HENRY WOOD

JOHNNY LUDLOW, SIXTH SERIES

Henry Wood
Johnny Ludlow, Sixth Series

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Johnny Ludlow, Sixth Series:

Содержание

Mrs. Henry Wood
Johnny Ludlow, Sixth Series

"God sent his Singers upon earth
With songs of sadness and of mirth,
That they might touch the hearts of men,
And bring them back to heaven again."

Longfellow.

THE MYSTERY AT NUMBER SEVEN

I.—MONTPELLIER-BY-SEA

"Let us go and give her a turn," cried the Squire.

Tod laughed. "What, all of us?" said he.

"To be sure. All of us. Why not? We'll start to-morrow."

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Todhetley, dismay in her mild tones. "Children and all?"

"Children and all; and take Hannah to see to them," said the Squire. "You don't count, Joe: you will be off elsewhere."

"We could never be ready," said the Mater, looking the image of perplexity. "To-morrow's Friday. Besides, there would be no time to write to Mary."

"*Write to her!*" cried the Squire, turning sharply on his heel as he paced the room in his nankeen morning-coat. "And who do you suppose is going to write to her? Why, it would cause her to make all sorts of preparation, put her to no end of trouble. A pretty conjurer you'd make! We will take her by surprise: that's what we will do."

"But if, when we got there, we should find her rooms are let, sir?" said I, the possibility striking me.

"Then we'll go into others, Johnny. A spell at the seaside will be a change for us all."

This conversation, and the Squire's planning-out, arose through a letter we had just received from Mary Blair—poor Blair's widow, if you have not forgotten him, who went to his end through that Gazette of Jerry's. After a few ups and downs, trying at this thing for a living, trying at that, Mrs. Blair had now settled in a house at the seaside, and opened a day-school. She hoped to get on in it in time, she wrote, especially if she could be so fortunate as to let her drawing-room to visitors. The Squire, always impulsive and good-hearted, at once cried out that *we* would go and take it.

"It will be doing her a good turn, you see," he ran on; "and when we leave I dare say she'll find other people ready to go in. Let's see"—picking up the letter to refer to the address—"No. 6, Seaboard Terrace, Montpellier-by-Sea. Whereabouts is Montpellier-by-Sea?"

"Never heard of it in my life," cried Tod. "Don't believe there is such a place."

"Be quiet, Joe. I fancy it lies somewhere towards Saltwater."

Tod flung back his head. "Saltwater! A nice common place that is!"

"Hold your tongue, sir. Johnny, fetch me the railway guide."

Upon looking at the guide, it was found there; "Montpellier-by-Sea;" the last station before getting to Saltwater. As to Saltwater, it might be common, as Tod said; for it was crowded

with all sorts of people, but it was lively and healthy.

Not on the next day, Friday, for it was impossible to get ready in such a heap of a hurry, but on the following Tuesday we started. Tod had left on the Saturday for Gloucestershire. His own mother's relatives lived there, and they were always inviting him.

"Montpellier-by-Sea?" cried the railway clerk in a doubting tone as we were getting the tickets. "Let's see? Where is that?"

Of course that set the Squire exploding. What right had clerks to pretend to issue tickets unless they knew their business? The clerk in question coolly ran his finger down the railway list he had turned to, and then gave us the tickets.

"It is a station not much frequented, you see," he civilly observed. "Travellers mostly go on to Saltwater."

But for the train being due, and our having to make a rush for the platform, the Squire would have waited to give the young man a piece of his mind. "Saltwater, indeed!" said he. "I wonder the fellow does not issue his edict as to where people shall go and where they shan't go."

We arrived in due time at our destination. It was written up as large as life on a white board, "Montpellier-by-Sea." A small roadside station, open to the country around; no signs of sea or of houses to be seen; a broad rural district, apparently given over entirely to agriculture. On went the whistling train, leaving the group of us standing by our luggage on the platform. The Squire was staring about him doubtfully.

"Can you tell me where Seaboard Terrace is?"

"Seaboard Terrace?" repeated the station-master. "No, sir, I don't know it. There's no terrace of that name hereabouts. For that matter there are no terraces at all—no houses in fact."

The Squire's face was a picture. He saw that (save a solitary farm homestead or two) the country was bare of dwelling-places.

"This is Montpellier-by-Sea?" he questioned at last.

"Sure enough it is, sir. Munpler, it's called down here."

"Then Seaboard Terrace must be *somewhere* in it—somewhere about. What a strange thing!"

"Perhaps the gentlefolks want to go to Saltwater?" spoke up one of the two porters employed at the little station. "There's lots of terraces there. Here, Jim!"—calling to his fellow—"come here a minute. He'll know, sir; he comes from Saltwater."

Jim approached, and settled the doubt at once. He knew Seaboard Terrace very well indeed; it was at Saltwater; just out at the eastern end of it.

Yes, it was at Saltwater. And there were we, more than two miles off it, on a broiling hot day, when walking was impracticable, with all our trunks about us, and no fly to be had, or other means of getting on. The Squire went into one of his passions, and demanded why people living at Saltwater should give their address as Montpellier-by-Sea.

He had hardly patience to listen to the station-master's explanation—who acknowledged that we were not the first travelling party that had been deluded in like manner. Munpler

(as he and the rest of the natives persisted in calling it) was an extensive, straggling rural parish, filled with farm lands; an arm of it extended as far as Saltwater, and the new buildings at that end of Saltwater had rechristened themselves Montpellier-by-Sea, deeming it more aristocratic than the common old name. Had the Squire been able to transport the new buildings, builders and all, he had surely done it on the spot.

Well, we got on to Saltwater in the evening by another train, and to No. 6, Seaboard Terrace. Mary Blair was just delighted.

"If I had but known you were coming, if you had only written to me, I would have explained that it was Saltwater Station you must get out at, not Montpellier," she cried in deprecation.

"But, my dear, why on earth do you give in to a deception?" stormed the Squire. "Why call your place Montpellier when it's Saltwater?"

"I do what other people do," she sighed; "I was told it was Montpellier when I came here. Generally speaking, I have explained, when writing to friends, that it is really Saltwater, in spite of its fine name. I suppose I forgot it when writing to you—I had so much to say. The people really to blame are those who named it so."

"And that's true, and they ought to be shown up," said the Squire.

Seaboard Terrace consisted of seven houses, built in front of the sea a little beyond the town. The parlours had bay windows; the drawing-rooms had balconies and verandahs. The two end

houses, Nos. 1 and 7, were double houses, large and handsome, each of them being inhabited by a private family; the middle houses were smaller, most of them being let out in lodgings in the season. Mary Blair began talking that first evening as we sat together about the family who lived in the house next door to her, No. 7. Their name was Peahern, she said, and they had been so very, very kind to her since she took her house in March. Mr. Peahern had interested himself for her and got her several pupils; he was much respected at Saltwater. "Ah, he is a good man," she added; "but–"

"I'll call and thank him," interrupted the Squire. "I am proud to shake hands with such a man as that."

"You cannot," she said; "he and his wife have gone abroad. A great misfortune has lately befallen them."

"A great misfortune! What was it?"

I noticed a sort of cloud pass over Mary Blair's face, a hesitation in her manner before she replied. Mrs. Todhetley was sitting by her on the sofa; the Squire was in the armchair opposite them, and I at the table, as I had sat at our tea-dinner.

"Mr. Peahern was in business once—a wholesale druggist, I believe; but he made a fortune, and retired some years ago," began Mary. "Mrs. Peahern has bad health and is a little lame. She was very kind to me also—very good and kind indeed. They had one son—no other children; I think he was studying for the Bar; I am not sure; but he lived in London, and came down here occasionally. My young maid-servant, Susan, got acquainted

with their servants, and she gathered from their gossip that he, Edmund Peahern, a very handsome young man, was in some way a trouble to his parents. He was down at Easter, and stayed three weeks; and in May he came down again. What happened I don't know; I believe there was some scene with his father the day he arrived; anyway, Mr. Peahern was heard talking angrily to him; and that night he—he died."

She had dropped her voice to a whisper. The Squire spoke.

"Died! Was it a natural death?"

"No. A jury decided that he was insane; and he was buried here in the churchyard. Such a heap of claims and debts came to light, it was said. Mr. Peahern left his lawyer to pay them all, and went abroad with his poor wife for change of scene. It has been a great grief to me. I feel so sorry for them."

"Then, is the house shut up?"

"No. Two servants are left in it—the two housemaids. The cook, who had lived with them five and twenty years and was dreadfully affected at the calamity, went with her mistress. Nice, good-natured young women are these two that are left, running in most days to ask if they can do anything for me."

"It is good to have such neighbours," said the Squire. "And I hope you'll get on, my dear. How came you to be at this place at all?"

"It was through Mr. Lockett," she answered—the clergyman who had been so much with her husband before he died, and who had kept up a correspondence with her. Mr. Lockett's brother

was in practice as a doctor at Saltwater, and they thought she might perhaps do well if she came to it. So Mary's friends had screwed a point or two to put her into the house, and gave her besides a ten-pound note to start with.

"I tell you what it is, young Joe: if you run and reve yourself into that scarlet heat, you shan't come here with me again."

"But I like to race with the donkeys," replied young Joe. "I can run almost as fast as they, Johnny. I like to see the donkeys."

"Wouldn't it be better to ride a donkey, lad?"

He shook his head. "I have never had a ride but once," he answered: "I've no sixpences for it. That once Matilda treated me. She brings me on the sands."

"Who is Matilda?"

"Matilda at No. 7—Mr. Peahern's."

"Well, if you are a good boy, young Joe, and stay by me, you shall have a ride as soon as the donkeys come back."

They were fine sands. I sat down on a bench with a book; little Joe strained his eyes to look after the donkeys in the distance, cantering off with some young shavers like himself on their backs, their nursemaids walking quickly after them. Poor little Joe!—he had the gentlest, meekest face in the world, with his thoughtful look and nice eyes—waited and watched in quiet patience. The sands were crowded with people this afternoon; organs were playing, dancing dolls exhibiting; and vessels with their white sails spread glided smoothly up and down on the sparkling sea.

"And will you really pay the sixpence?" asked the little fellow presently. "They won't let me get on for less."

"Really and truly, Joe. I'll take you for a row in a boat some calm day, if mamma will allow you to go."

Joe looked grave. "I don't *much* like the water, please," said he, timidly. "Alfred Dale went on it in a boat and fell in, and was nearly drowned. He comes to mamma's school."

"Then we'll let the boats alone, Joe. There's Punch! He is going to set himself up yonder: wouldn't you like to run and see him?"

"But I might miss the donkeys," answered Joe.

He stood by me quietly, gazing in the direction taken by the donkeys; evidently they were his primary attraction. The other child, Mary, who was a baby when her father died (poor Baked Pie, as we boys used to call him at Frost's), was in Wales with Mrs. Blair's people. They had taken the child for a few months, until she saw whether she should get along at Saltwater.

But we thought she would get along. Her school was a morning school for little boys of good parentage, all of whom paid liberal terms; and she would be able to let her best rooms for at least six months in the year.

"There's Matilda! Oh, there's Matilda!"

It was quite a loud shout for little Joe. Looking up, I saw him rush to a rather good-looking young woman, neatly dressed in a black-and-white print gown and small shawl of the same, with black ribbons crossed on her straw bonnet. Servants did not dress

fine enough to set the Thames on fire in those days. Joe dragged her triumphantly up to me. She was one of the housemaids at No. 7.

"It's Matilda," he said; and the young woman curtsied. "And I am going to have a donkey-ride, Matilda; Mr. Johnny Ludlow's going to give the sixpence for me!"

"I know you by sight, sir," observed Matilda to me. "I have seen you go in and out of No. 6."

She had a pale olive complexion, with magnificent, melancholy dark eyes. Many persons would have called her handsome. I took a sort of liking for the girl—if only for her kindness to poor little fatherless Joe. In manner she was particularly quiet, subdued, and patient.

"You had a sad misfortune at your house not long ago," I observed to her, at a loss for something to say.

"Oh, sir, don't talk of it, please!" she answered, catching her breath. "I seem to have had the shivers at times ever since. It was me that found him."

Up cantered the donkeys; and presently away went Joe on the back of one, Matilda attending him. The ride was just over, and Joe beginning to enlarge on its delights to me, when another young woman, dressed precisely similar to Matilda, even to the zigzag white running pattern on the prim gown, and the black cotton gloves, was seen making her way towards us. She was nice-looking also, in a different way—fair, with blue eyes, and a laughing, arch face.

"Why, there's Jane Cross!" exclaimed Matilda. "What in the world have you come out for, Jane? Have you left the house safe?"

"As if I should leave it unsafe!" lightly retorted the one they had called Jane Cross. "The back door's locked, and here's the key of the front"—showing a huge key. "Why shouldn't I go out if you do, Matilda? The house is none so lively a one now, to stop in all alone."

"And that's true enough," was Matilda's quiet answer. "Little master Joe's here; he has been having a donkey-ride."

The two servants, fellow-housemaids, strolled off towards the sea, taking Joe with them. At the edge of the beach they encountered Hannah, who had just come on with our two children, Hugh and Lena. The maids sat down for a gossip, while the children took off their shoes and stockings to dabble in the gently rising tide.

And that was my introductory acquaintanceship with the servant-maids at No. 7. Unfortunately it did not end there.

Twilight was coming on. We had been out and about all day, had dined as usual at one o'clock (not to give unnecessary trouble), and had just finished tea in Mrs. Blair's parlour. It was where we generally took tea, and supper also. The Squire liked to sit in the open bay window and watch the passers-by as long as ever a glimmer of daylight lasted; and he could not see them so well in the drawing-room above. I was at the other corner of the bay window. The Mater and Mary Blair were on their favourite

seat, the sofa, at the end of the room, both knitting. In the room at the back, Mary held her morning school.

I sat facing towards the end house, No. 7. And I must here say that during the last two or three weeks I had met the housemaids several times on the sands, and so had become quite at home with each of them. Both appeared to be thoroughly well-conducted, estimable young women; but, of the two, I liked Jane Cross best; she was always so lively and pleasant-mannered. One day she told me why No. 7 generally called her by her two names —which I had thought rather odd. It appeared that when she entered her place two years before, the other housemaid was named Jane, so they took to call her by her full name, Jane Cross. That housemaid had left in about a twelvemonth, and Matilda had entered in her place. The servants were regarded as equals in the house, not one above the other, as is the case in many places. These details will probably be thought unnecessary and uncalled for, but you will soon see why I mention them. This was Monday. On the morrow we should have been three weeks at Saltwater, and the Squire did not yet talk of leaving. He was enjoying the free-and-easy life, and was as fond as a child of picking up shells on the sands and looking at Punch and the dancing dolls.

Well, we sat this evening in the bay window as usual, I facing No. 7. Thus sitting, I saw Matilda cross the strip of garden with a jug in her hand, and come out at the gate to fetch the beer for supper.

"There goes Jane Cross," cried the Squire, as she passed the

window. “Is it not, Johnny?”

“No, sir, it’s Matilda.” But the mistake was a very natural one, for the girls were about the same height and size, and were usually dressed alike, the same mourning having been supplied to both of them.

Ten minutes or so had elapsed when Matilda came back: she liked a gossip with the landlady of the Swan. Her pint jug was brimful of beer, and she shut the iron gate of No. 7 after her. Putting my head as far out at the window as it would go, to watch her indoors, for no earthly reason but that I had nothing else to do, I saw her try the front door, and then knock at it. This knock she repeated three times over at intervals, each knock being louder than the last.

“Are you shut out, Matilda?” I called out.

“Yes, sir, it seems like it,” she called back again, without turning her head. “Jane Cross must have gone to sleep.”

Had she been a footman with a carriage full of ladies in court trains behind him, she could not have given a louder or longer knock than she gave now. There was no bell to the front door at No. 7. But the knock remained unanswered and the door unopened.

“Matilda at No. 7 is locked out,” I said, laughing, bringing in my head and speaking to the parlour generally. “She has been to fetch the beer for supper, and can’t get in again.”

“The beer for supper?” repeated Mrs. Blair. “They generally go out at the back gate to fetch that, Johnny.”

"Anyhow, she took the front way to-night. I saw her come out."

Another tremendous knock. The Squire put his good old nose round the window-post; two boys and a lady, passing by, halted a minute to look on. It was getting exciting, and I ran out. She was still at the door, which stood in the middle of the house, between the sitting-rooms on each side.

"So you have got the key of the street, Matilda!"

"I can't make it out," she said; "what Jane Cross can be about, or why the door should be closed at all. I left it on the latch."

"Somebody has slipped in to make love to her. Your friend, the milkman, perhaps."

Evidently Matilda did not like the allusion to the milkman. Catching a glimpse of her face by the street lamp, I saw it had turned white. The milkman was supposed to be paying court at No. 7, but to which of the two maids gossip did not decide. Mrs. Blair's Susan, who knew them well, said it was Matilda.

"Why don't you try the back way?" I asked, after more waiting.

