BARING-GOULD SABINE

THE BROOM-SQUIRE

Sabine Baring-Gould
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http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24172556
The Broom-Squire:
ISBN http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/30354

Содержание

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CHAPTER I
AT THE SIGN OF THE SHIP

On a September evening, before the setting of the sun, a man entered the tavern of the Ship in Thursley, with a baby under his arm.

The tavern sign, rudely painted, bore, besides a presentment of a vessel, the inscription on one side of the board: —

> "Now before the hill you climb,
> Come and drink good ale and wine."

On the other side of the board the legend was different. It ran thus: —

> "Now the hill you're safely over,
> Drink, your spirits to recover."

The tavern stood on the high-road side between Godalming and

Portsmouth; that is to say the main artery of communication

between

London and Portsmouth.

After rising out of the rich overshadowed weald land, the road had crossed long sandy wastes, where population was sparse, where were no enclosures, no farms, only scattered Scottish firs; and in front rose the stately ridge of sandstone that culminates in Hind Head and Leith Hill. It was to prepare the wayfarer for a scramble to the elevation of a little over nine hundred feet that he was invited to "drink good ale and wine," or, if he were coming from the opposite direction was called upon to congratulate himself in a similar manner on having over-passed this ridge. The wayfarer with the baby under his arm came from the Godalming side. He looked up at the sign, which appealed at once to his heart, for he was obviously a sailor, no less than did the invitation commend itself to his condition.

He entered, tumbled the baby on to the tavern table that was marked with wet rings from beer cans, and upset a saucer containing fly poison, and said, with a sigh of relief —

"There you are! Blowed and all of a lather!"

He pulled out a blue cotton pocket-handkerchief, mopped his face and shouted, "Beer!"

"Well, I never!" exclaimed the landlady. "Whoever heered afore or saw of a babby lugged about wrong side uppermost. What would you say if I was to bring you your tankard topsy-turvy?"

"I wouldn't pay for it," said the sailor.

"'Cos why?" asked the woman, planting herself arms akimbo, in front of the wayfarer.

"'Cos it 'ud capsize the ale," he answered.

"Very well, ain't babbies got no in'ards to capsize?" asked the landlady, defiantly. "And chucked in among the pison for killing them dratted flies, too!"

"Never mind about the kid," said the man.

"I do mind about the child," retorted the woman; "look at him there – the innocent – all in the nasty slops. What'll the mother say to the mess and crumple you've made of the clothes?"

The landlady took the infant from the table, on one arm, and proceeded to the bar to draw the beer.

Presently she returned, kissing the child and addressing it in terms of affection. She thrust the pewter full of foaming ale on the table towards the customer, with resentfulness in her action.

"He's a stomachy (sturdy) young chap," she said, patting the babe with the now disengaged hand.

"He ain't a he at all," retorted the man. "He's a she."

"A girl, is it!" exclaimed the hostess; "and how came you by the precious?"

"Best rights of all," answered the man; "'cos I'm the kid's father."

"Her mother ought to be ashamed of herself letting you haul about the poor mite under your arm, just as though she was pertatoes."

"Her mother can't help it," said the man. "She's dead, and left

me wi' this here child a month or six weeks old, and I've been sweating along the way from Lun'non, and she yowlin' enough to tear a fellow's nerves to pieces." This said triumphantly; then in an apologetic tone, "What does the likes o' me know about holdin' babies? I were brought up to seamanship, and not to nussin'. I'd joy to see you, missus, set to manage a thirty-pounder. I warrant you'd be as clumsy wi' a gun as I be wi' a kid."

"D'r say," responded the landlady, "and where be you a-g'win to with this here angel? Takin' her to sea to make a mermaid of her?"

"No, I aren't," said the mariner. "Her mother's dead – in lodgin's down by the Katherine docks, and got no relatives and no friends there. I'm off to sea again when I've dispodged o' this here incumbrance. I'm takin' her down to her mother's sister – that way." He indicated the down road with his thumb.

"It's a wonder you ain't made a crook of her backbone, it is," said the woman. "And if you'd gone and crippled she for life, what would you think o' that?"

"I didn't carry her like that all the road," answered the sailor.

"Part ways I slung her over my back."

"Wonder she's alive. Owdatious strong she must be. Come in, my cherry beam. I'll give you as good as mother's milk. Three parts water and a bit o' shuggar. Little your father thinks o' your wants so long as he gets his ale."

"I let her suck my thumb," said the sailor, timidly.

"Much good she got out o' that," retorted the landlady. "Yes,

yes, my syrup. I'll give you something."

"If you can stop her yowling, I'll thank you."

With a contemptuous look at the father, the hostess withdrew.

Then the sailor planted his elbows on the table, drank a long draught of beer, and said, sententiously, "It's an institootion is wimin."

"Woman is the joy of our lives," said a lanky, dark-haired man at the table.

"'Tain't exactly that," answered the sailor, now first observing that there were other men in the room. "'Tis that there's things for everything – there's the capstan for hawlin' up the anchor, and there's the woman for nussin'. They was ordained to it – not men – never, no – not men. Look at my hand." The sailor extended his arm across the table. "It's shakin' like a guitar-string when a nigger's playing – and all along of that kid's yawls. Wimin likes it."

"It's their moosic," said the lanky man.

Then in rushed the landlady with flashing eyes, and holding out both palms before her said, "The child's mouth be that purple or blue – it's fits."

"It's blackberries," answered the seaman. "They was nice and ripe, and plenty of them."

"Blackberries!" almost shrieked the hostess, "and the child not six weeks old! You've killed her! It's upset her blessed little inside."

"I thought I'd done wrong," said the sailor, timidly, "that's why

I was a-carryin' of her topsy-turvy. I thought to ha' shooked the blackberries out again."

"If that child dies," exclaimed the landlady, solemnly, "then where will you go to, you unnat'ral parient?"

"I did it wi' the best intention," apologized the man.

"That's what Betsy Chaffers said when she gave wrong change. Oh that heaven should ever a created man. They's terrible monsters."

She disappeared again after the child.

The sailor drank more beer, sighed, wiped his brow, then his upper lip, and looked appealingly about him at the men who were present. Of these there were four and a half. That is to say, four men and a boy. Three of the men were at the table, and of these the lanky sallow man was one.

These three men were strange, unpleasant-looking fellows, dressed up in scraps of incongruous clothing, semi-nautical, semi-agricultural. One was completely enveloped in a great-coat that had belonged to a very tall and stout man, and he was short and thin. Another was incompletely dressed, for what garments he had on were in rags that afforded glimpses between them of tattered lining, of flesh, but of no shirt.

The third man had the unmistakable lower jaw and mouth of an

Irishman.

By the fire sat an individual of a different type. He was a young man with heavy brows and a large mouth devoid of lips, set tight

as a snapped man-trap. He had keen, restless, watchful eyes. His hair was sandy, thrust forward over his brow, and hanging low behind. On the opposite side of the hearth crouched a boy, a timid, delicately formed lad with a large head and full lustrous eyes.

"Come from far?" asked one of the ragamuffins at the table.

"Didn't yur hear me say from Lun'non town?" answered the sailor. "Lagged that there dratted baby the whole way. I'll have another glass of beer."

"And what distance are you going?" asked the lanky man.

"I shall put into the next port for the night, and tomorrow on to Portsmouth, and stow away the kid with my wife's sister. Lord! I wishes the morrer were well over."

"We're bound for Portsmouth," said the man in tatters. "What say you? shall we keep company and relieve you of the kid? If you'll pay the shot here and at the other end, and at the other pubs – can't say but what we'll ease you."

"It's a bargain," exclaimed the sailor. "By George! I've had enough of it from Lun'non here. As to money, look here," he put his hand into his trousers pocket and pulled out a handful of coins, gold, silver and copper together. "There is brass for all. Just home, paid off – and find my wife dead – and me saddled with the yowling kid. I'm off to sea again. Don't see no sport wider-erring here all bebothered with a baby."

"We are very willing to accompany you," said the tattered man, and turning to the fellow with sallow face and lantern jaws,

he said, "What's your opinion, Lonegon?"

"I'm willing, Marshall; what say you, Michael Casey?"

"Begorra – I'm the man to be a wet nuss."

The sailor called for spirits wherewith to treat the men who had offered their assistance.

"This is a mighty relief to me," said he. "I don't think I could ha' got on by myself."

"You've no expayrience, sir," said Casey. "It's I'm the boy for the babbies. Ye must rig up a bottle and fill it with milk, and just a whisk of a drop of the craytur to prevent it curdling, and then stuff the mouth with a rag – and the darlin'll suck, and suck, and be still as the evenin' star as I sees yonder glimmering at the window."

"You'll have to start pretty sharp if you want to get on a stage before dark," said the man by the fire.

"It's a lone road," threw in the boy shyly.

"What's the odds when we are four of us?" asked the man whose name was Lonegon.

"And all of us pertecting the little cherub from ketching cold," threw in Casey.

"We ain't afraid – not we," said the ragged man.

"Not of bogies, at any rate."

"Oh, you need not fear bogies," observed the man at the fire, dryly.

"What is it, then?" asked Michael Casey. "Sure It's not highwaymen?"

The man by the fire warmed his palms, laughed, and said: "It would take two to rob you, I guess, one to put the money into your pocket and the second to take it out."

"You're right there," answered the Irishman, laughing. "It's my pockets be that worn to holes wi' the guineas that have been in them, that now they let 'em fall through."

The man by the fire rubbed his palms together and made a remark in a low tone – addressed to the boy. Lonegon turned sharply round on his seat and cried threateningly, "What's that you're hinting agin us? Say it again, and say it aloud, and I'll knock your silly, imperdent head off."

"I say it again," said the young man, turning his cunning head round, like a jackdaw. "I say that if I were going over Hind Head and by the Punch Bowl at night with as much money in my pocket as has that seaman there – I'd choose my companions better. You haven't heard what I said? I'd choose my companions better."

CHAPTER II
WANDERING SOULS

The long, lean fellow, Lonegon, leaped to his feet, and struck at the man by the fire.

The latter was prepared for him. He had snatched a brand from the hearth, and without losing the sarcastic laugh on his great mouth, presented it sharply in the way of the descending fist, so as to catch Lonegon's wrist.

The sparks flew about at the clash, and the man who had received the blow uttered a howl of pain, for his wrist was torn by the firewood, and his hand burnt by the fire.

With an imprecation and a vow to "do for" "eyes, liver, and lights" of the "clodhopper," he rushed at him blindly. With a mocking laugh, the man assailed thrust forth a leg, and Lonegon, stumbling across it, measured his length on the floor.

