve. When he spoke of the postscript that Aunt Dean had bade him add to his letter, arranging that silence should be taken for consent, and that as no answer had come, he of course had so taken it, the girl turned sick and faint. She saw the treachery that had been at work and where it had lain; but for her mother's sake she hushed it up and let the matter pass. Alice had not lived with her mother so many years without detecting her propensity for deceit.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.