"Because I know the outer door is locked, sir. Jane Cross locked it just now, and that's why I came out this front way. I can try it, however."

She went round to the road that ran by the side of the house, and tried the door in the garden wall. It was fastened, as she had said. Seizing the bell-handle, she gave a loud peal—another, and another.

"I say, it seems odd, though," I cried, beginning to find it so.

"Do you think she can have gone out?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir. But—no; it's not likely, Master Johnny. I left her laying the cloth for our supper."

"Was she in the house alone?"

"We are always alone, sir; we don't have visitors. Anyway, none have been with us this evening."

I looked at the upper windows of the house. No light was to be seen in any of them, no sign of Jane Cross. The lower windows were hidden from view by the wall, which was high.

"I think she must have dropped asleep, Matilda, as you say. Suppose you come in through Mrs. Blair's and get over the wall?"

I ran round to tell the news to our people. Matilda followed me slowly; I thought, reluctantly. Even in the dim twilight, as she stood at our gate in hesitation, I could see how white her face was.

"What are you afraid of?" I asked her, going out again to where she stood.

"I hardly know, Master Johnny. Jane Cross used to have fits. Perhaps she has been frightened into one now."

"What should frighten her?"

The girl looked round in a scared manner before replying. Just then I found my jacket-sleeve wet. Her trembling hands had shaken a little of the ale upon it.

"If she—should have seen Mr. Edmund?" the girl brought out in a horrified whisper.

"Seen Mr. Edmund! Mr. Edmund who?—Mr. Edmund Peahern? Why, you don't surely mean his ghost?"

Her face was growing whiter. I stared at her in surprise.

"We have always been afraid of seeing something, she and me, since last May; we haven't liked the house at night-time. It has often been quite a scuffle which of us should fetch the beer, so as not to be the one left alone. Many a time I have stood right out at the back door while Jane Cross has gone for it."

I began to think her an idiot. If Jane Cross was another, why, perhaps she had frightened herself into a fit. All the more reason that somebody should see after her.

"Come along, Matilda; don't be foolish; we'll both get over the wall."

It was a calm, still summer evening, almost dark now. All the lot of us went out to the back garden, I whispering to them what the girl had said to me.

"Poor thing!" said Mrs. Todhetley, who had a sort of fellow-feeling for ghosts. "It has been very lonely for the young women; and if Jane Cross is subject to fits, she may be lying in one at this moment."

The wall between the gardens was nothing like as high as the outer one. Susan brought out a chair, and Matilda could have got over easily. But when she reached the top, she stuck there.

"I can't go on by myself; I dare not," she said, turning her frightened face towards us. "If Mr. Edmund is there–"

"Don't be a goose, girl!" interrupted the Squire, in doubt whether to laugh or scold. "Here, I'll go with you. Get on down. Hold the chair tight for me, Johnny."

We hoisted him over without damage. I leaped after him, and Susan, grinning with delight, came after me. She supposed that Jane Cross had slipped out somewhere during Matilda's absence.

The door faced the garden, and the Squire and Susan were the first to enter. There seemed to be no light anywhere, and the Squire went gingerly picking his way. I turned round to look for Matilda, who had hung back, and found her with her hand on the trellis-work of the porch, and the beer splashing over in her fear.

"I say, look here, Matilda; you must be a regular goose, as the Squire says, to put yourself into this fright before you know whether there's any cause for it. Susan says she has only stepped out somewhere."

She put up her hand and touched my arm, her lips the colour of chalk.

"Only last night that ever was, Mr. Johnny, as we were going up the staircase to bed, we heard a sound in the room as we passed it. It was just like a groan. Ask Jane Cross, else, sir."

"What room?"

"Mr. Edmund's; where he did it. She has heard him to-night, or seen him, or something, and has fallen into a fit."

The kitchen was on the right of the passage. Susan, knowing the ways of the house, soon lighted a candle. On a small round table was spread a white cloth, some bread and cheese, and two tumblers. A knife or two had seemingly been flung on it at random.

"Jane Cross! Jane Cross!" shouted the Squire, going forward

towards the front hall, Susan following with the candle. It was a good-sized hall; I could see that, with a handsome well-staircase at this end of it.

"Halloa! What's this? Johnny! Susan!—all of you come here! Here's somebody lying here. It must be the poor girl. Goodness bless my heart! Johnny, help me to raise her!"

Still and white she was lying, underneath the opening of the staircase. Upon lifting her head, it fell back in a curious manner. We both backed a little. Susan held the candle nearer. As its light fell on the upturned face, the girl shrieked.

"She is in a fit," cried Matilda.

"God help her!" whispered the Squire. "I fear this is something worse than a fit. We must have a doctor."

Susan thrust the candlestick into my hand, and ran out at the back door, saying she'd fetch Mr. Lockett. Back she came in a moment: the garden gate was locked, and the key not in it.

"There's the front door, girl," stuttered the Squire, angry with her for returning, though it was no fault of hers. He was like one off his head, and his nose and cheeks had turned blue.

But there could be no more exit by the front door than by the back. It was locked, and the key gone. Who had done these things? what strange mystery was here? Locking the poor girl in the house to kill her!

Matilda, who had lighted another candle, found the key of the back gate lying on the kitchen dresser. Susan caught it up, and flew away. It was a most uncomfortable moment. There lay Jane

Cross, pale and motionless, and it seemed that we were helpless to aid her.

"Ask that stupid thing to bring a pillow or a cushion, Johnny! Ghosts, indeed! The idiots that women are!"

"What else has done it? what else was there to hurt her?" remonstrated Matilda, bringing up the second candle. "She wouldn't fall into a fit for nothing, sir."

And now that more light was present, we began to see other features of the scene. Nearly close to Jane Cross lay a work-basket, overturned, a flat, open basket, a foot and a half square. Reels of cotton, scissors, tapes, small bundles of work tied up, and such-like things lay scattered around.

The Squire looked at these, and then at the opening above. "Can she have fallen down the well?" he asked, in a low tone. And Matilda, catching the words, gave a cry of dismay, and burst into tears.

"A pillow, girl! A pillow, or a cushion!"

She went into one of the sitting-rooms and brought out a sofa-cushion. The Squire, going down on his knees, for he was not good at stooping, told me to slip it under while he raised the head.

A sound of feet, a sudden flash of light from a bull's-eye, and a policeman came upon the scene. The man was quietly passing on his beat when met by Susan. In her excitement she told him what had happened, and sent him in. We knew the man, whose beat lay at this end of Saltwater; a civil man, named Knapp. He knelt down where the Squire had just been kneeling, touching

Jane Cross here and there.

"She's dead, sir," he said. "There can be no mistake about that."

"She must have fallen down the well of the staircase, I fear," observed the Squire.

"Well—yes; perhaps so," assented the man in a doubtful tone. "But what of this?"

He flung the great light in front of poor Jane Cross's dress. A small portion of the body, where the gown fastened in front, had been torn away, as well as one of the wristbands.

"It's no fall," said the man. "It's foul play—as I think."

"Goodness bless me!" gasped the Squire. "Some villains must have got in. This comes of that other one's having left the front door on the latch." But I am not sure that any of us, including himself, believed she could be really dead.

Susan returned with speed, and was followed by Mr. Lockett. He was a young man, thirty perhaps, pale and quiet, and much like what I remembered of his brother. Poor Jane Cross was certainly dead, he said—had been dead, he thought, an hour.

But this could scarcely have been, as we knew. It was not, at the very utmost, above twenty-five minutes since Matilda went out to fetch the beer, leaving her alive and well. Mr. Lockett looked again, but thought he was not mistaken. When a young doctor takes up a crotchet, he likes to hold to it.

A nameless sensation of awe fell upon us all. Dead! In that sudden manner! The Squire rubbed up his head like a helpless

lunatic; Susan's eyes were round with horror; Matilda had thrown her apron over her face to hide its grief and tears.

Leaving her for the present where she was, we turned to go upstairs. I stooped to pick up the overturned basket, but the policeman sharply told me to let all things remain as they were until he had time to look into them.

The first thing the man did, on reaching the landing above, was to open the room doors one by one, and throw his bull's-eye light into them. They were all right, unoccupied, straight and tidy. On the landing of the upper floor lay one or two articles, which seemed to indicate that some kind of struggle had taken place there. A thimble here, a bodkin there, also the bit that had been torn out of the girl's gown in front, and the wristband from the sleeve. The balustrades were very handsome, but very low; on this upper landing, dangerously low. These bedrooms were all in order; the one in which the two servants slept, alone showing signs of occupation.

Downstairs went Knapp again, carrying with him the torn-out pieces, to compare them with the gown. It was the print gown I had often seen Jane Cross wear, a black gown with white zigzag lines running down it. Matilda was wearing the fellow to it now. The pieces fitted in exactly.

"The struggle must have taken place upstairs: not here," observed the doctor.

Matilda, questioned and cross-questioned by the policeman, gave as succinct an account of the evening as her distressed state

allowed. We stood round the kitchen while she told it.

Neither she nor Jane Cross had gone out at all that day. Monday was rather a busy day with them, for they generally did a bit of washing. After tea, which they took between four and five o'clock, they went up to their bedroom, it being livelier there than in the kitchen, the window looking down the side road. Matilda sat down to write a letter to her brother, who lived at a distance; Jane Cross sat at the window doing a job of sewing. They sat there all the evening, writing, working, and sometimes talking. At dusk, Jane remarked that it was getting blind man's holiday, and that she should go on downstairs and lay the supper. Upon that, Matilda finished her letter quickly, folded and directed it, and followed her down. Jane had not yet laid the cloth, but was then taking it out of the drawer. "You go and fetch the beer, Matilda," she said: and Matilda was glad to do so. "You can't go that way: I have locked the gate," Jane called out, seeing Matilda turning towards the back; accordingly she went out at the front door, leaving it on the latch. Such was her account; and I have given it almost verbatim.

"On the latch," repeated the policeman, taking up the words. "Does that mean that you left it open?"

"I drew it quite to, so that it looked as if it were shut; it was a heavy door, and would keep so," was Matilda's answer. "I did it, not to give Jane the trouble to open it to me. When I got back I found it shut and could not get in."

The policeman mused. "You say it was Jane Cross who locked

the back door in the wall?"

"Yes," said Matilda. "She had locked it before I got downstairs. We liked to lock that door early, because it could be opened from the outside—while the front door could not be."

"And she had not put these things on the table when you went out for the beer?"—pointing to the dishes.

"No: she was only then putting the cloth. As I turned round from taking the beer-jug from its hook, the fling she gave the cloth caused the air to whiffle in my face like a wind. She had not begun to reach out the dishes."

"How long were you away?"

"I don't know exactly," she answered, with a moan. "Rather longer than usual, because I took my letter to the post before going to the Swan."

"It was about ten minutes," I interposed. "I was at the window next door, and saw Matilda go out and come back."

"Ten minutes!" repeated the policeman. "Quite long enough for some ruffian to come in and fling her over the stairs."

"But who would do it?" asked Matilda, looking up at him with her poor pale face.

"Ah, that's the question; that's what we must find out," said Knapp. "Was the kitchen just as it was when you left it?"

"Yes—except that she had put the bread and cheese on the table. And the glasses, and knives," added the girl, looking round at the said table, which remained as we had found it, "but not the plates."

"Well now, to go to something else: Did she bring her work-basket downstairs with her from the bedroom when she remarked to you that she would go and put the supper on?"

"No, she did not."

"You are sure of that?"

"Yes. She left the basket on the chair in front of her where it had been standing. She just got up and shook the threads from off her gown, and went on down. When I left the room the basket was there; I saw it. And I think," added the girl, with a great sob, "I think that while laying the supper she must have gone upstairs again to fetch the basket, and must have fallen against the banisters with fright, and overbalanced herself."

"Fright at what?" asked Knapp.

Matilda shivered. Susan whispered to him that they were afraid at night of seeing the ghost of Mr. Edmund Peahern.

The man glanced keenly at Matilda for a minute. "Did you ever see it?" he asked.

"No," she shuddered. "But there are strange noises, and we think it is in the house."

"Well," said Knapp, coughing to hide a comical smile, "ghosts don't tear pieces out of gowns—that ever I heard of. I should say it was something worse than a ghost that has been here to-night. Had this poor girl any sweetheart?"

"No," said Matilda.

"Have you one?"

"No."

"Except Owen the milkman."

A red streak flashed into Matilda's cheeks. I knew Owen: he was Mrs. Blair's milkman also.

"I think Owen must be your sweetheart or hers," went on Knapp. "I've seen him, often enough, talking and laughing with you both when bringing the afternoon's milk round. Ten minutes at a stretch he has stayed in this garden, when he need not have been as many moments."

"There has been no harm: and it's nothing to anybody," said Matilda.

The key of the front door was searched for, high and low; but it could not be found. Whoever locked the door, must have made off with the key. But for that, and for the evidences of the scuffle above and the pieces torn out of the gown, we should have thought Matilda's opinion was correct: that Jane Cross had gone upstairs for her basket, and through some wretched accident had pitched over the balustrades. Matilda could not relinquish the notion.

"It was only a week ago that ever was—a week ago this very day—that Jane Cross nearly fell over there. We were both running upstairs, trying in sport which should get first into our bedroom; and, in jostling one another on the landing, she all but overbalanced herself. I caught hold of her to save her. It's true—if it were the last word I had to speak."

Matilda broke down, with a dreadful fit of sobbing. Altogether she struck me as being about as excitable a young woman as one

could meet in a summer day's journey.

Nothing more could be made out of it this evening. Jane Cross had met her death, and some evil or other must have led to it. The police took possession of the house for the night: and Matilda, out of compassion, was brought to ours. To describe the Mater's shock and Mary Blair's, when they heard the news, would be beyond me.

All sorts of conjectures arose in the neighbourhood. The most popular belief was that some person must have perceived the front door open, and, whether with a good or a bad intention, entered the house; that he must have stolen upstairs, met Jane Cross on the top landing, and flung her down in a scuffle. That he must then have let himself out at the front door and locked it after him.

Against this theory there were obstacles. From the time of Matilda's leaving the house till her return, certainly not more than ten minutes had elapsed, perhaps not quite as much, and this was a very short space of time for what had been done in it. Moreover the chances were that I, sitting at the next window, should have seen any one going in or out; though it was not of course certain. I had got up once to ring the bell, and stayed a minute or two away from the window, talking with Mary Blair and the Mater.

Some people thought the assassin (is it too much to call him so?) had been admitted by Jane Cross herself; or he might have been in hiding in the garden before she locked the door. In short, the various opinions would fill a volume.

But suspicion fell chiefly upon one person—and that was Thomas Owen the milkman. Though, perhaps, "suspicion" is too strong a word to give to it—I ought rather to say "doubt." These Owens were originally from Wales, very respectable people. The milk business was their own; and, since the father's death, which happened only a few months before, the son had carried it on in conjunction with his mother. He was a young man of three or four and twenty, with a fresh colour and open countenance, rather superior in manners and education. The carrying out the milk himself was a temporary arrangement, the boy employed for it being ill. That he had often lingered at No. 7, laughing with the two young women, was well known; he had also been seen to accost them in the street. Only the previous day, he and Matilda had stayed talking in the churchyard after morning service when everybody else had left it; and he had walked up nearly as far as Seaboard Terrace with Jane Cross in the evening. A notion existed that he had entered the house on the Monday evening, for who else was it likely to have been, cried everybody. Which was, of course, logic. At last a rumour arose—arose on the Tuesday—that Owen had been *seen* to leave the house at dusk on the fatal evening; that this could be proved. If so, it looked rather black. I was startled, for I had liked the man.

The next day, Wednesday, the key was found. A gardener who did up the gardens of the other end house, No. 1, every Wednesday, was raking the ground underneath some dwarf pines that grew close against the front railings, and raked out a big

door-key. About a dozen people came rushing off with it to No. 7.

It was the missing key. It fitted into the door at once, locked and unlocked it. When the villain had made his way from the house after doing the mischief, he must have flung the key over amidst the pines, thinking no doubt it would lie hidden there.

The coroner and jury assembled; but they could not make more of the matter than we had made. Jane Cross had died of the fall down the well-staircase, which had broken her neck; and it was pretty evident she had been flung down. Beyond the one chief and fatal injury, she was not harmed in any way; not by so much as a scratch. Matilda, whose surname turned out to be Valentine, having got over the first shock, gave her testimony with subdued composure. She was affected at parts of it, and said she would have saved Jane Cross's life with her own: and no one could doubt that she spoke the truth. She persisted in asserting her opinion that there had been no scuffle, in spite of appearances; but that the girl had been terrified in some way and had accidentally fallen over.

When Matilda was done with, Thomas Owen took her place. He was all in black, having dressed himself to come to the inquest and wearing mourning for his father; and I must say, looking at him now, you'd never have supposed he carried out milk-pails.