The man called Marshall now interfered by snatching the pewter tankard from the sailor, and aiming it at the head of him who had overthrown his mate.

At the same time the boy, terrified, began to scream. "Mother! mother! help! pray! they'll murder Bideabout."

The hostess speedily appeared, set her arms akimbo, planted her feet resolutely on the floor, and said, in commanding tones —

"Now then! No fighting on the premises. Stand up, you rascal.

What have you done with the pewter? Ah, crushed out of all shape and use. That's what Molly Luff sed of her new bonnet when she sat down on it – Lawk, a biddy! Who'd ha' thought it?"

Lonegon staggered to his feet, and burst into a torrent of recrimination against the man whom the boy had called Bideabout.

"I don't care where the rights are, or where be the wrongs. An addled egg be nasty eating whether you tackle it one end or 'tother. All I sez is – I won't have it. But what I will have is – I'll be paid for that there tankard. Who threw it?"

"It was he – yonder, in tatters," said the boy.

"You won't get money out o' me," said Marshall; "my pockets – you may turn 'em out and see for yourself – are rich in nothing but holes, and there's in them just about as many of they as there are in the rose o' a watering can."

"I shall be paid," asserted the hostess. "You three are mates, and there'll be money enough among you."

"Look here, mistress," put in the sailor, "I'll stand the damage, only don't let us have a row. Bring me another can of ale, and tell me what it all comes to. Then we'll be on the move."

"The other fellows may clear off, and the sooner the better," said the landlady. "But not you just now, and the baby has dropped off into the sweetest of sleeps. 'Twere a sin to wake her."

"I'm going on to the Huts," said the seaman.

"And we're going with him as a guard to the baby," said the Irish fellow.

"A blackguard set," threw in Bideabout.

"What about the color so long as it is effective?" asked Casey.

By degrees the anger of Lonegon was allayed, and he seated himself growling at the table, and wiped the blood from his torn wrist on his sleeve, and drawing forth a dirty and tattered red kerchief, bound it round the bruised and wounded joint. The man, Bideabout, did not concern himself with the wrath or the anguish of the man. He rubbed his hands together, and clapped a palm on each knee, and looked into the fire with a smirk on his face, but with an eye on the alert lest his adversary should attempt to steal an advantage on him.

Nor was he unjustified in being on his guard, judging by the malignant glances cast at him by Lonegon.

"Whom may you be?" asked the tattered man.

"I'm Jonas Kink," answered the young fellow at the fire.

"He's Bideabout, the Broom-Squire," explained the landlady. Then with a glimmering of a notion that this variation in names might prove confusing, she added, "leastways that's what we calls him. We don't use the names writ in the Church register here. He's the Broom-Squire – and not the sort o' chap for you ragamuffins to have dealings with – let me tell you."

"I don't kear what he be," said Lonegon, sullenly, "but dang it, I'd like a sup o' ale with your leave," and without further ceremony he took the new tankard from the sailor and quaffed off half its contents.

The hostess looked from the drinker to the seaman and said,

"Are you standing tick for they?"

"I'll pay for their drink and they'll help me along the road with the baby," said the sailor.

The landlady shrugged her shoulders contemptuously, and asked, "If

I may be so bold, what's her name?"

"What's whose name?"

"The baby's."

"Ha'n't got none," said the seaman.

"What, ain't she been christened yet?"

"No, I reckon not," answered the father. Then he proceeded to explain. "You see my poor wife she was down in lodgings and hadn't no friends nor relations no'ther nigh her, and she took ill and never got over the birth of this here babe, and so it couldn't be done. But the kid's aunt'll see to all that right enough when I've got her there."

"What! you're trapsing about the country hugging a babe along under your arm and slung over your shoulder and feeding her o' blackberries and chucking her in among fly poison, and not a Christian yet! My! What a world it is!".

"All in good time, missus."

"That's what Betsy Cole said o' her pork and 'ams when the pig wor killed and her hadn't salt nor saltpetre. She'd see to it some day. Meanwhile the maggots came and spiled the lot."

"It shall all be made right in a day or two."

"Ah! but what if it be too late? Then where will you go to some

day? How can you say but that the child wi' being hung topsy-turvy and swinging like a pendiddlum may die of the apoplexy, or the blackberries turn sour in her blessed stomach and she go off in convulsions, or that she may ha' put out the end o' her tongue and sucked some o' that there fly paper? Then where will you be?"

"I hope I shall be on board ship just before that comes to pass," said the sailor.

"Do you know what happens if a child dies and ha'n't been christened? It becomes a wanderer."

"What do you mean?"

"It ain't a Christian, so it can't go to heaven. It ain't done no evil, so it can't go to hell; and so the poor spirit wanders about in the wind and never has no rest. You can hear them piping in the trees and sobbin' at the winder. I've heard 'm scores of times. How will you like that when at sea to have your own child sighing and sobbin' up in the rigging of the vessel, eh?"

"I hope it will not come to that," said the sailor.

"That's what Susan Bay said when she put a darnin' needle into the armchair cushion, and I sed, said I, 'twas a ticklesome thing and might do hurt. She did it once too often. Her old man sat down on it."

She brought some more ale at the request of the seaman, and as she set down the tankard said:

"I won't be so bold as to say it's in Scriptur', but it's in the Psalm-book I dare swear. Mother, she were a tip-top tearin'

religious woman, and she used to say it to me when I was younger than I be now: —

"'They flies in clouds and flap their shrouds
When full the moon doth shine;
In dead of night when lacketh light,
We here 'em pipe and pine.

"'And many a soul wi' hoot and howl
Do rattle at the door,
Or rave and rout, and dance about
All on a barren moor.'

"And it goes on somehow like this. You can think on it as you go over Hind Head in the dark:

"'Or at the winder wail and weep,
Yet never venture nigher;
In snow and sleet, within to creep
To warm 'em at the fire.'"

The child began to cry in the adjoining room.

"There," said the landlady, "'tis awake she is, poor mite without a name, and not as much Christianity as could make a cat sneeze. If that there child were to die afore you got to Portsmouth and had her baptized, sure as my name is Susanna Verstage, I'd never forgive myself, and I'd hear her for sure and certainty at the winder. I'm a motherly sort of a woman, and there's a lot o' them

poor wanderers comes piping about the panes of an evening. But I can do nothing for them."

"Now then, lads, let's be moving," said the mariner.

The three men at the table rose; and when standing exposed more of their raggedness and the incongruity of their apparel than was shown when they were seated.

The landlady reluctantly surrendered the child.

"A babe," said she, "mustn't be shaken after feeding;" then, "a babe mustn't be allowed to get its little feet cold, or gripes comes;" then, "you must mind and carry it with the head to your shoulder, and away from the wind." Presently another item occurred to the good woman, as the men left their places at the table: "You must hold the child on your arm, between the wrist and the elbow-jint."

As they went to the door she called, "And never be without a drop o' dill water: it's comforting to babies."

As they made their exit – "And when nussin', mind, no green meat nor fruit."

When all had departed the landlady turned to the man by the fire, who still wore his sarcastic smirk, and said "Bideabout! What do you think of they?"

"I think," answered the Broom-Squire, "that I never saw three such cut-throat rascals as those who have gone off with the sailor; and as for him – I take he's softish."

"I thought him a bit of a natural."

"He must be so to start on one of the lonesomest roads in

England, at fall of night, with such a parcel of jailbirds."

"Well, dear life!" exclaimed the good woman. "I hope nothing will hap' to the poor child."

"Mother," said the boy, timidly, "it's not true is it about the spirits of babies in the wind?"

"Of course it is. Where would you have them go? and they bain't Christians. Hark! I won't say there be none flying about now. I fancy I hear a sort of a kind o' whistling."

"Your boy Iver, he's coming with me to the Punch-Bowl," said the Broom-Squire; "but I'll not go for half-an-hour, becos I don't want to overtake that lanky, black-jawed chap as they call Lonegon. He ain't got much love for me, and might try to repay that blow on his wrist, and sprawl on the floor I gave him."

"What is Iver going to the Punch-Bowl for?" asked the landlady, and looked at the boy, her son.

"It's a snipe's feather Bideabout has promised me," answered the lad.

"And what do you want a snipe's feather for at this time o' night?"

"Mother, it's to make a paint brush of. Bideabout ain't at home much by day. I've been over the road scores o' times."

"A paint brush! What do you want paint brushes for? Have you cleaned out the pig-stye lately?"

"Yes, mother, but the pig lies abroad now; it's warm in the stye."

"Well, you may go. Dear life! I wish I could see that blessed

babe again, safe and sound. Oh, my!"

The good-hearted woman was destined to have her wish answered more speedily than she could have anticipated.

CHAPTER III
THE PUNCH-BOWL

The Broom-Squire and the boy were on their way up the hill that led towards the habitation of the former; or, to be more exact, it led to the summit of the hill whence the Squire would have to diverge at a sharp angle to the right to reach his home.

The evening had closed in. But that mattered not to them, for they knew their way, and had not far to go.

The road mounted continuously, first at a slight incline, over sand sprinkled with Scotch pines, and then more rapidly to the range of hills that culminates in Hind Head, and breaks into the singular cones entitled The Devil's Jumps.

This is one of the loveliest parts of fair England. The pine and the oak and the Spanish chestnut luxuriate in the soil, the sand tracts between the clumps are deep in heather, at intervals the country is furrowed as by a mighty plough; but the furrowing was done by man's hand to extract the metal of which the plough is formed. From a remote antiquity this district of Surrey, as well as the weald of Sussex, was the great centre of the iron trade. The metal lies in masses in the sand, strangely smooth and liver-colored, and going by the name of kidney iron. The forest of Anderida which covered the weald supplied at once the ore and the fuel for smelting.

In many places are "hammer ponds," pools of water artificially constructed, which at one time served to turn wheels and work mechanism for the beating out of the iron that had been won on the spot.

The discovery of coal and iron together, or in close proximity, in the North of England brought this industry of the counties of Surrey and Sussex to an abrupt end. Now the deposits of ore are no longer worked, no furnaces exist, only the traces of the old men's mines and forges and smelting pits remain to attest that from an age before Caesar landed in Kent, down to the close of the last century, all the iron employed in England came from this region.

Another singular feature of the district consists in the masses of hard stone, gray with lichen, that lie about, here topping a sandhill, there dropped at random in the plain. There was at one time many more of these, but owing to their power of resisting heat they were largely exploited as hearthstones. These masses, there can be no doubt, are remains of superincumbent beds of hard rock that have been removed by denudation, leaving but a few fragments behind.

That superstition should attach to these blocks is not marvellous. The parish in which lies the Punch-Bowl and rises Hind Head, comprises one such Thors-stone, named perhaps after the Scandinavian Thunder god. One of these strange masses of stone formerly occupied a commanding position on the top of Borough Hill. On this those in need knocked, whereupon the

"Good People" who lived under it lent money to the knockers, or any utensil desired in loan, on condition that it was returned. One night, a petitioner, who was going to give a feast at the baptism of his child, went to the stone, and knocked, and asked in a loud voice for the loan of a cauldron.

This was at once thrust out from under the stone, and was carried away and used for the christening feast. Unhappily, the applicant for the cauldron neglected to return it at the time appointed, and since then no more loans have been made. The cauldron, which is of copper, is now preserved in Frensham parish church. It is two feet in diameter, and stands on an iron trivet.

After the road had ascended some way, all trees disappeared. The scenery was as wild and desolate as any in Scotland. On all sides heathery slopes, in the evening light a broken patch of sand showed white, almost phosphorescent, through contrast with the black ling. A melancholy bird piped. Otherwise all was still. The richly-wooded weald, with here and there a light twinkling on it, lay far below, stretching to Lewes. When the high-road nearly reached the summit, it was carried in a curve along the edge of a strange depression, a vast basin in the sand-hills, sinking three hundred feet to a marshy bottom full of oozing springs. This is termed the Devil's Punch-Bowl. The modern road is carried on a lower level, and is banked up against the steep incline. The old road was not thus protected and ran considerably higher.

The night was gathering in, fold on fold, and obscuring all.

The Punch-Bowl that the Broom-Squire and the boy had on their right was a bowl brimming with naught save darkness. Its depths could not be fathomed by the eye at that time of night, nor did any sound issue from it save a hissing as though some fluid were seething in the bowl; yet was this produced solely by the wind swirling in it among the harsh branches of the heather.

"So your mother don't like your drawing and painting," said the

Broom-Squire.

"No, Bideabout, she and father be terrible on at me to become a publican, and carry along with the Ship, after father's got old and gived up. But I don't fancy it; in fact, I hate the thought of it. Of course," added the boy; "if they forces me to it, I must. But anyhow I wouldn't like to have that there Ship sign at our door so bad painted as she be. I could do better if I had the paints."

"Oh! drinkers don't care for beautiful pictures at the door, but for good ale within."

"I don't like that there ship, and I wouldn't stand it – if the inn were mine."

"You're a fool," said the Broom-Squire contemptuously. "Here's the spot where the turn comes off the road to my house. Mind where you walk, and don't roll over down the Punch-Bowl; it's all a bog at the bottom."

"There's no light anywhere," observed the boy.

"No – no winders look this way. You can't say if a house is alive or dead from here."

"How long have you had your place in the Punch-Bowl, Bideabout?"

"I've heard say my grandfather was the first squatter. But the Rocliffes, Boxalls, Snellings, and Nashes will have it they're older. What do I care so long as I have the best squat in the lot."

That the reader may understand the allusions a word or two must be allowed in explanation of the settlements in the Punch-Bowl.

This curious depression in the sand range is caused by a number of springs welling up several hundred feet below the summit of the range. The rain that falls on the hills sinks through the sand until it reaches an impervious bed of clay, when it breaks forth at many orifices. These oozing springs in course of vast ages have undermined and washed away the superincumbent sand and have formed the crater called the Devil's Punch-Bowl. The bottom is one impassable swamp, and the water from the springs flows away to the north through an opening in the sand-hills.

At some unknown date squatters settled in the Punch-Bowl, at a period when it was in as wild and solitary a region as any in England. They enclosed portions of the slopes. They built themselves hovels; they pastured their sheep, goats, cattle on the sides of the Punch-Bowl, and they added to their earnings the profits of a trade they monopolized – that of making and selling brooms.

On the lower slopes of the range grew coppices of Spanish

chestnut, and rods of this wood served admirably for broom-handles. The heather when long and wiry and strong, covered with its harsh leafage and myriad hard knobs, that were to burst into flower, answered for the brush.

On account of this manufacture, the squatters in the Punch-Bowl went by the designation of Broom-Squires. They provided with brooms every farm and gentleman's house, nay, every cottage for miles around. A wagon-load of these besoms was often purchased, and the supply lasted some years.

The Broom-Squires were an independent people. They used the turf cut from the common for fuel, and the farmers were glad to carry away the potash as manure for their fields.

Another business supplemented farming and broom-making. That was holly-cutting and getting. The Broom-Squires on the approach of Christmas scattered over the country, and wherever they found holly trees and bushes laden with berries, without asking permission, regardless of prohibition, they cut, and then when they had a cartload, would travel with it to London or Guildford, to attend the Christmas market.

Not only did they obtain their fuel from the heaths, but much of their victual as well. The sandy hills abound in rabbits, and the lagoons and morasses at the foot of the hills in the flat land teem with fish and wild fowl. At the present day the ponds about Frensham are much in request for fishing – at the time of our tale they were netted by the inhabitants of the neighborhood when they felt a hankering after fish, and the "moors," as marshes

are locally termed, were prowled over for ducks, and the sand burrows watched for rabbits, all without let and hindrance.

At the present date there are eight squatter families in the Punch-Bowl, three belong to the branches of the clan of Boxall, three to that of Snelling, and two to the less mighty clan of Nash. At the time of which I write one of the best built houses and the most fertile patches of land was in the possession of the young man, Jonas Kink, commonly known as Bideabout.

Jonas was a bachelor. His father and mother were dead, and his sister had married one of the Rocliffe's. He lived alone in his tolerably substantial house, and his sister came in when she was able to put it tidy for him and to do some necessary cooking. He was regarded as close-fisted though young; his age about twenty-three years. Hitherto no girl had caught his fancy, or had caught it sufficiently to induce him to take one to wife.

"Tell'y what," said his sister, "you'll be nothing else but an old hudger (bachelor)."

This was coming to be a general opinion. Jonas Kink had a heart for money, and for that only. He sneered at girls and flouted them. It was said that Jonas would marry no girl save for her money, and that a monied girl might pick and choose for herself, and such as she would most assuredly not make election of Bideabout. Consequently he was foredoomed to be a "hudger."

"What's that?" suddenly exclaimed the Broom-Squire, who led the way along a footpath on the side of the steep slope.

"It's a dead sheep, I fancy, Bideabout."

"A dead sheep – I wonder if it be mine. Hold hard, what's that noise?"

"It's like a babe's cry," said the boy. "Oh, lawk! if it be dead and ha' become a wanderer! I shu'd never have the pluck to go home alone."

"Get along with your wanderers. It's arrant nonsense. I don't believe a word of it."

"But there is the crying again. It is near at hand. Oh, Bideabout!

I be that terrified!"

"I'll strike a light. I'm not so sure about this being a dead sheep."

Something lay on the path, catching what little light came from the sky above.

Jonas stooped and plucked some dry grass. Then he got out his tinderbox and struck, struck, struck.

The boy's eyes were on the flashing sparks. He feared to look elsewhere. Presently the tinder was ignited, and the Broom-Squire blew it and held dry grass haulms to the glowing embers till a blue flame danced up, became yellow, and burst into a flare.

Cautiously Jonas approached the prostrate figure and waved the flaming grass above it, whilst sparks flew about and fell over it.

The boy, shrinking behind the man, looked timidly forward, and uttered a cry as the yellow flare fell over the object and

illumined a face.

"I thought as much," said the Broom-Squire. "What else could he expect? Them three chaps ha' murdered him. They've robbed and stripped him."

"Oh – Bideabout!"

"Aye. What other could come o' such companions. They've gone off wi' his clothes – left his shirt – have they? That's curious, as one of the blackguards had none."

Then the child's wailing and sobbing sounded more continuously than before.

"The baby ain't far off," said Jonas. "I suppose we can't leave it here. This is a pretty awkward affair. Tell'y what, Iver. You bide by the dead man and grope about for that there baby, and I'll go down to the houses and get help."

"Oh, Bideabout! I dursn't."

"Dursn't what?"

"Not be left alone – here – in the Punch-Bowl with a dead man."

"You're a fool," said Jonas, "a dead man can't hurt nobody, and them rascals as killed him are for sure a long way off by this time. Look here, Iver, you timid 'un, you find that squalling brat and take it up. I don't mind a brass fardin' being here wi' a corpse so long as I can have my pipe, and that I'll light. But I can't stand the child as well. You find that and carry it down, and get the Boxalls, or someone to take it in. Tell 'em there's a murdered man here and I'm by the body, and want to get home and can't

till someone comes and helps to carry it away. Cut along and be sharp. I'd ha' given a shilling this hadn't happened. It may cost us a deal o' trouble and inconvenience – still – here it is – and – you pick about and find that creature squealin' its bellows out."

There was callousness unusual and repulsive in so young a man. It jarred with the feelings of the frightened and nervous boy. Tears of alarm and pity were in his eyes. He felt about in the heather till he reached the infant. It was lying under a bush. He took the poor little creature up, and the babe, as though content to feel itself with strong arms under it, ceased to cry.

"What shall I do, Bideabout?"

"Do – cut along and raise the Boxalls and the Snellings, and bid them come and remove the body, and get someone to take the child. Confound the whole concern. I wish they'd done it elsewhere – or I hadn't come on it. But it's like my ill-luck."

CHAPTER IV
WITHOUT A ROOF

The boy, Iver, trudged along carrying the infant in his arms. The little face was against his cheek, and the warm breath played over it. Whenever the child cried, he spoke, and his voice reassured the babe, and it was quiet again. He walked cautiously, as the path was narrow and the night dark. A false step might send him rolling down the steep slope with his burden.

Iver had often been to the squatters' quarters, and he knew very well his direction; but he was now agitated and alarmed.

After a while he reached bushes and could see trees standing black against the sky, and caught the twinkling of lights. Before him was a cottage, and a little garden in front. He opened a wicket and went up to the door and rapped. A call of "Who is there?" in response. The boy raised the latch and entered.

A red peat fire was burning on the hearth, and a man sat by it.

A woman was engaged at needlework by the light of a tallow candle.

"Tom Rocliffe!" exclaimed the boy. "There's been a murder. A sailor – he's dead on the path – there's Bideabout Kink standing by and wants you all to come and help and – here's the baby."

The man sprang to his feet. "A murder! Who's dead?"

"There was a sailor came to our place, it's he."

"Who killed him?"

"Some chaps as was drinking with him, so Bideabout says. They've robbed him – he had a lot of brass."

"Dead – is he?" The man ran out.

"And what have you got there?" asked the woman.

"It's his baby."

"How came he by the baby?"

"I heard him say his wife was dead, and he were going to carry the child to his wife's sister."