Yes, he had known the poor young woman in question, he readily said in answer to questions; had been fond of chaffing with the two girls a bit, but nothing more. Meant nothing by

it, nothing serious. Respected both of them; regarded them as perfectly well-conducted young women.—Was either of them his sweetheart? Certainly not. Had not courted either of them. Never thought of either of them as his future wife: should not consider a servant eligible for that position—at least, his mother would not. Of the two, he had liked Jane Cross the best. Did not know anything whatever of the circumstances attending the death; thought it a most deplorable calamity, and was never more shocked in his life than when he heard of it.

"Is there any truth in the report that you were at the house on Monday evening?" asked the coroner.

"There is no truth in it."

"I see him come out o' No. 7: I see him come out o' the side door in the garden wall," burst forth a boy's earnest voice from the back of the room.

"You saw me *not* come out of it," quietly replied Thomas Owen, turning round to see who it was that had spoken. "Oh, it is you, is it, Bob Jackson! Yes, you came running round the corner just as I turned from the door."

"You *were* there, then?" cried the coroner.

"No, sir. At the door, yes; that's true enough; but I was not inside it. What happened was this: on Monday I had some business at a farmhouse near Munpler, and set out to walk over there early in the evening. In passing down the side road by No. 7, I saw the two maids at the top window. One of them—I think it was Jane Cross—called out to ask me in a joking kind of way

whether I was about to pay them a visit; I answered, not then, but I would as I came back if they liked. Accordingly, in returning, I rang the bell. It was not answered, and I rang again with a like result. Upon that, I went straight home to my milk books, and did not stir out again, as my mother can prove. That is the truth, sir, on my oath; and the whole truth."

"What time was this?"

"I am not quite sure. It was getting dusk."

"Did you see anything of the young women this second time?"

"Not anything."

"Or hear anything?—Any noise?"

"None whatever. I supposed that they would not come to the door to me because it was late: I thought nothing else. I declare, sir, that this is all I know of the matter."

There was a pause when he concluded. Knapp, the policeman, and another one standing by his side, peered at Owen from under their eyebrows, as if they did not put implicit faith in his words: and the coroner recalled Matilda Valentine.

She readily confirmed the statement of his having passed along the side road, and Jane Cross's joking question to him. But she denied having heard him ring on his return, and said the door-bell had not rung at all that night. Which would seem to prove that Owen must have rung during the time she had gone out for the beer.

So, you perceive, the inquest brought forth no more available light, and had to confess itself baffled.

“A fine termination this is to our pleasure,” cried the Squire, gloomily. “I don’t like mysteries, Johnny. And of all the mysteries I have come across in my life, the greatest mystery is this at No. 7.”

THE MYSTERY AT NUMBER SEVEN

II.—OWEN, THE MILKMAN

It was a grand sea to-day: one of the grandest that we had seen at Saltwater. The waves were dancing and sparkling like silver; the blue of the sky was deeper than a painter's ultramarine. But to us, looking on it from Mrs. Blair's house in Seaboard Terrace, its brightness and beauty were dimmed.

"For you see, Johnny," observed the Squire to me, his face and tone alike gloomy—outward things take their impress from the mind—"with that dreadful affair at the next door jaundicing one's thoughts, the sea might as well be grey as blue, and the sky lowering with thunder-clouds. I repeat that I don't like mysteries: they act on me like a fit of indigestion."

The affair just was a mystery; to us, as to all Saltwater. More than a week had elapsed since the Monday evening when it took place, and poor Jane Cross now lay buried in the windy graveyard. On this said Monday evening, the two servant maids, Jane Cross and Matilda Valentine (left in the house, No. 7, Seaboard Terrace, during the absence of the family abroad), had been pursuing their ordinary occupations. While Jane Cross

was laying the cloth for supper in the kitchen, Matilda went out to fetch the usual pint of ale. On her return she could not get in. When admittance was obtained, Jane Cross lay dead in the hall, having fallen down the well of the staircase. Evidences of a scuffle on the upper landing could be traced, making it apparent that the fall was not accidental; that she had been flung down. Some doubt attached to Owen, the milkman, partly from his previous intimacy with the girls, chiefly because he had been seen leaving the back door of the house somewhere about the time it must have occurred. What Owen said was, that he had rung twice at the door, but his ring was not answered.

Matilda was to be pitied. The two young women had cared a good deal for one another, and the shock to Matilda was serious. The girl, now staying in our house, had worn a half-dazed look ever since, and avoided No. 7 as though it had the plague. Superstition in regard to the house had already been rife in both the servants' minds, in consequence of the unhappy death in it of their master's son, Edmund Peahern, some weeks back: and if Matilda had been afraid of seeing one ghost before (as she had been) she would now undoubtedly expect to see two of them.

On this same morning, as I stood with the Squire looking at the sea from the drawing-room window of No. 6, Matilda came in. Her large dark eyes had lost their former sparkle, her clear olive skin its freshness. She asked leave to speak to Mrs. Todhetley: and the Mater—who sat at the table adding up some bills, for our sojourn at Saltwater was drawing towards its close—told her, in

a kindly tone, to speak on.

"I am making bold to ask you, ma'am, whether you could help me to find a place in London," began Matilda, standing between the door and the table in her black dress. "I know, ma'am, you don't live in London, but a long way off it; Mrs. Blair has told me so, Master Johnny Ludlow also: but I thought perhaps you knew people there, and might be able to hear of something."

The Mater looked at Matilda without answering, and then round at us. Rather strange it was, a coincidence in a small way, that we had had a letter from London from Miss Deveen that morning, which had concluded with these lines of postscript: "Do you chance to know of any nice, capable young woman in want of a situation? One of my housemaids is going to leave."

Naturally this occurred to the Mater's mind when Matilda spoke. "What kind of situation do you wish for?" she asked.

"As housemaid, ma'am, or parlour-maid. I can do my duty well in either."

"But now, my girl," spoke up the Squire, turning from the window, "why need you leave Saltwater? You'd never like London after it. This is a clear, fresh, health-giving place, with beautiful sands and music on them all day long; London is nothing but smoke and fogs."

Matilda shook her head. "I could not stay here, sir."

"Nonsense, girl. Of course what has happened *has* happened, and it's very distressing; and you, of all people, must feel it so: but you will forget it in time. If you don't care to go back to No. 7

before Mr. and Mrs. Peahern come home–"

"I can never go back to No. 7, sir," she interrupted, a vehemence that seemed born of terror in her subdued voice. "Never in this world. I would rather die."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said the Squire, impatiently. "There's nothing the matter with No. 7. What has happened in it won't happen again."

"It is an unlucky house, sir; a haunted house," she contended with suppressed emotion. "And it's true that I would rather die outright than go back to live in it; for the terror of being there would slowly kill me. And so, ma'am," she added quickly to Mrs. Todhetley, evidently wishing to escape the subject, "I should like to go away altogether from Saltwater; and if you can help me to hear of a place in London, I shall be very grateful."

"I will consider of it, Matilda," was the answer. And when the girl had left the room the Mater asked us what we thought about recommending her to Miss Deveen. We saw no reason against it—not but that the Squire put the girl down as an idiot on the subject of haunted houses—and Miss Deveen was written to.

The upshot was, that on the next Saturday Matilda bade farewell to Saltwater and departed for Miss Deveen's, the Squire sarcastically assuring her that *that* house had no ghosts in it. We should be leaving, ourselves, the following Tuesday.

But, before that day came, it chanced that I saw Owen, the milkman. It was on the Sunday afternoon. I had taken little Joe Blair for a walk across the fields as far as Munpler (their

Montpellier-by-Sea, you know), and in returning met Thomas Owen. He wore his black Sunday clothes, and looked a downright fine fellow, as usual. There was something about the man I could not help liking, in spite of the doubt attaching to him.

"So Matilda Valentine is gone, sir," he observed, after we had exchanged a few sentences.

"Yes, she went yesterday," I answered, putting my back against the field fence, while young Joe went careering about in chase of a yellow butterfly. "And for my part, I don't wonder at the girl's not liking to stay at Saltwater. At least, in Seaboard Terrace."

"I was told this morning that Mr. and Mrs. Peahern were on their way home," he continued.

"Most likely they are. They'd naturally want to look into the affair for themselves."

"And I hope with all my heart they will be able to get some light out of it," returned Owen, warmly. "I mean to do *my* best to bring out the mystery, sir; and I sha'n't rest till it's done."

His words were fair, his tone was genuine. If it was indeed himself who had been the chief actor in the tragedy, he carried it off well. I hardly knew what to think. It is true I had taken a bit of a fancy to the man, according to my usual propensity to take a fancy, or the contrary; but I did not know much about him, and not anything of his antecedents. As he spoke to me now, his tone was marked, rather peculiar. It gave me a notion that he wanted to say more.

"Have you any idea that you will be able to trace it out?"

"For my own sake I should like to get the matter cleared up," he added, not directly answering my question. "People are beginning to turn the cold shoulder my way: one woman asked me to my face yesterday whether I did it. No, I told her, I did not do it, but I'd try and find out who did."

"You are sure you heard and saw nothing suspicious that night when you rang the bell and could not get in, Owen?"

"Not then, sir; no. I saw no light in the house and heard no noise."

"You have not any clue to go by, then?"

"Not much, sir, yet. But I can't help thinking somebody else has."

"Who is that?"

"Matilda."

"Matilda!" I repeated, in amazement. "Surely you can't suspect that she—that she was a party to any deed so cruel and wicked!"

"No, no, sir, I don't mean that; the young women were too good friends to harm one another: and whatever took place, took place while Matilda was out of the house. But I can't help fancying that she knows, or suspects, more of the matter than she will say. In short, that she is screening some one."

To me it seemed most unlikely. "Why do you judge so, Owen?"

"By her manner, sir. Not by much else. But I'll tell you

something that I saw. On the previous Wednesday when I left the afternoon milk at that tall house just beyond Seaboard Terrace, the family lodging there told me to call in the evening for the account, as they were leaving the next day. Accordingly I went; and was kept waiting so long before they paid me that it was all but dark when I came out. Just as I was passing the back door at No. 7, it was suddenly drawn open from the inside, and a man stood in the opening, whispering with one of the girls. She was crying, for I heard her sobs, and he kissed her and came out, and the door was hastily shut. He was an ill-looking man; so far at least as his clothes went; very shabby. His face I did not see, for he pulled his slouching round hat well over his brows as he walked away rapidly, and the black beard he wore covered his mouth and chin."

"Which of the maids was it?"

"I don't know, sir. The next day I chaffed them a bit about it, but they both declared that nobody had been there but the watchmaker, Mr. Renninson, who goes every Wednesday to wind up the clocks, and that it must have been him I saw, for he was late that evening. I said no more; it was no business of mine; but the man I saw go out was just about as much like Renninson as he was like me."

"And do you fancy–"

"Please wait a minute, sir," he interrupted, "I haven't finished. Last Sunday evening, upon getting home after service, I found I had left my prayer-book in church. Not wishing to lose it, for it

was the one my father always used, I went back for it. However, the church was shut up, so I could not get in. It was a fine evening, and I took a stroll round the churchyard. In the corner of it, near to Mr. Edmund Peahern's tomb, they had buried poor Jane Cross but two days before—you know the spot, sir. Well, on the flat square of earth that covers her grave, stood Matilda Valentine, the greatest picture of distress you can imagine, tears streaming down her cheeks. She dried her eyes when she saw me, and we came away together. Naturally I fell to talking of Jane Cross and the death. 'I shall do as much as lies in my power to bring it to light,' I said to Matilda; 'or people may go on doubting me to the end. And I think the first step must be to find out who the man was that called in upon you the previous Wednesday night.' Well, sir, with that, instead of making any answering remark as a Christian would, or a rational being, let us say, Matilda gives a smothered shriek and darts away out of the churchyard. I couldn't make her out; and all in a minute a conviction flashed over me, though I hardly know why, that she knew who was the author of the calamity, and was screening him; or at any rate that she had her suspicions, if she did not actually know. And I think so still, sir."

I shook my head, not seeing grounds to agree with Owen. He resumed:

"The next morning, between nine and ten, I was in the shop, putting a pint of cream which had been ordered into a can, when to my surprise Matilda walked in, cool and calm. She said she

had come to tell me that the man I had seen leave the house was her brother. He had fallen into trouble through having become security for a fellow workman, had had all his things sold up, including his tools, and had walked every step of the way—thirty miles—to ask her if she could help him. She did help him as far as she could, giving him what little money she had by her, and Jane Cross had added ten shillings to it. He had got in only at dusk, she said, had taken some supper with them, and left again afterwards, and that she was letting him out at the gate when I must have been passing it. She did not see me, for her eyes were dim with crying: her heart felt fit to break in saying farewell. That was the truth, she declared, and that her brother had had no more to do with Jane's death than she or I had; he was away again out of Saltwater the same night he came into it."

"Well? Did you not believe her?"

"No, sir," answered Owen, boldly. "I did not. If this was true, why should she have gone off into that smothered shriek in the churchyard when I mentioned him, and rush away in a fright?"

I could not tell. Owen's words set me thinking.

"I did not know which of the two girls it was who let the man out that Wednesday night, for I did not clearly see; but, sir, the impression on my mind at the moment was, that it was Jane Cross. Jane Cross, and not Matilda. If so, why does she tell me this tale about her brother, and say it was herself?"

"And if it was Jane Cross?"

Owen shook his head. "All sorts of notions occur to me,

sir. Sometimes I fancy that the man might have been Jane's sweetheart, that he might have been there again on the Monday night, and done the mischief in a quarrel; and that Matilda is holding her tongue because it is her brother. Let the truth be what it will, Matilda's manner convinces me of one thing: that there's something she is concealing, and that it is half frightening her wits out of her.–You are going to leave Saltwater, I hear, sir," added the young man in a different tone, "and I am glad to have the opportunity of saying this, for I should not like you to carry away any doubt of me. I'll bring the matter to light if I can."

Touching his hat, he walked onwards, leaving my thoughts all in a whirligig.

Was Owen right in drawing these conclusions?—or was he purposely giving a wrong colouring to facts, and seeking craftily to throw suspicion off himself? It was a nice question, one I could make neither top nor tail of. But, looking back to the fatal evening, weighing this point, sifting that, I began to see that Matilda showed more anxiety, more terror, than she need have shown *before* she knew that any ill had happened. Had she a prevision, as she stood at the door with the jug of ale in her hand, that some evil might have chanced? Did she leave some individual in the house with Jane Cross when she went to the Swan to get the ale?—and was it her brother? Did she leave Owen in the house, and was she screening him?

"Why, Matilda! Is it you?"

It was fourteen months later, and autumn weather, and I had

just arrived in London at Miss Deveen's. My question to Matilda, who came into my dressing-room with some warm water to wash off the travelling dust, was not made in surprise at seeing *her*, for I supposed she was still in service at Miss Deveen's, but at seeing the change in her. Instead of the healthy and, so to say, handsome girl known at Saltwater, I saw a worn, weary, anxious-looking shadow, with a feverish fire in her wild dark eyes.

"Have you been ill, Matilda?"

"No, sir, not at all. I am quite well."

"You have grown very thin."

"It's the London air, sir. I think everybody must get thin who lives in it."

Very civilly and respectfully, but yet with an unmistakable air of reticence, spoke she. Somehow the girl was changed, and greatly changed. Perhaps she had been grieving after Jane Cross? Perhaps the secret of what had happened (if in truth Matilda knew it) lay upon her with too heavy a weight?

"Do you find Matilda a good servant?" I asked of Miss Deveen, later, she and I being alone together.

"A very good servant, Johnny. But she is going to leave me."

"Is she? Why?"

Miss Deveen only nodded, in answer to the first query, passing over the last. I supposed she did not wish to say.

"I think her so much altered."

"In what way, Johnny?"

"In looks: looks and manner. She is just a shadow. One might

say she had passed through a six months' fever. And what a curious light there is in her eyes!"

"She has always impressed me with the idea of having some great care upon her. None can mistake that she is a sorrowful woman. I hear that the other servants accuse her of having been 'crossed in love,'" added Miss Deveen, with a smile.

"She is thinner even than Miss Cattledon."

"And that, I daresay you think, need not be, Johnny! Miss Cattledon, by the way, is rather hard upon Matilda just now: calls her a 'demon.'"

"A demon! Why does she?"

"Well, I'll tell you. Though it is only a little domestic matter, one that perhaps you will hardly care to hear. You must know (to begin with) that Matilda has never made herself sociable with the other servants here; in return they have become somewhat prejudiced against her, and have been ready to play her tricks, tease her, and what not. But you must understand, Johnny, that I knew nothing of the state of affairs below; such matters rarely reach me. My cook, Hall, was especially at war with Matilda: in fact, I believe there was no love lost between the two. The girl's melancholy—for at times she does seem very melancholy —was openly put down by the rest to the assumption that she must have had some love affair in which the swain had played her false. They were continually worrying her on this score, and it no doubt irritated Matilda; but she rarely retorted, preferring rather to leave them and take refuge in her room."

"Why could they not let her alone?"

"People can't let one another alone, as I believe, Johnny. If they did, the world would be pleasanter to live in than it is."

"And I suppose Matilda got tired at last, and gave warning?"