"What's the man's name?"

"I don't know."

"Where did he come from?"

"He was a seaman."

"Where was he going to put the baby?"

"I don't know 'xactly – somewhere Portsmouth way."

"What's the man's name?"

"I don't know."

"How'll you find her?"

"I don't know."

"Portsmouth is a large place. Are you sure she's in Portsmouth?"

"He said Portsmouth way, I think."

"Then there be a difficulty in finding her?"

"'Spose there will. Will you take the baby?"

"I-I – " The woman stared. "What's its name?"

"It ain't got none."

"Is it a boy or girl?"

"I think it's a girl."

"How old is it?"

"I think he said about six weeks."

"Is it healthy?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe it has the smallpox."

"I do not think so. Will you take it?"

"I – not I. I know nothin' about it. There's no saying, it might bring diseases into the house, and I must consider my own children. Is it terrible dirty?"

"I – I don't think so."

"And it hasn't got a name?"

"No; the sailor said it was not baptized."

"What's the color of its eyes?"

"I don't know."

"Has it got any hair?"

"I have not looked."

"P'raps it's an idjot?"

"I don't think so."

"And is deformed?"

"Oh, no."

"Well, I can't have no baby here as I don't know nothin about. You can take it over to the Snellings. They may fancy it. I won't have nothin' to do with a babe as ain't got no parents and no name, and ain't got no hair and no color in its eyes. There is my

Samuel snorin'. Take the child away. I don't want no measles, and smallpox, and scarlatina, and rickets brought into my house. Quick, take the nasty thing off as fast as you can."

Iver shrunk away, left the house, and made his way, carrying the baby, to another cottage a hundred yards distant. There was a lane between them, with a stream running through it, and the banks were high and made the lane dark. The boy stumbled and fell, and though he probably had not hurt the child, he had frightened it, and it set up loud and prolonged screams. With brow bathed in perspiration, and heart beating from alarm, Iver hurried up to the second squatter's cabin, and, without knocking, burst in at the door.

"I say," shouted he, "there's been a man killed, and here's a baby yelling, and I don't know what's the matter with it. I stumbled."

A man who was pulling off his boots started to his feet.

"Stop that darned noise," he said. "My wife – she's bad – got the fever, and can't abide no noise. Stop that din instantly, or I'll kick you out. Who are you, and what do'y mean rushing in on a fellow that way?"

The boy endeavored to explain, but his voice was tremulous, and the cries of the infant pitched at a higher note, and louder.

"I can't hear, and I don't want to," said the man. "Do you mind what I sed? My wife be terrible bad wi' fever, and her head all of a split, and can't bear no noise – and will you do what I say? Take that brat away. Is this my house or is it yours? Take that

'orrid squaller away, or I'll shy my boot at yer head."

"But," said Iver, "there's a man dead – been murdered up in the – "

"There'll be more afore long, if you don't cut. I'll heave that boot at you when I've counted thrice, if you don't get out. Drat that child! It'll wake my wife. Now, then, are you going?"

Iver retreated hastily as the man whirled his heavy boot above his head by the lace.

On leaving the house he looked about him in the dark. The cottages were scattered here and there, some in hollows by springs, others on knolls above them, without a definite road between them, except when two enclosures formed a lane betwixt their hedges.

The boy was obliged to step along with great care, and to feel his way in front of him with his foot before planting it. A quarter of an hour had elapsed before he reached the habitation of the next squatter.

This was a ramshackle place put together of doors and windows fitted into walls, made of boards, all taken from ruinous cottages that had been pillaged, and their wreckage pieced together as best could be managed. Here Iver knocked, and the door was opened cautiously by an old man, who would not admit him till he had considered the information given.

"What do you say? A man murdered? Where? When? Are the murderers about?"

"They have run away."

"And what do you want me to do?"

"Would you mind taking in the poor little baby, and going to help

Master Bideabout Kink to carry the body down."

"Where to? Not here. We don't want no bodies here."

The old fellow would have slammed the door in Iver's face had not the boy thrust in foot and knee.

Then a woman was heard calling, "What is that there, Jamaica? I hear a babe."

"Please, Mrs. Cheel, here is a poor little creature, the child of the murdered man, and it has no one to care for it," said the boy.

"A babe! Bless me! give the child to me," cried the woman. "Now then, Jamaica, bundle out of that, and let me get at the baby."

"No, I will not, Betsy," retorted the man designated Jamaica. "Why should I? Ask for an inch, and they'll have an ell. Stick in the toe of the baby, and they'll have the dead father after it. I don't want no corpses here."

"I will have the baby. I haven't set my eyes on a baby this hundred years."

"I say you shan't have nothing of the sort."

"I say I shall. If I choose to have a baby, who's to say me nay?"

"I say you nay. You shan't have no babies here."

"This is my house as much as yourn."

"I'm master I reckon."

"You are an old crabstick."

"You're an old broom-handle."

"Say that again."

"I say it."

"Now then – are you going to hit me?"

"I intend to."

Then the old man and his wife fell to fighting, clawing and battering each other, the woman screaming out that she would have a baby, the man that she should not.

Iver had managed to enter. The woman snatched at the child, the man wrenched it away from her. The boy was fain to escape outside and fly from the house with the child lest the babe should be torn in pieces between them. He knew old Cheel and his wife well by repute – for a couple ever quarrelling.

He now made his way to another house, one occupied by settlers of another family. There were here some sturdy sons and daughters.

When Iver had entered with the babe in his arms and had told his tale, the young people were full of excitement.

"Bill," said one of the lads to his brother, "I say! This is news. I'm off to see."

"I'll go along wi' you, Joe."

"How did they kill him?" asked one of the girls. "Did they punch him on the head?"

"Or cut his throat?" asked Bill.

"Joe!" called one of the girls, "I'll light the lantern, and we'll all go."

"Aye!" said the father, "these sort o' things don't happen but once in a lifetime."

"I wouldn't be out of seeing it for nuthin'," said the mother.

"Did he die sudden like or take a long time about it?"

"I suppose they'll inquitch him," said one of the girls.

"There'll be some hanging come o' this," said one of the boys.

"Oh, my! There will be goings on," said the mother. "Dear life,

I may never have such a chance again. Stay for me, Betsy Anne.

I'm going to put on my clogs."

"Mother, I ain't agoing to wait for your clogs."

"Why not? He won't run away."

"And the baby?" asked Iver.

"Oh, bother the baby. We want to see the dead man."

"I wonder, now, where they'll take him to?" asked the mother.

"Shall we have him here?"

"I don't mind," said the father. "Then he'll be inquitched here; but I don't want no baby."

"Nor do I nuther," said the woman. "Stay a moment, Betsy Anne! I'm coming. Oh, my! whatever have I done to my stocking, it's tore right across."

"Take the child to Bideabout," said one young man, "we want no babies here, but we'll have the corpse, and welcome. Folks will come and make a stir about that. But we won't have no babies. Take that child back where you found it."

"Babies!" said another, scornfully, "they come thick as blackberries, and bitter as sloes. But corpses – and they o' murdered men – them's coorosities."

"But the baby?" again asked the boy.

CHAPTER V
MEHETABEL

Iver stood in the open air with the child in his arms. He was perplexed. What should be done with it? He would have rubbed his head, to rub an idea into it, had not both his arms been engaged.

Large warm drops fell from the sky, like tears from an overcharged heart. The vault overhead was now black with rain clouds, and a flicker over the edge of the Punch-Bowl, like the quivering of expiring light in a despairing eye, gave evidence that a thunderstorm was gathering, and would speedily break.

The babe became peevish, and Iver was unable to pacify it.

He must find shelter somewhere, and every door was shut against the child. Had it not been that the storm was imminent, Iver would have hasted directly home, in full confidence that his tender-hearted mother would receive the rejected of the Broom-Squire, and the Ship Inn harbor what the Punch-Bowl refused to entertain.

He stumbled in the darkness to Jonas Kink's house, but finding the door locked, and that the rain was beginning to descend out of the clouds in rushes, he was obliged to take refuge in an out-house or barn – which the building was he could not distinguish. Here he was in absolute darkness. He did not venture

to grope about, lest he should fall over some of the timber that might be, and probably was, collected there.

He supposed that he was in the place where Jonas fashioned his brooms, in which case the chopping block, the bundles of twigs, as well as the broom-sticks would be lying about. Bideabout was not an orderly and tidy worker, and his material would almost certainly be dispersed and strewn in such a manner as to trip up and throw down anyone unaccustomed to the place, and unprovided with a light.

The perspiration broke out on the boy's brow. The tears welled up in his eyes. He danced the infant in his arms, he addressed it caressingly, he scolded it. Then, in desperation, he laid it on the ground, and ran forth, through the rain, to the cottage of an old maid near, named Sally, stopping, however, at intervals in his career, to listen whether the child were still crying; but unable to decide, owing to the prolonged chime in his ears. It is not at once that the drums of hearing obtain relief, after that they have been set in vibration by acute clamor. On reaching the old maid's door he knocked.

For some time Sally remained irresponsive.

"I knows very well," said she to herself under the bedclothes, "it's that dratted boy who has been at the Rocliffe's."

Iver persisted in knocking. At length she appeared at the casement, opened it, thrust forth her nightcapped head, and said peevishly, "It ain't no manner o' use. I won't have no babies here, not to my time o' life, thank'y. I sez I won't, and wot I sez that

I sticks to like toffee between the teeth. You may knock them there knuckles of yorn into dimples, but open I won't. I won't. I won't."

The old woman stamped on her bedroom floor.

"I do not ask that, Sally," pleaded the boy. "I have set the baby in Bideabout's barn, and there's no knowin', it may get hold of the chopper and hack off its limbs, or pull down all the rick o' broom-handles on Itself, or get smothered in the heather. I want a lantern. I don't know how to pacify the creature, and 'tis squeadling that terrible I don't know what's the matter."

"Is it a drawin' of the hind legs up, and stiffenin' of the back?" asked the old maid.

"I think so," answered the boy, dubiously; then, with further consideration, "I'm sure of it. It wriggled in my arms, like a worm when one's gettin' it on a hook out fishing."

"That's convulsions," said Sally. "'Twill go off in one of they, sure as eggs is eggs and ain't inions."

"Do you really say so?"

"It's that, or water on the brain. Wi' all this pouring rain, I shouldn't wonder if 'twasn't the tother. Not, you know, that I've any acquaintance wi babies. Only I've heard wimmin talk as has had 'em just like rabbits."

"Do they die when they have water on the brain?" asked the boy.

"Always. Babies can't stand it, no more nor can goslings gettin' their backs wetted."

"Don't you think that perhaps it's only hunger?"

"Can't say. Has the babe been a grabbin' and a clawin' at your nose, and a tryin' to suck it?"

"Once, Sally, when my nose got into the way."

"Then there's hunger too," said Sally, sententiously. "Them babies has terrible apertites, like canibals, and don't know what's good for 'em."

"Will you help me?" pleaded the boy. "Have you a feeding bottle?"

"Presarve and deliver us – I! What do you take me for, you imperant bye?"

"I think any medicine bottle would do, if well washed out. I shouldn't like, if there was any castor oil or senna tea dregs left, you know. But properly washed out, it might do, with a little milk in it."

"You'll choke the baby like that," said the old maid.

"I have seen how it is done. You stuff a bit of rag into the throat of the bottle, and leave a tip o' rag hanging out."

"Dare say, but you byes seems to understand these things better than I."

"Won't you come down and help me, Sally?"

"I'll come down presently when I've tumbled into some of my clothes."

Then the head disappeared, and the casement was shut.

After the lapse of a few minutes, a light appeared at the window of the lower room, and the door was slowly unlocked

and unbarred.

Then the old woman appeared in the doorway. She wore her huge white-frilled nightcap, that fluttered in the wind about the shrivelled face it enclosed, but she presented an extremely limp and attenuated appearance in her person.

"I've been a turnin' over in my head," she said, "and ten chances to half-a-one, if that there child hev been squealin' so long, it's either broke a blood vessel, or will die o' 'plexy. There'll be a purty expense to the parish. There'll be two buryings laid on it that oughten't to be. That means an extra penny in the rates. If them there chaps wanted to murder a man, why didn't they go and do it in Hampshire, and not go a burdenin' of this county an' parish? There's rayson in everything."

"Do you really suppose the child will die?" asked the boy, more concerned about the life than about the rates.

"How can I say? I've had precious little to do wi' babies, thanks be. Now, sharp, what is it you want? I'm perishin' wi' cold."

"May I have a bottle and some milk, and a lantern?"

"You can have wot you wants, only I protest I'll have no babies foist on me here." Then she added, "I will not trust you byes. Show me your hands that you ain't hidin' of it behind yer back."

"I assure you the child is in Bideabout's shed. Do be quick, and help. I am so afraid lest it die, and becomes a wanderer."

"If I can help it I will do what I can that it mayn't die, for certain," said the woman, "anything but taking it in here, and that I won't, I won't, I won't." Again she stamped.

Iver provided himself with the requisites as speedily as might be, and hastened back to the outhouse. At the door a cat was miawling, and rubbed itself against his shins. When he entered the cat followed him.

The child was still sobbing and fitfully screaming, but was rapidly becoming exhausted.

Iver felt the arms and head and body to ascertain whether any bone was broken or battered by the fall, but his acquaintance with the anatomy of a child was still rudimentary for him to come to any satisfactory conclusion.

He held the bottle in one and, but was ignorant how to administer the contents. Should the child be laid on its back or placed in a sitting posture?

When he applied the moistened rag to its mouth he speedily learned that position was immaterial. The babe fell to work vigorously, with the large expectation of results. Some moments elapsed before it awoke to the fact that the actual results were hardly commensurate with its anticipations, nor with its exertions.

When roused to full consciousness that it was being trifled with, then the resentment of the infant was vehement and vociferous. It drew up its legs and kicked out. It battled with its hands, it butted with its pate, and in its struggles pulled the plug out of the mouth of the flask so that the milk gushed over its face and into its mouth, at once blinding and choking it.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, what shall I do?" he exclaimed, and began

to cry with vexation.

The cat now came to his assistance. It began to lick up the spilled milk.

Iver seized the occasion.

"Look, see, pretty puss!" said he, caressingly, to the child. "Stroke pussy. Don't be afraid. You see she likes the milk that you wouldn't have. Naughty pussy eats little birds and mousies. But she won't touch babies."

The cat having appropriated the spilled milk looked at the infant with an uncanny way out of her glinting green eyes, as though by no means indisposed to try whether baby was not as good eating as a fledgling bird, as toothsome as a mouse.

Iver caught up the cat and scratched her under the chin and behind the ears.

"Do you hear? The pussy purrs. Would that you also might purr. She is pleased to make your acquaintance. Oh do, do, do be quiet!"

Then casting aside the cat he endeavored slowly to distil some of the milk down the child's throat without suffering it to swallow too much at once, but found the task difficult, if not impossible for his hand shook.

"Wait a bit," said he. "There are straws here. I will cut one and put it through the rag, and then you can tipple like a king upon his throne."

He selected a stout barley straw, and finding a knot in it endeavored to perforate the obstruction with a pin. When this

failed he looked about for another straw, and at last discovered one that was strong, uninterrupted by knots, and sufficiently long to serve his purpose.

For awhile he was so engrossed in his occupation that the child remained unnoticed. But when the straw had been adjusted satisfactorily, and the apparatus was in working order, as Iver ascertained by testing it himself, then he looked round at his charge.

The babe was lying silent and motionless.

His heart stood still.

"It is dead! It is going to die! It will become a wanderer!" he exclaimed; and putting down the feeding bottle, snatched up the lantern, crept on his knees to the child, and brought the little face within the radius of the sickly yellow light.

"I cannot see! O, I can see nothing! There is no light worth having!" he gasped, and proceeded to open the door in the lantern side.

"What is do be done?" he asked despairingly. "I do not know if it be dying or be in a fit. O! live! do, do live! I'll give you a brass button and some twine out of my pocket! I promise you my next lollipops if you will. Nasty, cross, disobliging thing." He went to the barn door and looked out, saw that the rain was coming down in torrents, came back. "Is it true," asked he, "that you must be a wanderer, if you die unchristened? Shall I ever hear you yowling in the wind? It is too, too dreadful!"

A chill came over the boy's heart.

Iver had never seen death. He was vastly frightened at the thought that the little soul might fleet away whilst he was watching. He dared not leave the child. He was afraid to stay. If he were to desert the babe, and it expired – and to run home, would not the soul come crying and flapping after him?

He considered with his hands to his head.

"I know what I will do!" exclaimed he, suddenly; "I'll make a Christian of it, anyhow."

There was standing on the floor an old broken red bowl of coarse pottery, out of which fowls had been fed. It was now empty.

Iver took it, wiped it out with his hand, and went with it to the door, where a rude "launder" or shoot of wood carried the water from the thatch immediately over the door, and sent the collected moisture in a stream down one side. The boy held the vessel under the shoot till he had obtained sufficient for his purpose, and then, returning within, said, "I'll stop your wandering," went up to the child, sprinkled some water over it and said, "Mehetabel, I baptize thee – "

The cat made a spring and dashed past.

Down went the contents of the bowl over the babe, which uttered a howl lusty, loud enough to have satisfied any nurse that the baptism was valid, and that the devil was expelled.

CHAPTER VI
MEHETABEL IT MUST BE

In at the barn door came Mrs. Verstage, Iver's mother.

"Iver! Wot's up?"

"Oh, mother!"

"Where's that babe?"

"Here, mother, on the ground."

"On the ground! Good life! Sowsed, soaked through and through, whatever have you been doin'? Holdin' it under the spout?"

"Baptizin' it, mother."

"Baptizin' of it?" The woman stared.

"I thought the creetur was dyin'."

"Well, and wot then?"

"Mother. Lest it shud take to wanderin'."

"Baptizin' of it. Dear life! And what did you call it?"

"Mehetabel."

"Mehetabel! 'Taint a human name."

"It is, mother. It's a Scriptur name."

"Never heard on it."

"Mehetabel was the wife of Hadar."

"And who the dickens was Hadar?"

"He was a dook – a dook of Edom."

In the churchyard of Thursley stands a large white stone, on which is carved a medallion, that contains the representation of a man falling on the ground, with one arm raised in deprecation, whilst two men are robbing and murdering him, and a third is represented as acting sentinel lest the ruffians should be surprised. On the ground are strewn the garments of the man who is being killed. Beneath this rudely sculptured group is this inscription: —

I N M E M O R Y O F

A generous, but unfortunate Sailor,

Who was barbarously murdered on Hind Head,

On September 24th, 1786,

B Y T H R E E V I L L A I N S,

After he had liberally treated them and promised them his farther Assistance on the Road to Portsmouth.

In the "Royal Huts," a tavern, in which now very good entertainment for man and beast may be had, a tavern which stands somewhat further along the way to Portsmouth than Hind Head, may be seen at this day some rude contemporary paintings representative of the murder.

The ruffians after having killed their victim, robbed him, not only of his money, but also of his clothes, and hastened on their way.

A hue and cry were raised, when the corpse had been discovered, and the men were arrested upon the following day at Sheet, near Peterhead, and were found in possession of the

clothing of the deceased. In due course of time they were tried at Kingston, and on the 7th of April, 1787, were hung and gibbeted in chains on Hind Head Hill, beside the old road and close to the scene of their crime.

A cross now marks the summit, and indicates the spot where stood the gallows, and a stone for some time pointed out the locality where the murder was committed. When, however, the new Portsmouth Road was cut further down the hill, skirting the Punch-Bowl at a lower level, then the stone was removed to the side of the new road. At present it is an object visited by vast numbers of holiday-makers, who seem to take almost as lively an interest in the crime that was committed over a century ago as if it were an event of the present day. At the time the murder aroused the greatest possible excitement in the neighborhood, and pre-eminently in the parish of Thursley.

As may be gathered from the wording of the inscription on the tombstone that covers the victim, his name never transpired. No relations claimed the right to bury him. None appeared to take charge of his orphan child.

The parish fretted, it fumed, it protested. But fret, fume, and protest availed nothing, it had to defray the cost of the funeral, and receive and lap the child in its parochial mercies.

A deceased wife's sister undoubtedly existed somewhere. Such was the conviction of every parishioner. The poor man was on his way to Portsmouth to deposit his child with her when the tragic event took place. Why did she not come forward? Why

did she hold her tongue?

Had there existed in her bosom one particle of natural feeling she would not have remained mute and motionless, and allowed the parish to bury her brother-in-law and encumber itself with her niece.

So the parish talked, appealingly, argumentatively, blusteringly, objurgatively, but all to no purpose. The deceased wife's sister kept mum, and invisible. Reluctantly, resentfully, the parish was finally obliged to face the facts, pay the expenses of the interment, and settle that a weekly dole should be afforded for the maintenance of the child, and as that deceased wife's sister did not appear, the parochial bile overflowed upon the hapless babe, who came to be regarded as an incubus on the ratepayers and a general nuisance.