"No. Some two or three weeks ago it appears that, by some means or other, Hall obtained access to a small trunk; one that Matilda keeps her treasures in, and has cautiously kept locked. If I thought Hall had opened this trunk with a key of her own, as Matilda accuses her of doing, I would not keep the woman in my house another day. But she declares to me most earnestly—for I had her before me here to question her—that Matilda, called suddenly out of her chamber, left the trunk open there, and the letter, of which I am about to tell you, lying, also open, by its side. Hall says that she went into the room—it adjoins her own—for something she wanted, and that all she did—and she admits this much—was to pick up the letter, carry it downstairs, read it to the other servants, and make fun over it."

"What letter was it?"

"Strictly speaking, it was only part of a letter: one begun but not concluded. It was in Matilda's own hand, apparently written a long time ago, for the ink was pale and faded, and it began 'Dearest Thomas Owen. The–'"

"Thomas Owen!" I exclaimed, starting in my chair. "Why, that is the milkman at Saltwater."

"I'm sure I don't know who he is, Johnny, and I don't suppose it matters. Only a few lines followed, three or four, speaking of

some private conversation that she had held with him on coming out of church the day before, and of some reproach that she had then made to him respecting Jane Cross. The words broke suddenly off there, as if the writer had been interrupted. But why Matilda did not complete the letter and send it, and why she should have kept it by her all this time, must be best known to herself."

"Jane Cross was her fellow-servant at Mr. Peahern's. She who was killed by falling down the staircase."

"Yes, poor thing, I remembered the name. But, to go on. In the evening, after the finding of this letter, I and Miss Cattledon were startled by a disturbance in the kitchen. Cries and screams, and loud, passionate words. Miss Cattledon ran down; I stayed at the top of the stairs. She found Hall, Matilda, and one of the others there, Matilda in a perfect storm of fury, attacking Hall like a maniac. She tore handfuls out of her hair, she bit her thumb until her teeth met in it: Hall, though by far the bigger person of the two, and I should have thought the stronger, had no chance against her; she seemed to be as a very reed in her hands, passion enduing Matilda with a strength perfectly unnatural. George, who had been out on an errand, came in at the moment, and by his help the women were parted. Cattledon maintains that Matilda, during the scene, was nothing less than a demon; quite mad. When it was over, the girl fell on the floor utterly exhausted, and lay like a dead thing, every bit of strength, almost of life, gone out of her."

"I never could have believed it of Matilda."

"Nor I, Johnny. I grant that the girl had just cause to be angry. How should we like to have our private places rifled, and their contents exhibited to and mocked at by the world; contents which to us seem sacred? But to have put herself into that wild rage was both unseemly and unaccountable. Her state then, and her state immediately afterwards, made me think—I speak it with all reverence, Johnny—of the poor people in holy writ from whom the evil spirits were cast out."

"Ay. It seems to be just such a case, Miss Deveen."

"Hall's thumb was so much injured that a doctor had to come daily to it for nine or ten days," continued Miss Deveen. "Of course, after this climax, I could not retain Matilda in my service; neither would she have remained in it. She indulged a feeling of the most bitter hatred to the women servants, to Hall especially —she had not much liked them before, as you may readily guess —and she said that nothing would induce her to remain with them, even had I been willing to keep her. So she has obtained a situation with some acquaintances of mine who live in this neighbourhood, and goes to it next week. That is why Matilda leaves me, Johnny."

In my heart I could not help being sorry for her, and said so. She looked so truly, terribly unhappy!

"I am very sorry for her," assented Miss Deveen. "And had I known the others were making her life here uncomfortable, I should have taken means to stop their pastime. Of the actual

facts, with regard to the letter, I cannot be at any certainty—I mean in my own mind. Hall is a respectable servant, and I have never had cause to think her untruthful during the three years she has lived with me: and she most positively holds to it that the little trunk was standing open on the table and the letter lying open beside it. Allowing that it was so, she had, of course, no right to touch either trunk or letter, still less to take the letter downstairs and exhibit it to the others, and I don't defend her conduct: but yet it is different from having rifled the lock of the trunk and taken the letter out."

"And Matilda accuses her of doing that?"

"Yes: and, on her side, holds to it just as positively. What Matilda tells me is this: On that day it chanced that Miss Cattledon had paid the women servants their quarter's wages. Matilda carried hers to her chamber, took this said little trunk out of her large box, where she keeps it, unlocked it and put the money into it. She disturbed nothing in the trunk; she says she had wrapped the sovereigns in a bit of paper, and she just slipped them inside, touching nothing else. She was shutting down the lid when she heard herself called to by me on the landing below. She waited to lock the box but not to put it up, leaving it standing on the table. I quite well remembered calling to the girl, having heard her run upstairs. I wanted her in my room."

Miss Deveen paused a minute, apparently thinking.

"Matilda has assured me again and again that she is quite sure she locked the little trunk, that there can be no mistake on that

point. Moreover, she asserts that the letter in question was lying at the bottom of the trunk beneath other things, and that she had not taken it out or touched it for months and months."

"And when she went upstairs again—did she find the little trunk open or shut?"

"She says she found it shut: shut and locked just as she had left it; and she replaced it in her large box, unconscious that any one had been to it."

"Was she long in your room, Miss Deveen?"

"Yes, Johnny, the best part of an hour. I wanted a little sewing done in a hurry, and told her to sit down there and then and do it. It was during this time that the cook, going upstairs herself, saw the trunk, and took the opportunity to do what she did do."

"I think I should feel inclined to believe Matilda. Her tale sounds the more probable."

"I don't know that, Johnny. I can hardly believe that a respectable woman, as Hall undoubtedly is, would deliberately unlock a fellow-servant's box with a false key. Whence did she get the key to do it? Had she previously provided herself with one? The lock is of the most simple description, for I have seen the trunk since, and Hall might possess a key that would readily fit it: but if so, as the woman herself says, how could she know it? In short, Johnny, it is one woman's word against another's: and, until this happened, I had deemed each of them to be equally credible."

To be sure there was reason in that. I sat thinking.

"Were it proved to have been as Matilda says, still I could not keep her," resumed Miss Deveen. "Mine is a peaceable, well-ordered household, and I should not like to know that one, subject to insane fits of temper, was a member of it. Though Hall in that case would get her discharge also."

"Do the people where Matilda is going know why she leaves?"

"Mrs. and Miss Soames. Yes. I told them all about it. But I told them at the same time, what I had then learnt—that Matilda's temper had doubtlessly been much tried here. It would not be tried in their house, they believed, and took her readily. She is an excellent servant, Johnny, let who will get her."

I could not resist the temptation of speaking to Matilda about this, an opportunity offering that same day. She came into the room with some letters just left by the postman.

"I thought my mistress was here, sir," she said, hesitating with the tray in her hand.

"Miss Deveen will be here in a minute: you can leave the letters. So you are going to take flight, Matilda! I have heard all about it. What a silly thing you must be to put yourself into that wonderful tantrum!"

"She broke into my box, and turned over its contents, and stole my letter to mock me," retorted Matilda, her fever-lighted eyes taking a momentary fierceness. "Who, put in my place, would not have gone into a tantrum, sir?"

"But she says she did not break into it."

"As surely as that is heaven's sun above us, she *did it*, Mr.

Johnny. She has been full of spite towards me for a long time, and she thought she would pay me out. I did but unlock the box, and slip the little paper of money in, and I locked it again instantly and brought the key away with me: I can never say anything truer than that, sir: to make a mistake about it is not possible."

No pen could convey the solemn earnestness with which she spoke. Somehow it impressed me. I hoped Hall would get served out.

"Yes, the wrong has triumphed for once. As far as I can see, sir, it often does triumph. Miss Deveen thinks great things of Hall, but she is deceived in her; and I daresay she will find her out sometime. It was Hall who ought to have been turned away instead of me. Not that I would stay here longer if I could."

"But you like Miss Deveen?"

"Very much indeed, sir; she is a good lady and a kind mistress. She spoke very well indeed of me to the new family where I am going, and I daresay I shall do well enough there.—Have you been to Saltwater lately, sir?" she added, abruptly.

"Never since. Do you get news from the place?"

She shook her head. "I have never heard a word from any soul in it. I have written to nobody, and nobody has written to me."

"And nothing more has come out about poor Jane Cross. It is still a mystery."

"And likely to be one," she replied, in a low tone.

"Perhaps so. Do you know what Owen the milkman thought?"

She had spoken the last sentence or two with her eyes bent,

fiddling with the silver waiter. Now they were raised quickly.

"Owen thought that you could clear up the mystery if you liked, Matilda. At least, that you possessed some clue to it. He told me so."

"Owen as good as said the same to me before I left," she replied, after a pause. "He is wrong, sir: but he must think it if he will. Is he—is he at Saltwater still?"

"For all I know to the contrary. This letter, that the servants here got at, was one you were beginning to write to Owen. Did–"

"I would rather not talk of that letter, Mr. Johnny: my private affairs concern myself only," she interrupted—and went out of the room like a shot.

Had anyone told me that during this short visit of mine in London I should come across the solution of the mystery of that tragedy enacted at No. 7, I might have been slow to credit it. Nevertheless, it was to be so.

Have you ever noticed, in going through life, that events seem to carry a sequence in themselves almost as though they bore in their own hands the guiding thread that connects them from beginning to end? For a time this thread will seem to be lost; to lie dormant, as though it had snapped, and the course of affairs it was holding to have disappeared for good. But lo! up peeps a little end when least expected, and we catch hold of it, and soon it grows into a handful; and what we had thought lost is again full of activity and gradually works itself out. Not a single syllable, good or bad, had we heard of that calamity at Saltwater during

the fourteen months which had passed since. The thread of it lay dormant. At Miss Deveen's it began to steal up again: Matilda, and her passion, and the letter she had commenced to Thomas Owen were to the fore: and before that visit of mine came to an end, the thread had, strange to say, unwound itself.

I was a favourite of Miss Deveen's: you may have gathered that from past papers. One day, when she was going shopping, she asked me to accompany her and not Miss Cattledon: which made that rejected lady's face all the more like vinegar. So we set off in the carriage.

"Are we going to Regent Street, Miss Deveen?"

"Not to-day, Johnny. I like to encourage my neighbouring tradespeople, and shall buy my new silk here. We have excellent shops not far off."

After a few intricate turnings and windings, the carriage stopped before a large linendraper's, which stood amidst a colony of shops nearly a mile from Miss Deveen's. George came round to open the door.

"Now what will you do, Johnny?" said Miss Deveen. "I daresay I shall be half an hour in here, looking at silks and calico; and I won't inflict that penalty on you. Shall the carriage take you for a short drive the while, or will you wait in it?—or walk about?"

"I will wait in the street here," I said, "and come in to you when I am tired. I like looking at shops." And I do like it.

The next shop to the linendraper's was a carver and gilder's: he

had some good pictures displayed in his window; at any rate, they looked good to me: and there I took up my station to begin with.

"How do you do, sir? Have you forgotten me?"

The words came from a young man who stood at the next door, close to me, causing me to turn quickly to him from gazing at the pictures. No, I had not forgotten him. I knew him instantly. It was Owen, the milkman.

After a few words had passed, I went inside. It was a large shop, well fitted up with cans and things pertaining to a milkman's business. The window-board was prettily set off with moss, ferns, a bowl containing gold and silver fish, a miniature fountain, and a rush basket of fresh eggs. Over the door was his own name, Thomas Owen.

"You are living here, Owen?"

"Yes, sir."

"But why have you left Saltwater?"

"Because, Mr. Johnny, the place looked askance at me. People, in their own minds, set down that miserable affair at No. 7 to my credit. Once or twice I was hooted at by the street boys, asking what I had done with Jane Cross. My mother couldn't stand that, and I couldn't stand it, so we just sold our business at Saltwater, and bought this one here. And a good change it has been, in a pecuniary point of view: this is an excellent connection, and grows larger every day."

"I'm sure I am glad to hear it."

"At first, mother couldn't bear London: she longed for the

country air and the green fields: but she is reconciled to it now. Perhaps she'll have an opportunity soon of going back to see her own old Welsh mountains, and of staying there if it pleases her."

"Then I should say you are going to be married, Owen."

He laughed and nodded. "You'll wish me good luck, won't you, sir? She's the only daughter at the next door, the grocer's."

"That I will. Have you discovered anymore of that mysterious business, Owen?"

"At Saltwater? No, sir: not anything at all that could touch the matter itself. But I have heard a good bit that bears upon it."

"Do you still suspect that Matilda could tell if she chose?"

"I suspect more than that, sir."

The man's words were curiously significant. He had a bit of fern in his hand, and his fresh, open, intelligent face was bent downwards, as if he wanted to see what the leaf was made of.

"I am not sure, sir. It is but suspicion at the best: but it's an uncommonly strong one."

"Won't you tell me what you mean? You may trust me."

"Yes, I am sure I may," he said, promptly. "And I think I will tell you—though I have never breathed it to mortal yet. I think Matilda did it herself."

Backing away from the counter in my surprise, I upset an empty milk-can.

"Matilda!" I exclaimed, picking up the can.

"Mr. Johnny, with all my heart I believe it to have been so. I have believed it for some time now."

"But the girls were too friendly to harm one another. I remember you said so yourself, Owen."

"And I thought so then, sir. No suspicion of Matilda had occurred to me, but rather of the man I had seen there on the Wednesday. I think she must have done it in a sudden passion; not of deliberate purpose."

"But now, what are your reasons?"

"I told you, sir, as I daresay you can recall to mind, that I should do what lay in my power to unravel the mystery—for it was not at all agreeable to have it laid at my door. I began, naturally, with tracing out the doings of that night as connected with No. 7. Poor Jane Cross had not been out of doors that night, and so far as I knew had spoken to no one save to me from the window; therefore of her there seemed nothing to be traced: but of Matilda there was. Inquiring here and there, I bit by bit got a few odds and ends of facts together. I traced out the exact time, almost to a minute, that I rang twice at the door-bell at No. 7, and was not answered; and the time that Matilda entered the Swan to get the supper beer. Pretty nearly half an hour had elapsed between the first time and the second."

"Half an hour!"

"Not far short of it. Which proved that Matilda must have been indoors when I rang, though she denied it before the coroner, and it was taken for granted that I had rung during her absence to fetch the beer. And you knew, sir, that her absence did not exceed ten minutes. Now why did not Matilda answer my ring?

Why did she not candidly say that she had heard the ring, but did not choose to answer it? Well, sir, that gave rise to the first faint doubt of her: and when I recalled and dwelt on her singular manner, it appeared to me that the doubt might pass into grave suspicion. Look at her superstitious horror of No. 7. She never would go into the house afterwards!"

I nodded.

"Two or three other little things struck me, all tending to strengthen my doubts, but perhaps they are hardly worth naming. Still, make the worst of it, it was only suspicion, not certainty, and I left Saltwater, holding my tongue."

"And is this all, Owen?"

"Not quite, sir. Would you be so good as to step outside, and just look at the name over the grocer's door?"

I did so, and read Valentine. "John Valentine." The same name as Matilda's.

"Yes, sir, it is," Owen said, in answer to me. "After settling here we made acquaintance with the Valentines, and by-and-by learnt that they are cousins of Matilda's. Fanny—my wife that is to be—has often talked to me about Matilda; they were together a good bit in early life; and by dint of mentally sifting what she said, and putting that and that together, I fancy I see daylight."

"Yes. Well?"

"Matilda's father married a Spanish woman. She was of a wild, ungovernable temper, subject to fits of frenzy; in one of which fits she died. Matilda has inherited this temper; she is liable to

go into frenzies that can only be compared to insanity. Fanny has seen her in two only; they occur at rare intervals; and she tells me that she truly believes the girl is mad—mad, Mr. Johnny—during the few minutes that they last."

The history I had heard of her mad rage at Miss Deveen's flashed over me. Temporarily insane they had thought her there.

"I said to Fanny one day when we were talking of her," resumed Owen, "that a person in that sort of uncontrollable passion, might commit any crime; a murder, or what not. 'Yes,' Fanny replied, 'and not unlikely to do it, either: Matilda has more than once said that she should never die in her bed.' Meaning–"

"Meaning what?" I asked, for he came to a pause.

"Well, sir, meaning, I suppose, that she might sometime lay violent hands upon herself, or upon another. I can't help thinking that something must have put her into one of these rages with Jane Cross, and that she pushed or flung the poor girl over the stairs."

Looking back, rapidly recalling signs and tokens, I thought it might have been so. Owen interrupted me.

"I shall come across her sometime, Mr. Johnny. These are things that don't hide themselves for ever: at least, not often. And I shall tax her with it to her face."

"But—don't you know where she is?"

"No, I don't sir. I wish I did. It was said that she came up to take a situation in London, and perhaps she is still in it. But London's a large place, I don't know what part of it she was

in, and one might as well look for a needle in a bundle of hay. The Valentines have never heard of her at all since she was at Saltwater."