The one difficulty that solved itself – ambulando, was that as to who would take charge of the child. That was solved by the hostess of the Ship.

The parish endeavored to cajole the good woman into receiving the babe as a gift from Heaven, and to exact no compensation for her labors in rearing it, for the expense of clothing, feeding, educating it. But Mrs. Verstage was deaf to such solicitations. She would take charge of the child, but paid she must be. Eventually the parochial authorities, after having called a vestry, and sat three hours in consultation, and to "knuckle under," as the hostess expressed it, and allow a trifle for the entertainment of the little waif.

So the matter was settled.

Then another had to be determined. What about the christening performed in the shed by Iver? What about the outlandish name given the child? The landlady raised no question on these heads till it was settled that the little being was to be an inmate of her house, and under her care. Then she reasoned thus – "Either this here child be a Mehetabel or she bain't. Either it's a Christian or it's a heathen. What is it? Is it fish, is it flesh, or is it good red herring? It ain't no use my calling her Mehetabel if she bain't nothing of the sort. And it ain't no use teachin' her the caterplasm, if she ha'n't been made a Christian. I'll go and ax the pa'son."

Accordingly the good woman took Iver by the shoulder and dragged him to Witley Vicarage, and stated her case and her difficulties. The Vicar had already had wind of what had occurred. Thursley was at the period a chapelry in the extensive parish of Witley, and the church therein had, before the Reformation, been regularly served by the monks of Witley Abbey. It was afterwards more or less irregularly supplied with sacred ministrations from the mother-church, and had no resident pastor.

In former days the parishioners were never very sure whether there was to be a service in Church at Thursley or not. The sexton was on the look-out, and if he saw the parson's wig glimmering over the hedge top, as he rode along, then he at once rushed to the bell-rope and announced to such of the parishioners as

were within hearing, that there was to be divine service. If there were no service, then those who had come from a distance in expectation of devotion, retired to the tavern and drank and gossiped, and were not disposed to cavil. The Church of Thursley is curious, it has a central bell-tower supported on huge beams of oak, such oaks they must have been as are never seen now. Those desiring to see the parson had to seek him in the Vicarage of the mother parish.

Mrs. Verstage accordingly had to go with her boy to Witley.

"If the boy gave a name," said the parson.

"He did, your Reverence, and such a name."

"What is it?"

"Mehetabel."

"Wherever did you pick up that name?" asked the Vicar, turning to the boy.

"Please, sir, we was doin' the Dooks of Edom in Sunday-school. We'd already learned David's mighty men, and could run 'em off like one o'clock, and – I don't know how it was, sir, but the name slipped out o' my mouth wi'out a thought. You see, sir, we had so many verses to say for next Sunday, and I had some of the Dooks of Edom to repeat."

"Oh! So you gave it the name of one of the Dukes."

"Please, sir, no. Mehetabel was the wife of one, she was married to his Grace, Dook Hadar."

"Oh, Hadar! to be sure, quite so; quite so! Very good boy, glad you are so well primed in all things necessary to salvation."

"And is the child to be called Mehetabel?" asked the woman.

"That depends," said the Vicar. "How did the boy perform the sacred function?"

"Please, sir," said Iver, "I did it as your Honor does, after the second lesson on Sunday afternoon, and the churching."

"He hadn't no surplice on," argued the mother.

"You had a bowl of pure water?" asked the parson.

"Yes, sir, rain water. I caught it out of the spout."

"And the words used?"

"The same as you say, sir; exactly."

The parson rubbed his chin.

"Was it done in thoughtlessness – in irreverent folly?"

"Oh, no, sir! I did it in sober earnest. I thought the child was going to die."

"Of course," said the Vicar, "lay baptism is valid, even if administered by a Dissenter; but – it is very unusual, very much so."

"I didn't do all that about the cross," observed Iver, "because the cat jumped and upset the bowl."

"Of course, of course. That belongs to the reception into the church, and you couldn't do that as it was – "

"In Bideabout's basin," said Iver.

"You are certain the water touched the child?"

"Soused her," responded the hostess. "She caught a tremendous cold out o' it, and has been runnin' at the nose ever since."

"I think the very best thing we can do," said the Vicar, "is that I should baptize the child conditionally, in church, – conditionally mind."

"And call her by another name?" asked the woman.

"I do not think I can do that."

"It's a terrible mouthful," observed Mrs. Verstage.

"I daresay that in practice you will be able to condense it. As for that boy of yours, ma'am, I should like a word with him, by himself."

"So, the creetur must bide Mehetabel?"

"Mehetabel it must be."

CHAPTER VII
FALSE PERSPECTIVE

As this story concerns that child which received the name of Mehetabel, it has been necessary to begin *de novo* with her as a babe, and to relate how she came by her name – that is her Christian name – and how it was that she had no surname at all. Also, how it was that she came to be an inmate of the Ship, and how that her fortunes were linked at the very outset of her career, on the one hand with Iver, who baptized her, and on the other hand with the Broom-Squire, whose roof – that at least of his shed – had sheltered her when every door of the squatter settlement in the Punch-Bowl, was resolutely closed against her.

But although this story begins with Mehetabel before she could speak, before she could assimilate anything more substantial than milk, yet the author has no intention of inflicting on the reader the record of her early days, of her acquisition of the power of speech, and capacity for consuming solid food. Neither is it his purpose to develop at large the growth of her mental powers, and to describe the evolution of her features. Suffice it then to say that Mehetabel grew up in the Ship Inn, almost as a child of the hostess and of her husband, with Iver as her playmate, and somewhat consequential patron.

By the parish at large, whether that of Witley or of its

subdivision Thursley, she was coldly regarded. She was but a charity girl, and kind as Mrs. Verstage was, the hostess never forgot that.

Iver was fourteen years older than Mehetabel, and, above all, was a boy, whereas Mehetabel was a waif, and only a girl.

Iver, moreover, regarded the child with gracious condescension. Had he not baptized her? Did she not owe her name to him? Had he not manufactured her first feeding-bottle?

As Mehetabel grew up, it is not surprising that she should regard Iver with admiration and affection, that she cherished every kindness he showed her, and in every way sought to deserve his notice.

The child had an affectionate, a clinging nature, and she threw the tendrils of her heart around the handsome boy, who was both patron and playmate.

It is a matter wholly immaterial whether Mehetabel underwent the ordeal of the customary childish maladies, measles, chicken-pox, whooping-cough for certainty, and scarlet fever and smallpox as possibilities, for none of them cut short the thread of her life, nor spoiled her good looks; either of which eventualities would have prevented this story proceeding beyond the sixth chapter. In the one case, there would have been no one about whom to write, in the other, had she been marked by smallpox or deafened by scarlatina, the interest of the reader could not have been claimed for her – so exacting is the reader of fiction. A heroine must be good-looking, or she will not be read about.

Indeed, it is more than probable, that had the author announced his story to be one of a very plain woman, he might have looked in vain for a publisher to undertake the issue of the story.

Before proceeding further it will be well to assure the reader that, from an early age, promise of beauty was given, and not of beauty only, but of intelligence and robust health.

Mehetabel was sent by Mrs. Verstage not only to a day school, kept by a widow, in Thursley, but also on the Lord's Day to the Vicar's Sunday-school at Witley. The Vicar was an excellent man, kindly disposed, earnest in his desire to do good, so long as the good was to be done in a novel fashion, absolutely untried. Sunday-schools were but a recent introduction, and he seized on the expedient with avidity. Hitherto the children had been catechised in Church after the second lesson in the afternoon, before their parents and the entire congregation. But as this was an usage of the past the Vicar rejected it in favor of the new system. According to the traditional custom the children had been instructed in the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. But this did not please the innovating Vicar, who cast these out of his curriculum to make way for a knowledge of the geography of Palestine, and an accurate acquaintance with the genealogies that are to be found scattered here and there in the pages of Holy Writ, The teaching of doctrine, according to the Vicar, lay at the bottom of the divisions of Christendom, but there could be no controversy over the

latitude and longitude of the sites mentioned in Scripture.

The landlord, proprietor of the Ship and of Mrs. Susanna Verstage, was a dull, obstinate man, slow of thought and of speech, withal kindly. Like many another dull man, if he did a stupid thing he stuck to it; and the stupider the thing done, the greater the tenacity with which he held to the consequences. His mind was chiefly occupied with a small farm acquired out of the sand waste, hedged about, dressed and cultivated, and increasing annually in value. In this was his interest and pride; he cared nothing for the tavern, save as an adjunct to the farm. All his energies were devoted to the latter, and he allowed his wife to rule supreme in the inn. Simon Verstage was a well-to-do man. He must have managed very ill had he not made a farm answer for which he paid no rent, save an acknowledgment of 6d. an acre to the lord of the manor. He held the land on a head rent upon the lives of himself, his wife, and his son. The public-house, well frequented by wayfarers, and in good repute among the villagers, supplemented the profits made out of the farm in good years, and made up for deficit in such years as rain and deficiency in sun made bad agriculturally.

The inn stood at a junction of roads, or rather where two lanes fell into the main London and Portsmouth road. It sometimes went in consequence by the name of The Lane End Inn. In situation it was fairly sheltered, a hillock of sand rock sheltered it on the east from the bitter winds that swept the waste between Milford and Thursley, and a growth of huge hollies was its

protection against the equally cold blasts from the north.

So long as Iver was a small boy, his father employed him about the farm, to assist him in ploughing, to hoe potatoes, and wield the muck-fork in the cow-house, or, to use the local term, the cow-stall. He kept the lad hard at work from morning rise till set of day.

Iver endured this, not entering with interest and pleasure into the work of the farm. He had no perception of the points of a bullock, and he had a prejudice in favor of ragged hedges.

Iver's neglect of duties, and forgetfulness of what was told him, called forth reprimand and provoked chastisement. They were not due to wilfulness or frivolity, but to preoccupation of the mind. The boy had no natural taste for the labors of the field. He disliked them; for everything else he had eyes, save for that which pertained to the tasks imposed on him.

Throughout early boyhood this lack of interest and inattention had caused much friction, and this friction became aggravated as he grew older, and his natural bent became more marked.

It would be hard to find in one family two persons so utterly dissimilar as Iver and his father. They seemed to have diverse faculties seated in their several organs. They neither saw, heard, nor smelt in the same manner, or rather saw, heard, and smelt so differently as to feel in distinct fashion. What pleased the one was distasteful to the other.

It was not possible for Iver to open his mind to his father, because his father could not understand and appreciate his

thoughts.