How strange it seemed;—that she and they were living so near one another, and yet not to be aware of it. Should I tell Owen? Only for half a moment did the question cross me. *No*: most certainly not. It might be as he suspected; and, with it all, I could only pity Matilda. Of all unhappy women, she seemed the unhappiest.

Miss Deveen's carriage bowled past the door to take her up at the linendraper's. Wishing Owen good-day, I was going out, but drew back to make room for two people who were entering: an elderly woman in a close bonnet, and a young one with a fair, pretty and laughing face.

"My mother and Fanny, sir," he whispered.

"She is very pretty, very nice, Owen," I said, impulsively. "You'll be sure to be happy with her."

"Thank you, sir; I think I shall. I wish you had spoken a word or two to her, Mr. Johnny: you'd have seen how nice she is."

"I can't stay now, Owen. I'll come again."

Not even to Miss Deveen did I speak of what I had heard. I kept thinking of it as we drove round Hyde Park, and she told me I was unusually silent.

The thread was unwinding itself more and more. Once it had begun to lengthen, I suppose it had to go on. Accident led to an encounter between Matilda and Thomas Owen. Accident? No, it

was this same thread of destiny. There's no such thing as accident in the world.

During the visit to the linendraper's, above spoken of, Miss Deveen bought a gown for Matilda. Feeling in her own heart sorry for the girl, thinking she had been somewhat hardly done by in her house, what with Hall and the rest of them, she wished to make her a present on leaving, as a token of her good-will. But the quantity of stuff bought proved not to be sufficient: Miss Deveen had doubted the point when it was cut off, and told Matilda to go herself and get two yards more. This it was, this simple incident, that led to the meeting with Owen. And I was present at it.

The money-order office of the district was situated amidst this colony of shops. In going down there one afternoon to cash an order, I overtook Matilda. She was on her way to buy the additional yards of stuff.

"I suppose I am going right, sir?" she said to me. "I don't know much about this neighbourhood."

"Not know much about it! What, after having lived in it more than a year!"

"I have hardly ever gone out; except to church on a Sunday," she answered. "And what few articles I've wanted in the dress line, I have mostly bought at the little draper's shop round the corner."

Hardly had the words left her lips, when we came face to face with Thomas Owen. Matilda gave a sort of smothered cry, and

stood still, gazing at him. What they said to one another in that first moment, I did not hear. Matilda had a frightened look, and was whiter than death. Presently we were all walking together towards Thomas Owen's, he having invited Matilda to go and see his home.

But there was another encounter first. Standing at the grocer's door was pretty Fanny Valentine. She and Matilda recognized each other, and clasped hands. It appeared to me that Matilda did it with reluctance, as though it gave her no pleasure to meet her relatives. She must have known how near they lived to Miss Deveen's, and yet she had never sought them out. Perhaps the very fact of not wishing to see them had kept her from the spot.

They all sat down in the parlour behind the shop—a neat room. Mrs. Owen was out; her son produced some wine. I stood up by the bookcase, telling them I must be off the next minute to the post-office. But the minutes passed, and I stayed on.

How he led up to it, I hardly know; but, before I was prepared for anything of the kind, Thomas Owen had plunged wholesale into the subject of Jane Cross, recounting the history of that night, in all its minute details, to Fanny Valentine. Matilda, sitting back on the far side of the room in an armchair, looked terror-stricken: her face seemed to be turning into stone.

"Why do you begin about that, Thomas Owen?" she demanded, when words at length came to her. "It can have nothing to do with Fanny."

"I have been wishing to tell it her for some little time, and this

seems to be a fitting opportunity," he answered, coolly resolute. "You, being better acquainted with the matter than I, can correct me if I make any blunders. I don't care to keep secrets from Fanny: she is going to be my wife."

Matilda's hands lifted themselves with a convulsive movement and fell again. Her eyes flashed fire.

"*Your wife?*"

"If you have no objection," he replied. "My dear old mother goes into Wales next month, and Fanny comes here in her place."

With a cry, faint and mournful as that of a wounded dove, Matilda put her hands before her face and leaned back in her chair. If she had in truth loved Thomas Owen, if she loved him still, the announcement must have caused her cruel pain.

He resumed his narrative; assuming as facts what he had in his own mind conceived to have been the case, and by implication, but not directly, charging Matilda with the crime. It had a dreadful effect upon her; her agitation increased with every word. Suddenly she rose up in the chair, her arms lifted, her face distorted. One of those fits of passion had come on.

We had a dreadful scene. Owen was powerful, I of not much good, but we could not hold her. Fanny ran sobbing into her own door and sent in two of the shopmen.

It was the climax in Matilda Valentine's life. One that perhaps might have been always looked for. From that hour she was an insane woman, her ravings interspersed with lucid intervals. During one of these, she disclosed the truth.

She had loved Thomas Owen with a passionate love. Mistaking the gossip and the nonsense that the young man was fond of chattering to her and Jane Cross, she believed her love was returned. On the day preceding the tragedy, when talking with him after morning service, she had taxed him with paying more attention to Jane Cross than to herself. Not a bit of it, he had lightly answered; he would take her for a walk by the seashore that evening if she liked to go. But, whether he had meant it, or not, he never came, though Matilda dressed herself in readiness. On the contrary, he went to church, met Jane there, and walked the best part of the way home with her. Matilda jealously resented this; her mind was in a chaos; she began to suspect that it was Jane Cross he liked, not herself. She said a word or two upon the subject to Jane Cross the next day, Monday; but Jane made sport of it—laughed it off. So the time went on to evening, when they were upstairs together, Jane sewing, Matilda writing. Suddenly Jane Cross said that Thomas Owen was coming along, and Matilda ran to the window. They spoke to him as he passed, and he said he would look in as he returned from Munpler. After Matilda's letter to her brother was finished, she began a note to Thomas Owen, intending to reproach him with not keeping his promise to her and for joining Jane Cross instead. It was the first time she had ever attempted to write to him; and she stuck her work-box with the lid open behind the sheet of paper that Jane Cross might not see what she was doing. When it grew dusk, Jane Cross remarked that it was blind

man's holiday and she would go on down and lay the supper. In crossing the room, work-basket in hand, she passed behind Matilda, glanced at her letter, and saw the first words of it, "Dearest Thomas Owen." In sport, she snatched it up, read the rest where her own name was mentioned, and laughingly began, probably out of pure fun, to teaze Matilda. "Thomas Owen your sweetheart!" she cried, running out on to the landing. "Why, he is mine. He cares more for my little finger than for–" Poor girl! She never finished her sentence. Matilda, fallen into one of those desperate fits of passion, had caught her up and was clutching her like a tiger-cat, tearing her hair, tearing pieces out of her gown. The scuffle was brief: almost in an instant Jane Cross was falling headlong down the well of the staircase, pushed over the very low balustrades by Matilda, who threw the work-basket after her.

The catastrophe sobered her passion. For a while she lay on the landing in a sort of faint, all strength and power taken out of her as usual by the frenzy. Then she went down to look after Jane Cross.

Jane was dead. Matilda, not unacquainted with the aspect of death, saw that at once, and her senses pretty nearly deserted her again with remorse and horror. She had never thought or wished to kill Jane Cross, hardly to harm her, she liked her too well: but in those moments of frenzy she had not the slightest control over her actions. Her first act was to run and lock the side door in the garden wall, lest anyone should come in. How she lived through the next half-hour, she never knew. Her superstitious fear of

seeing the dead Edmund Peahern in the house was strong—and now there was another! But, with all her anguish and her fear, the instinct of self-preservation was making itself heard. What must she do? How could she throw the suspicion off herself? She could not run out of the house and say, "Jane Cross has fallen accidentally over the stairs; come and look to her"—for no one would have believed it to be an accident. And there were the pieces, too, she had clutched out of the gown! Whilst thus deliberating the gate-bell rang, putting her into a state of the most intense terror. It rang again. Trembling, panting, Matilda stood cowering in the kitchen, but it did not ring a third time. This was, of course, Thomas Owen.

Necessity is the mother of invention. Something she *must* do, and her brain hastily concocted the plan she should adopt. Putting the cloth and the bread and cheese on the table, she took the jug and went out at the front door to fetch the usual pint of ale. A moment or two she stood at the front door, peering up and down the road to make sure that no one was passing. Then she slipped out, locking the door softly; and, carrying the key concealed in the hollow of her hand, she threw it amidst the shrubs at No 1. *Now* she could not get into the house herself; she would not have entered it alone for the world: people must break it open. All along the way to the post-office, to which she really did go, and then to the Swan, she was mentally rehearsing her tale. And it succeeded in deceiving us all, as the reader knows. With regard to the visit of her brother on the Wednesday, she had told Thomas

Owen the strict truth; though, when he first alluded to it in the churchyard, her feelings were wrought up to such a pitch that she could only cry out and escape. But how poor Matilda contrived to live on and carry out her invented story, how she bore the inward distress and repentance that lay upon her, we shall never know. A distress, remorse, repentance that never quitted her, night or day; and which no doubt contributed to gradually unhinge her mind, and throw it finally off its balance.

Such was the true history of the affair at No. 7, which had been so great a mystery to Saltwater. The truth was never made public, save to the very few who were specially interested in it. Matilda Valentine is in an asylum, and likely to remain there for life; whilst Thomas Owen and his wife flourish in sunshine, happy as a summer day is long.

CARAMEL COTTAGE

I.—EDGAR RESTE

I

It was early in August, and we were at Dyke Manor, for the Squire had let us go home from school for the Worcester races. We had joined him at Worcester the previous day, Tuesday, driving home with him in the evening. To-morrow, Thursday, he would drive us over to the course again; to-day, Wednesday, the horses would have rest; and on Friday we must return to school.

Breakfast was over, the Squire gone out, and the few minutes' Bible-reading to us—which Mrs. Todhetley never forgot, though Tod did not always stay in for it, but he did this morning—came to an end. Hannah appeared at the door as she closed the Book.

"Miss Barbary's come, ma'am," she said.

"Run, my dear," cried Mrs. Todhetley to Lena.

"I don't want to," said Lena, running to the open window instead, and nearly pitching head-foremost through it: upon which Hannah captured her and carried her off.

"Who on earth is Miss Barbary?" questioned Tod. "Any relation to the man at Caramel Cottage?"

"His daughter," said Mrs. Todhetley. "She comes to teach Lena French."

"Hope she's less of a shady character than her father!" was Tod's free comment.

A year or two before this, a stranger had made his appearance at Church Dykely, and put up at the Silver Bear. He was a gentlemanly-looking man of perhaps forty years, tall, slender, agile, with thin, distinguished features, an olive skin, black hair, and eyes of a peculiar shade of deep steel-blue. People went into raptures over his face, and called it beautiful. And so it was; but to my thinking it had a look in it that was the opposite of beautiful; any way, the opposite of good. They said it was my fancy at home: but Duffham owned to the same fancy. His name, as he wrote it down one day at the Silver Bear, was Pointz Barbary. After a week's stay at the inn, he, finding, I suppose, that the neighbourhood suited him, looked out for a little place to settle down upon, and met with it in Caramel Cottage, a small dwelling near to us, on the property called Caramel's Farm. The cottage was then to be let, and Mr. Barbary went into it.

Some items of his past history came out by degrees; it is hard to say how, for he told none himself. Now and then some former friend or other came to pay him a short visit; and it may be that these strangers talked about him.

Pointz Barbary, a gentleman by descent, and once of fairly good substance, had been a great traveller, had roved pretty nearly all over the world. The very few relatives he possessed

lived in Canada—people of condition, it was said—and his own property (what was left of it) was also there. He had been married twice. First to a young lady in France; her friends (English) having settled there for economy's sake. She died at the end of the year, leaving him a little girl, that the mother's people at once took to. Next he married a Miss Reste, daughter of Colonel Reste, in her Majesty's service. A few years later she also died—died of consumption—leaving him a widower and childless. It's true he had his first wife's daughter, but she lived in France with her mother's sister, so he did not get much benefit from her.

Mr. Barbary was poor. No mistake about that. The interest of his first wife's money brought him in fifty-two pounds yearly, and this he would enjoy till his death, when it went to his daughter. Miss Reste had brought him several thousand pounds; but he and she had lived away, and not a stiver remained of it. His own means had also been spent lavishly; and, so far as was known, he had but the two and fifty pounds a year to live upon at Caramel Cottage, with a chance remittance from Canada now and again.

He made no acquaintance at Church Dykely, and none was made with him. Civilly courteous in a rather grand and haughty way when he met people, so far as a few remarks went, touching the weather or the crops, and similar safe topics, he yet kept the world at a distance. As the time went on it was thought there might be a reason for this. Whispers began to circulate that Mr. Barbary's doings were not orthodox. He was suspected of poaching, both in game and fish, and a strong feeling of shyness

grew up against him.

Some few months prior to the present time—August—his daughter came to Caramel Cottage. Her aunt in France was dead, and she had no home henceforth but her father's. That I and Tod had not seen or heard of her until now, was owing to the midsummer holidays having been spent at Crabb Cot. The vacation over, and Mrs. Todhetley back at Dyke Manor, she found herself called upon by Miss Barbary. Hearing that Mrs. Todhetley wished her little girl to begin French, she had come to offer herself as teacher. The upshot was that she was engaged, and came for a couple of hours every morning to drill French into Lena.

"What's she like?" asked Tod of the mother, upon her explaining this. "Long and thin and dark, like Barbary, and disagreeable with a self-contained reticence?"

"She is not the least like him in any way," was Mrs. Todhetley's answer. "She is charmingly simple—good, I am sure, and one of the most open-natured girls I ever met. 'I wish to do it for the sake of earning a little money,' she said to me, when asking to come. 'My dear father is not rich, and if I can help him in ever so small a way I shall be thankful.' The tears almost came into her eyes as she spoke," added Mrs. Todhetley; "she quite won my heart."

"She seems to think great things of that respectable parent of hers!" commented Tod.

"Oh, yes. Whatever may be the truth as to his failings, *she* sees none in him. And, my dears, better that it should be so. She

earns a little money of me, apart from teaching Lena," added Mrs. Todhetley.

"What at?" asked Tod. "Teaching *you*?"

The mother shook her head with a smile. "I found out, Joseph, that she is particularly skilful at mending old lace. I have some that needs repairing. She takes it home and does it at her leisure —and you cannot imagine how grateful she is."

"How old is she?"

"Nineteen—close upon twenty, I think she said," replied the mother. And there the conversation ended, for Mrs. Todhetley had to go to the kitchen to give the daily orders.

The morning wore on. We went to Church Dykely and were back again by twelve o'clock. Tod had got Don on the lawn, making him jump for biscuit, when the dog rushed off, barking, and we heard a scream. A young lady in a straw hat and a half-mourning cotton dress was running away from him, she and Lena having come out of the house together.

"Come here, Don," said Tod in his voice of authority, which the good Newfoundland dog never disobeyed. "How dare you, sir? Johnny, lad, I suppose that's Miss Barbary."

I had forgotten all about her. A charming girl, as the mother had said, slight and graceful, with a face like a peach blossom, dimpled cheeks, soft light-brown hair and dark-blue eyes. Not the hard, steel-blue eyes that her father had: sweet eyes, these, with a gentle, loving look in them.

"You need not be afraid of the dog," cried Tod, advancing

to where she stood, behind the mulberry tree. “Miss Barbary, I believe?”—lifting his cap.

“Yes,” she said in a frank tone, turning her frank face to him; “I am Katrine Barbary. It is a very large dog—and he barks at me.”

Large he was, bigger than many a small donkey. A brave, faithful, good-tempered dog, he, and very handsome, his curly white coat marked out with black. Gentle to friends and respectable strangers, Don was at mortal enmity with tramps and beggars: we could not cure him of this, so he was chained up by day. At night he was unchained to roam the yard at will, but the gate was kept locked. Had he got out, he might have pinned the coat of any loose man he met, but I don’t believe he would have bitten him. A good fright Don would give, but not mortal injury. At least, we had never yet known him to do that.

Lena ran up in her short pink frock, her light curls flying. “Miss Barbary is always afraid when she hears Don bark,” she said to us. “She will not go near the yard; she thinks he’ll bite her.”

“I will teach you how to make friends with him,” said Tod: “though he would never hurt you, Miss Barbary. Come here and pat his head whilst I hold him; call him by his name gently. Once he knows you, he would protect you from harm with his life.”

She complied with ready obedience, though the roses left her cheeks. “There,” said Tod, loosing the dog, and letting her pat him at leisure, “see how gentle he is; how affectionately he looks

up at you!"

"Please not to think me very silly!" she pleaded earnestly, as though beseeching pardon for a sin. "I have never been used to dogs. We do not keep dogs in France. At least very few people do. Oh dear!"

Something that she carried in her left hand wrapped in paper had dropped on to the lawn. Don pounced upon it. "Oh, please take it from him! please, please!" she cried in terror. Tod laughed, and extricated the little parcel.

"It has some valuable old lace in it of Mrs. Todhetley's," she explained as she thanked him. "I am taking it home to mend."

"You mend old lace famously, I hear," said Tod, as we walked with her to the entrance gate.