But if his heart was sealed to Simon Verstage, it was open to his mother, who loved and spoiled him, and took his part invariably, whether the boy were in the right or wrong. In every way possible she humored his fancies; and she, unwisely, condoled with him on what she was pleased to consider as his father's injustice. At length there ensued a rupture so wide, so aggravated by mutual recrimination, that Mrs. Verstage doubted her ability to bridge it over.

This breach was occasioned by Iver one morning climbing to the sign-board and repainting the stern of the vessel, which had long irritated his eye because, whereas the ship was represented sideways, the stern was painted without any attempt at foreshortening; in fact, full front, if such a term can be applied to a stern.

The laws of perspective were outraged in the original painting; of such laws Iver knew nothing. What he did know was that the picture was wrong. His eye, his natural instinct told him so. The matter had been for long one of controversy between himself and his father. The latter had been unable to understand that if the portholes at the side were visible, the entire stern could not possibly be viewed in full.

"She's got a stern, ain't she?" asked the old man. "If she has, then wot's we to deny it her?"

At length Iver cut the controversy short, and brought the quarrel to a crisis by climbing a ladder with a brush and some

paints obtained from the village carpenter, during the temporary absence of his father, and putting the foreshortening to rights to the best of his ability.

When the old man was aware what his son had done on his return from Godalming, whither he had betaken himself to a fair, then he was furious. He stormed at Iver for daring to disfigure the sign-board, and at his wife for suffering him to do it unreproved.

Iver turned stubborn and sulky. He muttered an answer, lacking in that respect due to a parent. The old man became abusive.

Mrs. Verstage intervened ineffectually; and when night arrived the youth made a bundle of his clothes and left the house, with the resolve not to return to it so long as his father lived.

Whither he had gone, for a long time was unknown. His mother wept, so did Mehetabel. The old man put on an assumption of indifference, was short and ungracious to his wife. He was constrained to engage a man to do the farm work hitherto imposed upon Iver, and this further tended to embitter him against his rebellious son. He resented having to expend money when for so long he had enjoyed the work of Iver free of cost.

The boy's pride prevented him from writing home till he had secured himself a position in which he could maintain himself. When he did communicate with Thursley, it was through Mehetabel, because Simon had forbidden any allusion to the truant boy, and Mrs. Verstage was not herself much of a scholar, and did not desire unnecessarily to anger her husband by

having letters in his handwriting come to her by the post.

Years passed, during which the landlady's heart ached for her son: and as she might not speak of him to Simon, she made a confidant of Mehetabel.

Thus, the old woman and the girl were drawn closer together, and Mehetabel glowed with the thought that she was loved by the hostess as though she were her own daughter.

To talk about the absent one was the great solace of Susanna Verstage's life. There ever gnawed at her heart the worm of bereavement from the child in whom her best affections, her highest pride, her sole ambitions were placed. It may be questioned whether, without the sympathetic ear and heart of Mehetabel into which to pour her troubles and to which to confide her hopes, the woman would not have deteriorated into a hard-hearted virago.

Her love to Simon, never very hot, had dried up. He had wounded her to the quick in unpardonable fashion in driving her only child out of the house, and all for the sake of a two-penny-ha'penny signboard.

Throughout her work she schemed, she thought for Iver; she toiled and endured in the tavern only to amass a competence for him. She clung to the place only because she trusted some day he would return to it, and because every corner was sweet with recollections of him.

When not at work she dreamed, waking or sleeping, and all her dreams were of him. She built castles in the air – all occupied

by him. She had but one hope: to meet her son again. All her activities, all her thoughts, all her aspirations, all her prayers were so many lines focussing on one point, and that her son. To Mehetabel she told her mind, and Mehetabel shared all her hopes; the heart of the girl beat in entire sympathy with that of the hostess. Iver's letters were read and re-read, commented on, and a thousand things read into them by the love of the mother that were not, and could not be there. These letters were ever in the girl's bosom, kept there to be out of reach of old Simon, and to be accessible at all moments to the hungering mother. They heard that Iver had taken to painting, and that he was progressing in his profession; that he gave lessons and sold pictures.

What musings this gave rise to! what imaginations! What expectations!

Mrs. Verstage never wearied of talking of Iver to Mehetabel, and it never wearied the girl to speak with the mother about him.

The girl felt that she was indispensable to the old woman; but that she was only indispensable to her so long as Iver was away never entered into her imagination.

There is a love that is selfish as well as a love that is wholly self-annihilating, and an inexperienced child is incapable of distinguishing one from the other.

There is false perspective in the human heart as well as upon signboards.

CHAPTER VIII
ONLY A CHARITY GIRL

Simon Verstage sat outside the door of his house, one hot June evening, smoking his pipe.

By his side sat his wife, the hostess of the Ship. Eighteen years have passed since we saw her last, and in these years she has become more plump, a little more set in features, and mottled in complexion, but hardly otherwise older in appearance.

She was one of those women who wear well, till a sickness or a piercing sorrow breaks them down, and then they descend life's ladder with a drop, and not by easy graduation.

Yet Mrs. Verstage had not been devoid of trouble, for the loss of her son, the very apple of her eye, had left an ache in her heart that would have been unendurable, were not the balm of hope dropped into the wound. Mehetabel, or as she was usually called Matabel, had relieved her of the most onerous part of her avocation. Moreover, she was not a woman to fret herself to fiddle-strings; she was resolute and patient. She had formed a determination to have her son home again, even if she had to wait for that till his father was put under ground. She was several years younger than Simon, and in the order of nature might calculate on enjoyment of her widowhood.

Simon and his wife sat in the wide porch. This had been

constructed as an accommodation for wayfarers, as an invitation to take shade and shelter in hot weather or Mustering storm; but it also served what was uncontemplated, as an ear to the house. Whatever was uttered there was audible within – a fact very generally forgotten or unsuspected by such as occupied the porch. And, indeed, on the present occasion, this fact was wholly unconsidered by the taverner and his spouse, either because it escaped their minds that the porch was endowed with this peculiarity, or else because the only person then in the house was Mehetabel, and her hearing or not hearing what was said was an indifferent matter.

Had there been customers present, drinking, the two would not have been together when and where they were, nor would the topic of conversation between them have been of a private nature.

The innkeeper had begun with a remark which all the world might hear, and none would controvert, viz., that it was fine hay-making weather, and that next day he purposed carrying the crop.

But Mrs. Verstage was indisposed to discuss a matter so obvious as the weather, and so certain as that it would be utilized for saving the hay. She plunged at once into that which lay near her heart, and said, "Simon, you'll answer that there letter now?"

"Whose? Iver's?"

"Of course, Iver's letter. Now you yourself have heard from him, and what does that mean but he wants all square between you. He has got into a famous business. He sells his pictures

and gives lessons in drawing and painting at Guildford. It's but a matter of time and he will be a great man."

"What! as a drawing master? I'd as lief he played the fiddle and taught dancing."

"How can you say that, Simon?"

"Because it is what I feels. Here he had a good farm, a good inn, and a good business – one that don't dwindle but is on the increase, and the land bettering every day – and yet off he went, chucked aside the blessin's of Providence, to take up wi' scribblin' and scrawlin' on paper. If it weren't a thing altogether shameful it would be clear ridic'lous."

Simon sucked in smoke enough to fill his lungs, and then blew it forth leisurely in a long spiral.

"Odds' life," said he, "I don't see why I shu'd concern myself about the hay, nor anythin' else. I've enough to live upon and to enjye myself. What more do I want now?"

"What more?" inquired the landlady, with a sigh and a catch in her voice – a sigh of sorrow, a catch of resentment. "What more – when your son is away?"

"Whose fault is that? Home weren't good enough for he. Even the Old Ship on the sign-board didn't give him satisfaction, and he must alter it. I don't see why I should worrit myself about the hay or any other thing. I'll just put up my feet an enjye myself."

"Simon, I pray you answer Iver's letter. Opportunities be like fleas, to be took sharp, or away they goes, they be terrible long-legged. Opportunities only come now and then, and if not caught

are lost past recall. 'Twas so wi' Temperance Noakes, who might a' had the chimbley-sweep if she'd a kissed him when he axed. But she said, Wipe and wash your face fust – and she's an old maid now, and goin' sixty. Consider, Simon. Iver be your son, your only child. It's Providence makes us wot we is; that's why you're a man and not a woman. Iver hadn't a gift to be a farmer, but he had to paintin'. It can't be other – it's Providence orders all, or you might be a mother and nursin' a baby, and I smokin' and goin' after the plough in leggin's."

"That's all gammon," growled the landlord.

"We be gettin' old," pursued Mrs. Verstage. "In the end you'll have to give up work, and who but Iver is to come after you here?"

"Him – Iver!" exclaimed Simon. "Your own self says 'e ain't fit to be a farmer."

"Then he may let the farm and stick to the inn."

"He ain't got the makin' of a publican in him," retorted the man; "he's just about fit for nothin' at all."

"Indeed, but he is, Simon," pleaded the woman, "only not in the way you fancies. What good be you now in a public-house? You do nothing there, it is I who have all the managin'."

"I attend to the farm. Iver can do neither. All the money you and

I ha' scraped together he'll chuck away wi' both hands. He'll let the fences down I ha' set up; he'll let weeds overrun the fields

I ha' cleared. It shall not be. It never shall be."

"He may marry a thrifty wife, as you have done."

"And live by her labor!" he exclaimed, drawing his pipe from his mouth and in knocking out the ash in his anger breaking the stem. "That a child o' mine should come to that!"

"Iver is your own flesh and blood," persisted the woman, in great excitement. "How can you be so hard on him? It's just like that old fowl as pecked her eggs, and we had to wring her neck. It's like rabbits as eat their own young. Nonsense! You must be reconciled together. What you have you cannot leave to a stranger."

"I can do what I will with my own," retorted Simon. "Look here, Susanna, haven't you had that girl, Matabel, with you in place of a child all these years? Don't she work like a slave? Don't she thoroughly understand the business? Has she ever left the hogs unmeated, or the cow unmilked? If it pleases you to go to market, to be away for a week, a fortni't you know that when you come home again everything will be just as you left it, the house conducted respectable, and every drop o' ale and ounce o' 'backy accounted for."

"I don't deny that Matabel's a good girl. But what has that to do with the matter?"

"What! Why everything. What hinders me leavin' the whole pass'l o' items, farm and Ship to her? She'll marry a stiff man as'll look after the farm, and she'll mind the public-house every mite as well as ever have you, old woman. That's a gal as knows chalk from cheese."

Mrs. Verstage leaned back with a gasp of dismay and a cramp at her heart. She dropped her hands on her lap.

"You ain't speaking serious, Simon?"