"Yes, I think I do it nearly as well as the nuns who taught me."

"Have you been in a convent?"

"Only for my education. I was an externe—a daily pupil. My aunt lived next door to it. I went every morning at eight o'clock and returned home at six in the evening to supper."

"Did you get no dinner?" asked Tod.

She took the question literally. "I had dinner and collation at school; breakfast and supper at home. That was the way in our town with the externes at the convent. We were Protestants, you see, so my aunt liked me to be at home on Sundays. Thank you for teaching Don to know me: and now I will say good morning to you."

I was holding the gate open for her to pass out, when Ben

Gibbon went by, a gun carelessly held over his shoulder. He touched his hat to us, and we gave him a slight nod in reply. Miss Barbary said "Good day, Mr. Gibbon."

Tod drew down his displeased lips. He had already taken a liking to the girl—so had I, for that matter—she was a true lady, and Mr. Ben Gibbon, a brother to the gamekeeper at Chavasse Grange, could not boast of a particularly shining character.

"Do you know *him*, Miss Barbary?" asked Tod. "Be quiet, Don!" he cried to the dog, which had begun to growl when he saw Gibbon.

"He comes to our house sometimes to see papa. Please pardon me for keeping you waiting," she added to me, as I still held back the gate. "That gun is pointed this way and it may go off."

Tod was amused. "You seem to dread guns as much as you dread dogs, Miss Barbary. I will walk home with you," he said, as she at last came through, the gun having got to a safe distance.

"Oh, but–" she was beginning, and then stopped in confusion, blushing hotly, and looking at both of us. "I should like it; but–would it be proper?"

"Proper!" echoed Tod, staring, and then bursting into a fit of laughter long and loud. "Oh dear! why, Miss Barbary, you must be French all over! Johnny, you can come, too. Lena, run back again; you have not any hat on."

Crossing the road to take the near field way, we went along the path that led beside the hedge, and soon came in view of Caramel Cottage; it was only a stone's throw, so to say, from our

house. An uncommonly lonely look it had, buried there amidst many trees, with the denser trees of the Grove close beyond it. We asked her whether she did not find it dull here.

"At first I did, very; I do still a little: it is so different from the lively town I have lived in, where we knew all the people, and they knew us. But we shall soon be more lively," she resumed, after a pause. "A cousin is coming to stay with us."

"Indeed," said Tod. "Is it a lady or a gentleman?"

"Oh, it is a gentleman—Edgar Reste. He is not my cousin by kin; not really related to me; but papa says he will be as my cousin, as my brother even, and that he is very nice. Papa's last wife was Miss Reste, and he is her nephew. He is a barrister in London, and he has been much overworked, and he is coming here to-morrow for rest and country air."

Within the low green gate of the little front garden of Caramel Cottage stood Mr. Barbary, in his brown velveteen shooting coat and breeches of the same, that became him and his straight lithe limbs so well. Every time I saw him the beauty of his face struck me afresh; but so did the shifty expression of his eyes.

"There's papa!" exclaimed the girl, her dimples lighting up. "And—why, there's a gentleman with him—a stranger! I wonder who it is?"

I saw him as he came from the porch down the narrow garden-path. A slight, slender young man of middle height and distinguished air, with a pale, worn, nice-looking face, and laughing, luminous dark brown eyes. Yes, I saw Edgar Reste for

the first time at this his entrance at Caramel Cottage, and it was a thing to be thankful for that I could not then foresee the nameless horror his departure from it (I may as well say his disappearance) was to shadow forth.

"How do you do?" said Mr. Barbary to us, courteously civil. "Katrine, here's a surprise for you: your cousin is come. Edgar, this is my little girl.—Mr. Reste," he added, by way of introduction generally.

Mr. Reste lifted his hat, bowed slightly, and then turned to Katrine with outstretched hand. She met it with a hot blush, as if strange young men did not shake hands with her every day.

"We did not expect you quite so soon," she gently said, to atone for her first surprise.

"True," he answered. "But I felt unusually out of sorts yesterday, and thought it would make no difference to Mr. Barbary whether I came to-day or to-morrow."

His voice had a musical ring; his manner was open and honest. He might be Pointz Barbary's nephew by marriage, but I am sure he was not by nature.

"They'll fall in love with one another, those two; you'll see," said Tod to me as we went home. "Did you mark his pleased face when he spoke to her, Johnny—and how she blushed?"

"Oh, come, Tod! they tell me I am fanciful. What are you?"

"Not fanciful with your fancies, lad. As to you, Mr. Don"—turning to the dog, which had done nothing but growl while we stood before Barbary's gate, "unless you mend your manners, you

shall not come out again. What ails you, sir, to-day?"

II

If love springs out of companionship, why then, little wonder that it found its way into Caramel Cottage. They were with each other pretty nearly all day and every day, that young man and that young woman; and so—what else was to be expected?

"We must try and get you strong again," said Mr. Barbary to his guest, who at first, amidst other adverse symptoms, could eat nothing. No matter what dainty little dish old Joan prepared, Mr. Reste turned from it.

Mr. Barbary had taken to old Joan with the house. A little, dark, active woman, she, with bright eyes and a mob-cap of muslin. She was sixty years old; quick, capable, simple and kindly. We don't get many such servants now-a-days. One defect Joan had—deafness. When a voice was close to her, it was all right; at a distance she could not hear it at all.

"How long is it that you have been ailing, Cousin Edgar?" asked Miss Barbary, one day when they were sitting together.

"Oh, some few weeks, Cousin Katrine," he answered in a tone to imitate hers—and then laughed. "Look here, child, don't call me 'Cousin Edgar!' For pity's sake, don't!"

"I know you are not my true cousin," she said, blushing furiously.

"It's not that. If we were the nearest cousins that can be, it

would still be silly." Objectionable, was the word he had all but used. "It is bad taste; has not a nice sound to cultivated ears—as I take it. I am Edgar, if you please; and you are Katrine."

"In France we say 'mon cousin,' or 'ma cousine,' when speaking to one," returned Katrine.

"But we are not French; we are English."

"Well," she resumed, as her face cooled down—"why did you not take rest before? and what is it that has made you ill?"

He shook his head thoughtfully. The parlour window, looking to the front, was thrown up before them. A light breeze tempered the summer heat, wafting in sweetness from the homely flowers and scented shrubs. The little garden was crowded with them, as all homely gardens were then. Roses, lilies, columbines, stocks, gillyflowers, sweet peas, sweet Williams, pinks white and red, tulips, pansies (or as they were then generally called, garden-gates), mignonette, bachelor's buttons, and lots of others, sweet or not sweet, that I can't stay to recall: and clusters of marjoram and lavender and "old-man" and sweet-briar, and jessamines white and yellow, and woodbine, and sweet syringa; and the tall hollyhock, and ever true but gaudy sunflower—each and all flourished there in their respective seasons. Amidst the grand "horticulture," as it is phrased, of these modern days, it is a pleasure to lose one's self in the memories of these dear old simple gardens. Sometimes I get wondering if we shall ever meet them again—say in Heaven.

They sat there at the open window enjoying the fragrance.

Katrine had made a paper fan, and was gently fluttering it to and fro before her flushed young face.

"I have burnt the candle at both ends," continued Mr. Reste. "That is what's the matter with me."

"Y—es," hesitated she, not quite understanding.

"At law business all day, and at literary work the best part of the night, year in and year out—it has told upon me, Katrine."

"But why should you do both?" asked Katrine.

"Why? Oh, because—because my pocket is a shallow pocket, and has, moreover, a hole in it."

She laughed.

"Not getting briefs showered in upon me as one might hope my merits deserve—I know not any young barrister who does—I had to supplement my earnings in that line by something else, and I took to writing. *That* is up-hill work, too; but it brings in a few shillings now and again. One must pay one's way, you know, Katrine, if possible; and with some of us it is apt to be a rather extravagant way."

"Is it with you?" she asked, earnestly.

"It *was*. I squandered money too freely at first. My old uncle gave me a fair sum to set up with when my dinners were eaten and I was called; and I suppose I thought the sum would never come to an end. Ah! we buy our experience dearly."

"Will not the old uncle give you more?"

"Not a stiver—this long while past. He lives in India, and writing to ask him does no good. And he is the only relative left

to me in the world."

"Except papa."

Edgar Reste lifted his eyebrows. "Your father is not my relative, young lady. His late wife was my aunt; my father's sister."

"Did your father leave you no money, when he died?"

"Not any. He was a clergyman with a good benefice, but he lived up to his income and did not save anything. No, I have only myself to lean on. Don't know whether it will turn out to be a broken reed."

"If I could only help you!" breathed Katrine.

"You are helping me more than I can say," he answered, impulsively. "When with you I have a feeling of rest—of peace. And that's what I want."

Which avowal brought a hot blush again to Miss Katrine's cheek and a curious thrill somewhere round about her heart.

Time went on. Before much of it had elapsed, they were in love with one another for ever and for ever, with that first love that comes but once in a lifetime. That is, in secret; it was not betrayed or spoken of by either of them, or intended to be. Mr. Reste, Barrister-at-law (and briefless), could as soon have entertained thoughts of setting up a coach-and-four, as of setting up a wife. He had not a ghost of the means necessary at present, he saw not the smallest chance yet of attaining them. Years and years and years might go by before that desirable pinnacle in the social race was reached; and it might never be reached

at all. It would be the height of dishonour, as he considered, to persuade Katrine Barbary into an engagement, which might never be fulfilled. How could he condemn her to wear out her heart and her life and her days in loneliness, sighing for him, never seeing him—he at one end of the world, she at the other? for that's how, lover-like, he estimated the distance between this and the metropolis. So he never let a word of his love escape him, and he guarded his looks, and treated Katrine as his little cousin.

And she? Be you sure, she was as reticent as he. An inexperienced young maiden, scrupulously and modestly brought up, she kept her secret zealously. It is true she could not help her blushes, or the tell-tale thrilling of her soft voice; but Edgar Reste was not obliged to read them correctly.

Likely enough he could penetrate, as the weeks wore on, some of the ins and outs in the private worth of Mr. Barbary. In fact, he *did* do so. He found that gentleman rather addicted to going abroad at night when reasonable people were in bed and asleep. Mr. Barbary gave him his views upon the subject. Poaching, he maintained, was a perfectly legitimate and laudable occupation. "It's one to be proud of, instead of the contrary," he asserted, one September day, when they were in the gun-room together. "*Proud of*, Edgar."

"For a gentleman?" laughed Mr. Reste, who invariably made light of the subject. And he glanced at his host curiously from between his long dark eyelashes and straight, fine eyebrows; at the dark, passive, handsome face, at the long slender fingers, busy

over the lock of his favourite gun.

"For a gentleman certainly. Why should common men usurp all its benefit? The game laws are obnoxious laws, and it behoves us to set them at naught."

Another amused laugh from Mr. Reste.

"Who hesitates to do a bit of smuggling?" argued the speaker. "Answer me that, Reste. Nobody. Nobody, from a prince to a peasant, from poor Jack Tar to his superfine commander, but deems it meritorious to cheat the Customs. When a man lands here or yonder with a few contraband things about him, and gets them through safely, do his friends and acquaintances turn the cold shoulder upon him? Not a bit of it; they regard it as a fine feather in his cap."

"Oh, no doubt."

"Poaching is the same thing. It is also an amusement. Oh, it is grand fun, Edgar Reste, to be out on a fine night and dodge the keepers!" continued Mr. Barbary, with enthusiasm. "The spice of daring in it, of danger, if you choose to put it that way, stimulates the nerves like wine."

"Not quite orthodox, though, mon ami."

"Orthodox be hanged. Stolen pleasures are sweetest, as we all know. You shall go out with me some night, Edgar, and judge for yourself."

"Don't say but I will—just to look on—if you'll ensure my getting back in safety," said the barrister, in a tone that might be taken for jest or earnest, assent or refusal.

"Back in safety!" came the mocking echo, as if to get back in safety from midnight poaching were a thing as sure as the sun. "We'll let a week or two go on; when shooting first comes in the keepers are safe to be on the alert; and then I'll choose a night for you."

"All right. I suppose Katrine knows nothing of this?"

Mr. Barbary lodged his gun in the corner against the wainscot, and turned to look at the barrister. "Katrine!" he repeated, in surprised reproach. "Why, *no*. And take care that you don't tell her."

Mr. Reste nodded.

"She is the most unsuspicious, innocent child in regard to the ways of the naughty world that I've ever met with," resumed Barbary. "I don't think she as much as knows what poaching means."

"I wonder you should have her here," remarked the younger man, reflectively.

"How can I help it? There's nowhere else for her to be. She is too old to be put to school; and if she were not, I have not the means to pay for her. It does not signify; she will never suspect anything," concluded Mr. Barbary.

Please do not think Caramel Cottage grand enough to possess a regular "gun-room." Mr. Barbary called it so, because he kept his two guns in it, also his fishing-tackle and things of that sort. Entering at the outer porch and over the level door-sill, to the narrow house-passage, the parlour lay on the left, and was of

pretty good size. The gun-room lay on the right; a little square room with bare boards, unfurnished save for a deal table, a chair or two, and a strong cupboard let into the wall, which the master of the house kept locked. Behind this room was the kitchen, which opened into the back yard. This yard, on the kitchen side, was bounded by dwarf wooden palings, having a low gate in their midst. Standing at the gate and looking sideways, you could see the chimneys of Dyke Manor. On the opposite side, the yard was enclosed by various small outbuildings and adjuncts belonging to a cottage homestead. A rain-water barrel stood in the corner by the house; an open shed next, in which knives were cleaned and garden tools kept; then came the pump; and lastly, a little room called the brewhouse, used for washing and brewing, and for cooking also during the worst heat of summer. A furnace was built beside the grate, and its floor was paved with square red bricks. Beyond this yard, quite open to it, lay a long garden, well filled with vegetables and fruit trees, and enclosed by a high hedge. Upstairs were three bed chambers. Mr. Barbary occupied the largest and best, which was over the parlour; the smaller one over the gun-room had been assigned to Edgar Reste, both of them looking front; whilst Katrine's room was above the kitchen, looking to the yard and the garden. Old Joan slept in a lean-to loft in the roof. There is a reason for explaining all this.

III

He had looked like a ghost when we went to school after the races; he looked like a hale, hearty man when we got home from the holidays at Michaelmas and to eat the goose. Of course he had had pretty near eight weeks' spell of idleness and country air at Caramel Cottage. To say the truth, we felt surprised at his being there still.

"Well, it *is* longer than I meant to stay," Mr. Reste admitted, when Tod said something of this, "The air has done wonders for me."

"Why longer? The law courts do not open yet."

"I had thoughts of going abroad. However, that can stay over for next year."

"Have you had any shooting?"

"No. I don't possess a licence."

It was on the tip of Tod's tongue, as I could well see, to ask why he did not take out a licence, but he checked it. This little colloquy was held at the Manor gate on Saturday, the day after our return. Miss Barbary was leaving Lena at the usual time, and he had come strolling across the field to meet her. They went away together.

"What did I tell you, Johnny?" said Tod, turning to me, as soon as they were out of hearing. "It is a regular case of over-head-and-ears: cut and dried and pickled."

"I don't see what you judge by, Tod."

"*Don't you!* You'll be a muff to the end, lad. Fancy a fine young fellow like Reste, a man of the world, staying on at that pokey little place of Barbary's unless he had some strong motive to keep him there! I dare say he pays Barbary well for the accommodation."

"I dare say Barbary could not afford to entertain him unless he did."

"He stops there to make love to her. It must be a poor look-out, though, for Katrine, pretty little dimpled girl! As much chance of a wedding, I should say, as of a blue moon."

"Why not?"

"Why not! Want of funds. I'd start for London, if I were you, Johnny, and set the Thames on fire. A man must be uncommonly hard up when he lets all the birds go beside him for want of taking out a licence."

They were walking onwards slowly, Mr. Reste bending to talk to her. And of course it will be understood that a good deal of that which I have said, and am about to say, is only related from what came to my knowledge later on.

"Is it true that you had meant to go abroad this year?" Katrine was asking him.

"Yes, I once thought of it," he answered. "I have friends living at Dieppe, and they wanted me to go to them. But I have stayed on here instead. Another week of it, ten days perhaps, and then I must leave Worcestershire and you, Katrine."

"But why?"

"Why, to work, my dear little girl. That is getting in arrears shamefully. We are told that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy; but all play and no work would have worse results for Jack than dullness. Ah, Katrine, what a world this might be if we could only do as we like in it!"

"When shall you come again?"

"Perhaps never," he answered, incautiously.

"Never!" she repeated, her face turning white before she could hide it from him. It was a great shock.

"Katrine, my dear," he said with some emotion, his tones low and earnest, "I could stay at Caramel Cottage for my whole life and never wish to quit it, unless I carried somebody else away from it with me. But there are things which a poor man, a man without money in the present or prospect of it in the future, may not as much as glance at: he must put the temptation from him and hold it at arm's length. I had a dream the other night," he added, after a pause: "I thought I was a Q.C. and stood in my silk, haranguing a full bench of judges at Westminster—who listened to me with attentive suavity. When I awoke I burst out laughing."

"At the contrast it presented to reality?" she breathed.

"Just at that. If I were only making enough to set up a snug little nest of a home, though ever so small, it would be—something: but I am not. And so, Katrine, you see that many things I would do I cannot do; cannot even think of. And there it lies, and there it ends."

"Yes, I see, Edgar," she answered, softly sighing.

"Shall you miss me when I am gone?"

Some queer feeling took her throat; she could not speak. Mr. Reste stopped to pick a little pale blue-bell that grew under the hedge.

"I do not know how I shall bear with the loneliness then," she said in answer, seemingly more to herself than to him, or to the blue sky right before her, on which her eyes were fixed. "And I shall be more afraid when you are no longer in the house."

"Afraid!" he exclaimed, turning to her in blank surprise. "What are you afraid of, Katrine?"

"It—it is all so solitary for me.... Old Joan is too deaf to be talked to much; and papa is either at work in the garden or shut up in the gun-room, busy with his things. Please don't laugh at my childishness!"

She had paused, just to get over her embarrassment, the avowal having slipped from her unwittingly. The fact was, poor Katrine Barbary had been rudely awakened from her state of innocent security. Some days back, when in the cottage hut of Mary Standish, for Katrine liked to go about and make friends with the people, that ill-doing husband of Mary's, Jim, chanced to be at home. Jim had just been had up before the magistrates at Alcester on some suspicion connected with snares and gins, but there was no certain proof forthcoming, and he had to be discharged. Katrine remarked that if she were Jim she should leave off poaching, which must be a very dreadful thing, and

frightfully hazardous. Mr. Jim replied that it was not a dreadful thing, nor hazardous either, for them that knew what they were about, and he referred her to her father for confirmation of this assertion. One word led to another. Jim Standish, his ideas loose and lawless, never thought to hurt the young lady by what he disclosed, for he was kind enough when he had no motive to be the contrary, but when Katrine left the hut, she carried with her the terrible knowledge that her father was as fond of poaching as the worst of them. Since then she had lived in a state of chronic terror.

"Yes, it must be very solitary for you," assented Mr. Reste in a grave tone, and he had no idea that her answer was an evasive one, or its lightness put on; "but I cannot help you, Katrine. Should you ever need counsel, or—or protection in any way, apply for it to your friends at Dyke Manor. They seem kind, good people, and would be strong to aid."

Turning in at the little side gate as he spoke, they saw Mr. Barbary at work in the garden. He was digging up a plot of ground some seven or eight feet square under the branches of the summer-apple tree, which grew at this upper end of the garden, nearly close to the yard.

"What is he going to plant there, I wonder?" listlessly spoke Mr. Reste, glancing at the freshness of the turned-up mould.

"Winter cabbages, perhaps; but I am sure I don't know," returned Katrine. "I do not understand the seasons for planting vegetables as papa does."

This, as I have just said, was on Saturday. We saw Mr. Reste and Katrine at church the next day: a place Barbary did not often trouble with his presence; and walked with them, on coming out, as far as the two ways lay. Our people liked the look of Edgar Reste, but had not put themselves forward to make much acquaintance with him, on account of Barbary. One Tuesday, when the Squire was driving to Alcester, he had overtaken Mr. Reste walking thither to have a look at the market, and he invited him to a seat in the carriage. They drove in and drove back together, and had between the times a snack of bread and cheese at the Angel. The Squire took quite a fancy to the young barrister, and openly said to him he wished he was staying anywhere but at Caramel Cottage.

"You are thinking of leaving soon, I hear," said the Squire, as we halted in a group when parting, on this same walk from church.

"In about a week," replied Mr. Reste. "I may go on Saturday next; certainly not later than the following Monday."

"Shall you like a drive to Evesham between this and then?" went on the Squire. "I am going over there one of these days."

"I shall like it very much indeed."

"Then I will let you know which day I go. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," answered Mr. Reste, lifting his hat in salute to us all, as he walked on with Katrine.

Am I lingering over these various trifling details? I suppose it will seem so. But the truth is, a dreadful part of the story is

coming on (as poor Katrine said of the poaching) and my pen holds back from it.

A day or two had gone on. It was Tuesday morning, warm and bright with sunshine. Katrine sat in the parlour at Caramel Cottage, pouring out the coffee at the breakfast-table.

"Will you take some ham, Katrine?"

"No, thank you, papa; I have no appetite."

"No appetite! nonsense!" and Mr. Barbary put a slice of ham on her plate. "Do you feel inclined for a walk as far as Church Leet this morning, Edgar?"

"I don't mind," said Mr. Reste. "About three miles, is it not?"

"Three miles across the fields as straight as the crow flies. I want to see a man who lives there. He—why, that's Pettipher coming here!—the postman," broke off Mr. Barbary. Letters were not written every day then, and very few found their way to Caramel Cottage.

Old Joan went to the door, and then came in. She was like a picture. A dark-blue linsey gown down to her ancles, neat black stockings and low, tied shoes, a check apron, and a bow of black ribbon perched in front behind the flapping border of her white muslin mob-cap.

"Pettipher says 'tis for the gentleman," said Joan, putting the letter, a thick one, on the table by Mr. Reste.

"Why, it is from Amphlett!" he exclaimed, as he took it up, looking at the great sprawling writing. "What on earth has he got to say?"

Opening the letter, a roll of bank-notes fell out. Mr. Reste stared at them with intense curiosity.

"Is it your ship come in?" asked Katrine gaily: for he was wont to say he would do this or that when "his ship came home."

"No, Katrine; not much chance of that. Let me see what he says."

"'Dear Reste,—I enclose you my debt at last. The other side have come to their senses, and given in, and paid over to me instalment the first. Thank you, old friend; you are a good fellow never to have bothered me. Let me know your movements when you write back; I ask it particularly. Ever yours, W. A.'

"Well, I never expected that," cried Mr. Reste, as he read the words aloud.

"Money lent by you, Edgar?" asked Mr. Barbary.

"Yes; three or four years ago. I had given it up as a bad job. Never thought he would gain his cause."

"What cause? Who is he?"

"Captain Amphlett, of the Artillery, and an old friend of mine. As to the cause, it was some injustice that his avaricious relatives involved him in, and he had no resource but to bring an action. I am glad he has gained it; he is an honest fellow, no match for them in cunning."

Mr. Reste was counting the notes while he spoke; six of them for ten pounds each. Katrine happened to look at her father, and was startled at the expression of his face—at the grasping, covetous, *evil* regard he had fixed upon the notes. She

felt frightened, half sick, with some vague apprehension. Mr. Reste smoothed the notes out one by one, and laid them open on the breakfast cloth in a little stack. While doing this, he caught Mr. Barbary's covetous look.

"You'd like such a windfall yourself," he said laughingly to his host.

"I should. For *that* a man might be tempted to smother his grandmother."

Katrine instinctively shuddered, though the avowal was given in a half jesting tone. A prevision of evil seized her.

CARAMEL COTTAGE

II.—DISAPPEARANCE

I

October was setting in beautifully. Some people say it is the most lovely month in the year when the skies are blue and genial.

Seated at the breakfast-table at Caramel Cottage that Tuesday morning, with the window thrown open to the warm, pleasant air, the small party of three might have enjoyed that air, but for being preoccupied with their own reflections. Edgar Reste was thinking of the bank-notes which the postman had just brought him in Captain Amphlett's letter; Katrine Barbary sat shrinking from the vague fear imparted to her by the curious avowal her father had made in language not too choice, as his covetous eyes rested on the money: "For that, a man might be tempted to smother his grandmother." While Mr. Barbary had started instantly up and flung the window higher, as if in the silence that followed the words, they had struck back upon himself unpleasantly, and he sought to divert attention from them.

"A grand day for the outlying crops," he remarked, his lithe, slender form, his pale, perfect features showing out well in the

light of the brilliant morning. “But most of the grain is in, I think. We shall have a charming walk to Church Leet, Edgar.”

“Yes,” assented Mr. Reste, as he folded the notes together and placed them in his pocket-book. There were six of them for £10 each.

Breakfast over, Katrine set off for Dyke Manor that morning as usual, to talk to Lena in French, and teach her to read it. She stayed luncheon with us. Chancing to say that her father and his guest were gone to Church Leet, Mrs. Todhetley kept her.

At four o’clock, when Katrine went home, she found they had returned, and were then shut up in the gun-room. Katrine could hear the hum of their voices, with now and again a burst of merry laughter from Edgar Reste.

“Have they had dinner?” she enquired of Joan.

“Ay, sure they have, Miss Katrine. They got back at two o’clock, and I prepared the dinner at once.”

I had lent Katrine that afternoon the “Vicar of Wakefield,”—which she said she had never read; one could hardly believe such a thing of an English girl, but I suppose it was through her having lived over in France. Taking it into the back garden, she sat down on a rustic bench, one or two of which stood about. By-and-by Edgar Reste came out and sat down beside her.

“Had you a nice walk to-day?” she asked.

“Very,” he answered. “What a quaint little village Church Leet is! Hardly to be called a village, though. Leet Hall is a fine old place.”

"Yes, I have heard so. I have not seen it."

"Not seen it! Do you mean to say, Katrine, that you have never been to Church Leet?"

"Not yet. Nobody has ever invited me to go, and I cannot walk all that way by myself, you know."

He was sitting sideways, his left arm leaning on the elbow of the bench, his kindly, luminous brown eyes fixed on her fair pretty face, all blushes and dimples. Ah, if fortune had but smiled upon him!—if he might but have whispered to this young girl, who had become so dear to him, of the love that filled his whole heart!

"Suppose you walk over with me one of these fine days before I leave?" he continued. "It won't be too far for you, will it?"

"Oh no. I should like to go."

"There is the prettiest churchyard you ever saw, to rest in. And such a quaint little church, covered with ivy. The Rectory, standing by, is quite a grand mansion in comparison with the church."

"And the church has a history, I believe."

"Ay, as connected with the people of the Hall and the Rectory; and with its own chimes, that never played, I hear, but disaster followed. We will go then, Katrine, some afternoon between now and Saturday."

Her face fell; she turned it from him. "*Must* you leave on Saturday, Edgar?"

"My dear little cousin, yes. Cousins in name, you know we

are, though not in reality."

"You did say you might stay until Monday."

"Ay, my will would be good to stay till Monday, and many a Monday after it: but you see, Katrine, I have neglected my work too long, and I cannot break into another week. So you must please make the most of me until Saturday," he added playfully, "when I shall take the evening train."

"You English do not care to travel on a Sunday, I notice."

"We English! Allow me to remind Mademoiselle that she is just as much English as are the rest of us."

Katrine smiled.

"My good mother instilled all kinds of old-world notions into me, Katrine. Amongst them was that of never doing week-day work on a Sunday unless compelled by necessity."

"Do you never work on a Sunday—at your reviews and writings, and all that?"

"Never. I am sure it would not bring me luck if I did. Suppose we fix Thursday for walking to Church Leet?"

"That will do nicely. Unless—Squire Todhetley invited you to go with him to Evesham one day, you know," broke off Katrine. "He may just fix upon Thursday."

"In that case we will take our walk on Friday."

A silence ensued. Their hearts were very full, and that makes speech reticent. Katrine glanced now and again at the pages of the "Vicar of Wakefield," which lay in her lap, but she did not read it. As to the barrister, he was looking at her; at the face that had

become so dear to him. They might never meet again, nothing on earth might come of the present intimacy and the sweet burning longings, but he knew that he should remember her to the end of time. A verse of one of Moore's melodies passed through his mind: unconsciously he began to hum it:

> "O, that hallowed form is ne'er forgot
> Which first love traced;
> Still it, lingering, haunts the greenest spot
> On memory's waste."

"Here comes Joan to say tea is ready," interrupted Katrine.

They strolled indoors slowly, side by side. The tea-tray waited in the parlour. Mr. Barbary came in from the gun-room, and they all sat down to the table.

After tea he went back to the gun-room, Mr. Reste with him, leaving Katrine alone. She had the candles lighted and began to mend a piece of Mrs. Todhetley's valuable old lace. Presently Joan came in to ask a question.

"Miss Katrine, is it the brace of partridges or the pheasants that are to be cooked for supper? Do you know?"

"No, that I don't," said Katrine. "But I can ask."

Putting down her work, she went to the gun-room and gently opened the door. Upon which, she heard these remarkable words from Mr. Reste:

"I wouldn't hesitate at all if it were not for the moon."

"The moon makes it all the safer," contended Mr. Barbary.

"Foes can't rush upon one unawares when the moon's shining. I tell you this will be one of the best possible nights for you."

"Papa, papa," hurriedly broke in Katrine, speaking through the dusk of twilight, "is Joan to cook the pheasants or the partridges?"

"The pheasants," he answered sharply. "Shut the door."

So the pheasants were dressed for supper, and very nice they proved with their bread-sauce and rich gravy. Mr. Barbary especially seemed to enjoy them; his daughter did not.

Poor Katrine's senses were painfully alert that night, as she lay listening after getting to bed. The words she had overheard in the gun-room seemed to her to bear but one meaning—that not only was her father going abroad into the wilds of danger, but Edgar Reste also. They had gone to their respective rooms early, soon after she went to hers; but that might be meant as a blind and told nothing.

By-and-by, she caught a sound as of the stairs creaking. Mr. Reste and her father were both creeping down them. Katrine flew to her window and peeped behind the blind.

They went out together by the back door. The bright moonbeams lay full upon the yard. Mr. Reste seemed to be attired like her father, in high leggings and a large old shooting-coat, no doubt borrowed plumes. Each of them carried a gun, and they stole cautiously out at the little side gate.

"Oh," moaned the unhappy Katrine, "if papa would but take better care of himself! If he would but leave off doing this most

dreadful and dangerous thing!"

Whether Katrine fell asleep after that, or not, she could never decide: it appeared as though but a short time had elapsed, when she was startled by a sharp sound outside, close to the house. It might have been the report of a gun, but she was not sure. This was followed by some stir in the yard and covert talking.

"They are bringing in the game they have shot," thought Katrine, "but oh, I am thankful they have got back safely!" And she put the pillow over her head and ears, and lay shivering.

Squire Todhetley was as good and lenient a man at heart as could be found in our two counties, Warwickshire and Worcestershire; fonder of forgiving sins and sinners than of bringing them to book, and you have not read of him all these years without learning it. But there was one offence that stirred his anger up to bubbling point, especially when committed against himself. And that was poaching.

So that, when we got downstairs to breakfast at Dyke Manor on the following morning, Wednesday, and were greeted with the news that some poachers had been out on our land in the night, and had shot at the keepers, it was no wonder the Squire went into a state of commotion, and that the rest of us partook of it.

"Johnny, tell Mack to fetch Jones; to bring him here instantly," fumed he. "Those Standishes have been in this work!"

I went to carry the orders to Mack in the yard. In passing back, after giving them, I saw that the dog-kennel was empty and the chain lying loose.

"Where's Don?" I asked. "Who has taken him out?"

"Guess he have strayed out of hisself, Master Johnny," was Mack's answer. "He was gone when I come on this morning, sir, and the gate were standing wide open."

"Gone then?—and the gate open? Where's Giles?"

But, even as I put the question, I caught sight of Giles at the stable pump, plunging his head and face into a pail of water. So I knew what had been the matter with *him*. Giles was a first-rate groom and a good servant, and it was very seldom indeed that he took more than was good for him, but it did happen at intervals.

Old Jones arrived in obedience to the summons, and stood on his fat gouty legs in the hall while the Squire talked to him. The faith he put in that old constable was surprising, whose skill and discernment were about suited to the year One.

His tale of the night's doings, as confirmed by other tales, was not very clear. At least, much satisfaction could not be got out of it. Some poachers congregated on a plot of land called Dyke's Neck—why it should have been so named nobody understood—were surprised by the keepers early in the night. A few stray shots were interchanged, no damage being done on either side, and the poachers made off, escaping not only scot-free but unrecognised. This last fact bore the keenest sting of all, and the Squire paced the hall in a fury.

"You must unearth them," he said to Jones: "don't tell me. They can't have buried themselves, the villains!"

"No need to look far for 'em, Squire," protested Jones. "It's

them jail-birds, the three Standishes. If it's not, I'll eat my head."

"Then why have you not taken up the three Standishes?" retorted the Squire. "Of course it is the Standishes."

"Well, your honour, because I can't get at 'em," said Jones helplessly. "Jim, he is off somewhere; and Dick, he swears through thick and thin that he was never out of his bed last night; and t'other, Tom, ain't apperiently at home at all just now. I looked in at their kitchen on my way here, and that was all I could get out of Mary."

It was at this juncture that Katrine arrived, preparatory to her morning's work with Lena. Old Jones and the Squire, still in the hall, were chanting a duet upon the poachers' iniquity, and she halted by me to listen. I was sitting on the elbow of the carved-oak settle. Katrine looked pale as a sheet.

Girls, thought I, do not like to hear of these things. For I knew nothing then of her fears that the offenders had been her father and Mr. Reste.

"If the poachers had been taken, sir—what then?" she said tremblingly to the Squire, in a temporary lull of the voices.

"What then, Miss Barbary? Why then they would have been lodged in gaol, and the neighbourhood well rid of them," was the impulsive answer.

"Snug and safe, miss," put in old Jones, shuffling on his gouty legs in his thick white stockings, "a-waiting to stand their trial next spring assizes at Worcester. Which it would be transportation for 'em, I hope—a using o' their guns indeed!"

"Were they known at all?" gasped Katrine. "And might not the gamekeepers have shot *them*? Perhaps have killed them?"

"Killed 'em or wounded 'em, like enough," assented Jones, "and it would be a good riddance of such varmint, as his worship says, miss. And a misfortin it is that they be *not* known. Which is an odd thing to my mind, sir, considering the lightness o' the night: and I'd like to find out whether them there keepers did their duty, or didn't do it."

"I can't see the dog anywhere, father," interrupted Tod, dashing in at this moment in a white heat, for he had been racing about in search of Don.

"What, is the dog off?" exclaimed old Jones.

"Yes, he is," said Tod. "And if those poachers have stolen him, I'll try and get them hanged."

Leaving us to our commotion, Katrine Barbary passed on to the nursery with Lena, where the lessons were taken. This straying away of Don made one of the small calamities of the day. Giles, put to the torture of confession, admitted that he remembered unchaining Don the past night as usual, but could not remember whether or not he locked the gate. Of course the probability was that he left it wide open, Mack having found it so in the morning. So that Mr. Don, finding himself at liberty, might have gone out promenading as early in the night as he pleased. Giles was ready to hang himself with vexation. The dog was a valuable animal; a prize for any tramp or poacher, for he could be sold at a high price.

We turned out on our different quests; old Jones after the poachers, I and Tod after Don: and the morning wore on.

Katrine went home at midday. This news of the night encounter between the keepers and the poachers had thrown her into a state of anxious pain—though of course the reader fully understands that I am, so far, writing of what I knew nothing about until later. That her father and Edgar Reste had been the poachers of the past night she could not doubt, and a dread of the discovery which might ensue lay upon her with a sick fear. The Standishes might have been included in the party; more than likely they were; Ben Gibbon also. Mr. Jim Standish had contrived to let Katrine believe that they were all birds of a feather, tarred with the same brush. But how could Edgar Reste have allowed himself to be drawn into it even for one night? She could not understand that.

Entering Caramel Cottage by its side gate, Katrine found Joan seated in the kitchen, slicing kidney beans for dinner. Her father was in his favourite den, the gun-room, Mr. Reste was out. When she left in the morning, neither of them had quitted his respective chamber, an entirely unusual thing.

"How late you are with those beans, Joan!" listlessly observed Katrine.

"The master sent me to the Silver Bear for a bottle of the best brandy, and it hindered me," explained Joan. "They were having a fine noise together when I got back," she added, dropping her voice.

"Who were?" quickly cried Katrine.

"The master and Mr. Reste. Talking sharply at one another, they were, like two savages. I could hear 'em through my deafness. Ben Gibbon was here when I went out, but he'd gone when I came in with the brandy."

What with one thing and another, Katrine felt more uncomfortable than an oyster out of its shell. Mr. Reste came in at dinner-time, and she saw nothing amiss then, except that he and her father were both unusually silent.

Afterwards they went out together, and Katrine hoped that the unpleasantness between them was at an end.

She was standing at the front gate late in the afternoon, looking up and down the solitary road, which was no better than a wide field path, when Tod and I shot out of the dark grove by Caramel's Farm, and made up to her.

"You look hot and tired," she said to us.

"So would you, Miss Barbary, if you had been scouring the fields in search of Don, as we have," answered Tod, who was in a desperate mood.

At that moment Mr. Barbary came swinging round the corner of the short lane that led to the high-road, his guest following him. They nodded to us and went in at the gate.

"You do not happen to have seen anything of our Newfoundland dog to-day, I suppose, Mr. Barbary?" questioned Tod.

"No, I have not," he answered. "My daughter mentioned to

me that he had strayed away."

"Strayed away or been stolen," corrected Tod. "The dog was a favourite, and it has put my father out more than you'd believe. He thinks the Standishes may have got him: especially if it is they who were out in the night."

"Shouldn't wonder but they have," said Mr. Barbary.

Standing by in silence, I had been wondering what had come to Mr. Reste. He leaned against the porch, listening to this, arms folded, brow lowering, face dark, not a bit like his own pleasant self.

"I am about the neighbourhood a good deal; I'll not fail to keep a look-out," said Mr. Barbary, as we were turning away. "He was a fine dog, and might prove a temptation to the Standishes; but I should be inclined to think it more likely that he has strayed to a distance than that they have captured him. They might find a difficulty in concealing a large, powerful dog such as he is."

"Not they; they are deep enough for any wicked action," concluded Tod, as we went onwards.

It was tea-time then at Caramel Cottage, and they sat down to take it. Mr. Barbary was sociable and talked of this and that; Edgar Reste spoke hardly a word; Katrine busied herself with the teapot and cups. At dusk Ben Gibbon came in, and Katrine was sent to bear Joan company in the kitchen. Brandy and whisky were put upon the table, Joan being called to bring in hot and cold water. They sat drinking, as Katrine supposed, and talking together in covert tones for two hours, when Gibbon left; upon

which Katrine was graciously told by her father she might return to the parlour. Her head ached badly, she felt ill at ease, and when supper was over went up to bed. But she could not get to sleep.

About eleven o'clock, as she judged it to be, loud and angry sounds arose. Her father and Mr. Reste had renewed their dispute —whatever its cause might be. By-and-by, when it was at its height, she heard Mr. Reste dash out at the back door; she heard her father dash after him. In the yard there seemed to be a scuffle, more hot words, and then a sudden silence. Katrine rose and stole to the window to look.

She could not see either of them. But a noise in the kitchen beneath, as if the fire-irons were thrown down, seemed to say they had come back indoors. Another minute and her father came out with a lighted lantern in his hand; she wondered why, as it was moonlight. He crossed the yard and went into the back kitchen, or brewhouse, as it was more often called, and Katrine, hoping the quarrel was over, got into bed again. Presently the back door was shut with a bang that shook the room, and footsteps were heard ascending the stairs, and afterwards all was quiet until morning.

As on the past morning, so it was on this. When Katrine got downstairs she found that neither her father nor Mr. Reste was up. She breakfasted alone, and set off for the Manor afterwards.

But, as it chanced, she was to have partial holiday that day. Lena complained of a sore throat; she was subject to sore throats; so Miss Barbary was released when the lesson was half over, and

returned home.

Going to her room to take her bonnet off, she found Joan busy there. From the window she saw her father at work at the far end of the garden. This was Thursday, the day of the projected walk to Church Leet, and very lovely weather. But Mr. Reste had not said anything about it since the Tuesday afternoon.

"Is Mr. Reste gone out, Joan?"

"Mr. Reste is gone, Miss Katrine."

"Gone where?" asked she.

"Gone away; gone back to London," said Joan. Upon which Katrine, staring at the old woman, inquired what she meant.

It appeared that Mr. Barbary had left his chamber close upon Katrine's departure, and sat down to breakfast. When he had finished he called Joan to take the things away. She inquired whether they had not better be left for Mr. Reste. He answered that Mr. Reste was gone. "What, gone away back to London?" Joan cried, in surprise; and her master said, "Yes." "You might just have knocked me down with a feather, Miss Katrine, I was that took to," added Joan now, in relating this. "Never to say good-bye to me, nor anything!"

Katrine, thinking there was somebody else he had not said good-bye to, could hardly speak from amazement. "When did he go, Joan? Since breakfast? Or was he gone when I went out?"

"Well, I don't know," pondered Joan; "it seems all a moither in my head; as if I couldn't put this and that together. I never saw nor heard anything of him at all this morning, and I find his bed

has not been slept in, which looks as if he went last night. It's odd, too, that he didn't say he was going, and it's odd he should start off to London at midnight. Your papa is in one of his short tempers, Miss Katrine, and I've not dared to ask him about it."

Katrine, as she listened, felt perfectly bewildered. Why had he taken his departure in this strange manner? What for? What had caused him to do it? Joan had told all she knew, and it was of no use questioning her further.

Mr. Reste's chamber door stood open; Katrine halted at it and looked in. Why! he seemed to have taken nothing with him! His coats were hanging up; trifles belonging to him lay about on chairs; on the side shelf stood his little portable desk—and she had heard him say that he never travelled without that desk, it went with him wherever he went. Opening a drawer or two, she saw his linen, his neckties, his handkerchiefs. What was the meaning of it all? Could he have been recalled to London in some desperate hurry? But no letter or summons of any kind had come to Caramel Cottage, so far as she knew, except the letter from Captain Amphlett on Tuesday morning, and that one had not recalled him.

"There be two pairs of his boots in the kitchen," said Joan. "He has took none with him but them he's got on."

"I *must* ask papa about it," cried the puzzled Katrine.

Mr. Barbary was at the bottom of the garden working away at the celery bed in his shirt sleeves; his coat lay across the cucumber-frame.

"What brings you home now?" he cried out, looking up as Katrine drew near.

"The little girl is not well. Papa," she added, her voice taking a timid, shrinking tone, she hardly knew why, "Joan says Mr. Reste is gone."

"Well?"

"But why has he left so suddenly, without saying anything about it?"

"He could do so if he pleased. He was at liberty to go or stay."

Katrine could not dispute that. She hardly liked to say more, her father's answers were so curt and cross.

"He must have gone unexpectedly, papa."

"Unexpectedly! Not at all. He has been talking of going all the week."

Katrine paused. "Is he coming back, papa?"

"Not that I know of."

"But he has not taken any of his things."

"I am going to pack his things and send them after him."

"But–*when* did he go, papa?"

Mr. Barbary, who had kept on working, drew himself bolt upright. Letting his hands rest on the handle of his spade, he looked sternly into Katrine's face.

"He went last night."

"He–he never told me he was going. He never said anything about it."

"And why should he tell you?" demanded Mr. Barbary. "It

was enough that he told me. He thought he had been quite long enough away from his work, and that it was high time to go back to it. I thought the same. That's all, Katrine; you need not inquire further. And now you can go indoors."

She walked slowly up the narrow path, conscious that some mystery must lie behind this. Joan was standing in the yard, outside the back-kitchen door, trying to pull it open.

"This here back'us door's locked!" exclaimed Joan, in her country vernacular. "I want the spare jack out; t'other's given way at last."

"It can't be locked," dissented Katrine. "It never is."

"Well, I've never known the door locked afore; but 'tis now, Miss Katrine. I noticed it was shut to all day yesterday, but I didn't try it."

"It is only stuck," said Katrine, laying hold of the high old-fashioned bow handle which served to lift the latch inside; and she shook it well.

"What's that? What are you about?" called out Mr. Barbary, dashing up the path like a flash of lightning. "Let the door alone."

"Joan says it is locked, papa," said Katrine, frightened by his manner.

"And what if it is? I have locked up some—some wine there that came in. How dare you meddle with the places I choose to keep closed?"

"It's the other jack I want out, sir," said Joan, hearing imperfectly.

"You can't have the other jack."

"But, master, the old jack's broke clean in two, and it's time to put the lamb down."

"Cut it into chops," he cried, waving them both off, and standing, himself, before the door, as if to guard it, with a white, imperious, passionate face.

Single-minded old Joan went indoors, marvelling a little—such a bit of a trouble for him to have opened the back'us door and given her out the jack! Katrine followed, marvelling very much. She did not believe in the wine: felt sure no wine had come in; they never had any; what was it that was locked up there? All in a moment a thought flashed over her that it might be game: poached game: pheasants and partridges and hares. But, upon that thought came another: why should the spoil have been brought in on Tuesday night when it had never (as she believed) been brought before? Just a little came in for their own use, nothing more.

II

That day, Thursday, we had news of Don. And we had it in this way. Tobias Jellico—who had a small draper's shop at Evesham, and went about the country with a pack, out of which he seduced unwary ladies to buy finery, more particularly some of our ladies living in Piefinch Cut—was at Church Dykely to-day on one of his periodical visitations. We did not like the man or his trade; but

that's neither here nor there. Hearing that the Squire's dog was lost, he at once said he had seen Dick Standish that morning in Bengeworth (a portion of Evesham) with a large Newfoundland dog. White-and-brown, he called it; which was a mistake, for Don was white and black; but Jellico might not know colours. It was Mr. Duffham who brought us this news in the afternoon: he had been sent for to Lena, whose throat was getting worse. Duffham heard it from Perkins the butcher, to whom Jellico told it.

I don't know which item pleased the Squire most: that Don was found, or that the guilt of Tuesday night was traced home to the Standishes; for the three brothers had in general a certain gentleman's own luck, and were rarely caught.

"Don went out roaming, through that villain Giles unloosing him and leaving the yard gate open," decided the Squire, in his excitement. "The dog must have sprung upon them; he has a mortal enmity to tramps and poachers, you know, Duffham; and the Standishes captured him. I'll send a message to the police at Evesham at once, to look after Mr. Dick, and go over myself in the morning."

"Anyway, I'm glad the dog's found," said Duffham. "But what an idiot Dick Standish must be to allow himself to be seen with the dog in the public streets."

"Johnny," said the Squire, turning to me as he was leaving the room to send a man galloping on horseback to the Evesham police, "you run over to Caramel Cottage. Make my compliments

to young Reste; say that I am going to drive to Evesham to-morrow morning, and shall be happy to take him if he likes to accompany me. I offered to drive him over some day before he left, but this bother has caused me to delay it. Shall start at nine o'clock, tell him."

About the time the Squire was charging me with this message, Katrine Barbary was sitting in the homely garden at Caramel Cottage, amidst the fruit trees, the vegetables, and the late flowers. The October sunlight fell on her pretty face, that somehow put you in mind of a peach with its softest bloom upon it.

Katrine was striving to see daylight out of a mass of perplexity, of which I then knew nothing, and she could not discern a single ray. Why should that fine young barrister, Edgar Reste, staying with them so peacefully for several weeks past, and fully intending to stay this week out—why should he have run away by night, leaving behind him an atmosphere of mystery? This question would never leave Katrine's mind by night or by day.

Sitting there in the afternoon sun, she was running over mentally, for the tenth time or so, the details of the affair. One or two of them might have looked somewhat shady to a suspicious observer; to Katrine they presented only a web of perplexity. She felt sure that when she went to bed on the Wednesday night he had no thought of leaving; and yet it seemed that he did leave. When Joan rose in the early morning, he had disappeared—

vanished, as may be said. The puzzle that Katrine could not solve was this: why had he gone away in haste so great that he could not take his clothes with him? and why had he gone at all in an unexpected, stealthy way, saying nothing to anybody?

"It looks just as though he had run away to escape some imminent danger, with not a minute to spare," mused Katrine.

At this moment Katrine met with an interruption to her thoughts in the shape of me. Catching a glimpse of her print frock through the hedge, I went straight in at the little side gate, without troubling the front door.

"Sit down, Johnny," she said, holding out her hand, and making room for me on the bench. And as I took the seat, I said what I had come for—to deliver the Squire's message to Mr. Reste.

"Mr. Reste has left us," said Katrine. "He went away last night."

"Went away last night!" I exclaimed, the news surprising me uncommonly. "What took him off so suddenly?"

Open-natured as the day, Katrine told me the particulars (which proved that she had no dark fears about it as yet), of course saying nothing about the poaching. And she did mention the quarrel.

"It is so strange that he should leave all his things behind him —don't you see that, Johnny?" she said. "Even that little desk, full of private papers, is left, and he never travels without it; his boots are left."

"He must have had some news to call him away. A letter perhaps."

"The only letter he has had lately came on Tuesday morning," returned Katrine. "It had a good deal of money in it in bank-notes; sixty pounds; but it did not call him away. *Nothing* called him away, that I can discover. You can't think how it is worrying me; it seems just a mystery."

"Look here, Katrine," I said, after mentally twisting the matter this way and that, "I've known the most unaccountable problems turn out to be the simplest on explanation. When you hear from him, as you most likely will in a day or two, I dare say he will tell you he was called away unexpectedly, and had to go at once. Does not Mr. Barbary know why he went?"

"Well, yes; I fancy he does: he is indoors now, packing Mr. Reste's things: but he does not tell me."

After talking a little longer, we strolled up the path together, and had reached the yard when Mr. Barbary suddenly opened the kitchen door to shake the dust from a coat that seemed covered with it. His handsome face took a haughty expression, and his slender, shapely form was drawn up in pride as he looked sternly at me, as much as to say, "What do you want here?"

I turned, on my way to the side gate, to explain: that Don had been seen at Evesham in the company of Dick Standish, that the Squire would be driving thither on the morrow, and had thought Mr. Reste might like to go with him.

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