"I might do wuss," said he; "and the wust I could do 'ad be to give everythin' to that wastrel, Iver, who don't know the vally of a good farm and of a well-established public-house. I don't want nobody after I'm dead and gone to see rack and ruin where all were plenty and good order both on land and in house, and that's what things would come to wi' Iver here."

"Simon, he is a man now. He was a boy, and what he did as a boy he won't do as a man."

"He's a dauber of paints still."

The taverner stood up. "I'll go and cast an eye over the hay-field," he said. "It makes me all of a rage like to think o' that boy."

He threw away the broken pipe and walked off.

Mrs. Verstage's brain spun like a teetotum; her heart turned cold.

She was startled out of her musings by the voice of Mehetabel, who said, "Mother, it is so hot in the kitchen that I have come out to cool myself. Where is father? I thought I heard him talking with you?"

"He's gone to the hay-field. He won't answer Iver's letter. He's just about as hard as one o' them Hammer Ponds when frozen to the bottom, one solid lump."

"No, mother, he is not hard," said Mehetabel, "but he does not like to seem to give way all at once. You write to Iver and

tell him to come here; that were better than for me to write. It will not seem right for him to be invited home by me. The words from home must be penned by you just as though spoke by you. He will return. Then you will see that father will never hold out when he has his own son before his eyes."

"Did you hear all that father and I was sayin'?" asked the hostess, suspiciously.

"I heard him call out against Iver because he altered the signboard; but that was done a long time agone."

"Nuthin' else?"

"And because he would never make a farmer nor an innkeeper."

"It's a dratted noosence is this here porch," muttered the hostess. "It ort to 'a been altered ages agone, but lor', heart-alive, the old man be that stubborn and agin' all change. And you heard no more?"

"I was busy, mother, and didn't give attention to what didn't concern me."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Verstage, "only listened, did you, to what did concern you?"

A fear had come over the hostess lest the girl had caught Simon's words relative to his notion, rather than intention, of bequeathing what he had away from Iver and to the child that had been adopted.

Of course, Simon did not seriously purpose doing anything of the sort. It was foolish, inconsiderate of him to give utterance

to such a thought, and that in such a place as the porch, whence every whisper was conveyed throughout the interior of the house.

If Mehetabel had overheard his words, what a Fool's Paradise she might create for herself! How her head might be turned, and what airs she might give herself.

Leave the farm, the inn, everything to a girl with whom they were wholly unconnected, and to the detriment of the son. Hoity-toity! such a thought must not be allowed to settle, to take root, to spring up and fructify.

"Mother," said the girl, "I think that you ought to write to Iver with your own hand, though I know it will cost you trouble. But it need not be in many words. Say he must come himself without delay and see father. If Iver keeps at a distance the breakage will never be mended, the wound will never be healed. Father is a resolute man, but he is tender-hearted under all, and he's ever been wonderful kind to me."

"Oh, yes, so long as he ain't crossed he's right enough with anyone," answered Mrs. Verstage quickly. She did not relish the allusion to the old man's kindness towards Mehetabel, it seemed to her suspicious heart due to anticipation of what had been hinted by him. She considered a moment, and determined to have the whole matter out, and to dash any expectations the girl might have formed at once and for ever. A direct woman Mrs. Verstage had ever been.

"Matabel," she said, and drew her lips together and contracted her brows, "whatever father may scheme about making a will,

it's all gammon and nonsense. I don't know whether he's said any tomfoolery about it to you, or may do so in time to come. Don't think nuthin' of it. Why should he make a will? He has but Iver to whom he can leave what he has. If he don't make a will – where's the odds? The law will see to it; that everything goes to Iver, just as it ort."

"You will write to Iver to come?"

"Yes, I will. Matters can't be worse than they be, and they may come to a betterment. O dear life of me! What I have suffered all these years, parted from my only child."

"I have tried to do what I could for you, dear mother."

"Oh, yes" – the bitterness was still oozing up in the woman's heart, engalling her own mind – "that I know well enough. But then you ain't my flesh and blood. You may call me mother, and you may speak of Simon as father, but that don't alter matters, no more nor when Samuel Doit would call the cabbage plants broccaloes did it make 'em grow great flower heads like passon's wigs. Iver is my son, my very own child. You, Matabel, are only – "

"Only what, mother?"

"Only a charity girl."

CHAPTER IX
BIDEABOUT

The words were hardly spoken before a twinge of conscience made Mrs. Verstage aware that she had given pain to the girl who had been to her as a daughter.

Yet she justified herself to herself with the consideration that it was in the end kindest to cut down ruthlessly any springing expectation that might have started to life at the words of Simon Verstage. The hostess cast a glance at Mehetabel, and saw that her face was quivering, that all color had gone out of her cheeks, that her hands were contracted as with the cramp.

"I had no wish to hurt you," said the landlady; "but facks are facks, and you may pull down the blinds over 'em wi'out putting them out o' existence. There's Laura Tickner – got a face like a peony. She sez it's innade modesty; but we all knows it's arrysippelas, and Matthew Maunder tells us his nose comes from indigestion; but it's liquor, as I've the best reason to know. Matabel, I love you well, but always face facks. You can't get rid of facks any more than you can get rid of fleas out o' poultry."

Mrs. Verstage disappeared through the doorway. Mehetabel seated herself on the bench. She could not follow the hostess, for her limbs trembled and threatened to give way.

She folded her arms on her lap, and leaned forward, with her

eyes on the ground.

"A charity girl! Only a charity girl!"

She said the words to herself again and again. Her eyes burnt; a spray hung on her eyelids. Her lips were contracted with pain, spasms ran through her breast.

"Only a charity girl! She'd never, never a'sed that had she loved me. She don't." Then came a sob. Mehetabel tried to check it, but could not, and the sound of that sob passed through the house. It was followed by no other.

The girl recovered herself, leaned back against the wall, and looked at the twilight sky.

There was no night now. The season was near midsummer: —

> "Barnaby bright,
> All day and no night."

Into the luminous blue sky Mehetabel looked steadily, and did battle with her own self in her heart.

That which had been said so shortly was true; had it been wrapped up in filagree – through all disguise the solid unpleasant truth would remain as core. If that were true, then why should she be so stung by the few words that contained the truth?

It was not the words that had hurt her – she had heard them often at school – it was that "Mother" had said them. It was the way in which they had been uttered.

Mrs. Verstage had ever been kind to the girl; more affectionate

when she was quite a child than when she became older. Gradually the hostess had come to use her, and using her as a servant, to regard her in that light.

Susanna Verstage was one of those women to whom a baby is almost a necessity, certainly a prime element of happiness. As she philosophically put it, "Men likes 'baccy; wimin likes babies; they was made so;" but the passion for a baby was doubly strong in the heart of the landlady. As long as Mehetabel was entirely dependent, the threads that held her to the heart of the hostess were very strong, and very many, but so soon as she became independent, these threads were relaxed. The good woman had a blunt and peremptory manner, and she at times ruffled the girl by sharpness of rebuke; but never previously had she alluded to her peculiar position and circumstances in such a galling manner.

Why had she done this now? Why gone out of her way to do so?

Mehetabel thought how wonderful it was that she, a stranger, should be in that house, treated almost, though not wholly, as its child, whereas the son of the house was shut out from it, – that against him only was the door fast, which was held open with invitation to every one else.

It was the thought of this contrast, perhaps, that had been working in Mrs. Verstage's mind, and had provoked the impatience and occasioned the cruel words.

"Well," said Mehetabel to herself, "I must face it. I have only the name that Iver gave me in the barn. I have no father, no

mother, and no other name than that which I am given in charity." She looked at her gown. "I owe that to charity;" at her hands – "My flesh is nourished out of charity." She wiped her eyes – the very kerchief was a gift to her in charity. "It is so," she said. "I must bear the thought and get accustomed to it. I was given a name in charity, and in charity my father was granted a grave. All I can look to as in some fashion my own – and yet they are not my own – be the headstone in the churchyard to show how my real father was killed, and the gallows on Hind Head, with the chains, to tell where those hung who killed him. 'Tain't every one can show that." She raised her head with a flash of pride. Human Nature must find something on which to plume itself. If nothing else can be found, then a murdered father and a gallows for the murderers served.

Mehetabel was a handsome girl, and she knew it. She could not fail to know it, situated as she was. The men who frequented the public house would not leave a girl long in doubt whether she were comely or the reverse.

But Mehetabel made small account of her appearance. No youth of the neighborhood had won his way into her heart; and she blew away the compliments lavished upon her as the men blew away the froth from their tankards. What mattered it whether she were good-looking or not, so long as she was only Mehetabel, without a surname, without kin, without a penny!

When Iver had run away from home she had done all that lay in her power to comfort the mother. She had relieved the landlady

of half of her work; she had stayed up her heart when downcast, despondent. She had talked with her of the absent son, whose name the father would not allow to be mentioned in his hearing; had encouraged her with hopes, and, by her love, had sought to compensate for the loss.

It was due to her that the Ship Inn had a breath of youth and cheerfulness infused into it. But for her, the absence and indifference of the host, and the moroseness of the disappointed hostess, would have driven custom away.

Mrs. Verstage had found her useful, even necessary. She could hardly endure to be for an hour without her, and she had come to rely upon her more and more in the conduct of business, especially such as required sufficient scholarship to do correspondence and keep accounts.

The hostess was proud of the girl's beauty and engaging manner, and took to herself some of the credit of having her adopted daughter regarded as the belle of Thursley. She was pleased to see that the men admired her, not less than the women envied her. There was selfishness in all this. Mrs. Verstage's heart was without sincerity. She had loved Mehetabel as a babe, because the child amused her. She liked her as a girl, because serviceable to her, and because it flattered her vanity to think that her adopted daughter should be so handsome.

Now, however, that the suspicion was engendered that her own son might be set aside in favor of the adopted child, through Simon's partiality, at once her maternal heart took the alarm,

and turned against the girl in resolution to protect the rights of Iver, Mehetabel did not understand the workings of Susanna Verstage's mind. She felt that the regard entertained for her was troubled.

She had heard Simon Verstage's remark about constituting her his heir, but had so little considered it as seriously spoken, and as embodying a resolution, that it did not now occur to her as an explanation of the altered conduct of the "mother" towards herself.

Mehetabel felt instinctively that a vein of truer love throbbed in the old host than in his wife; and now, with a hunger for some word of kindness after the rebuff she had sustained, she stood up and walked in the direction of the hayfield to meet Simon Verstage on his return journey.

As she stepped along she heard a footfall behind her. The step was quickened, and a hand was laid on her shoulder. She turned, and exclaimed sharply:

"Bideabout – what do you want?"

"You, Matabel."

A man stayed her: the Broom-Squire.

"What with me?"

"I want you to listen to what I have to say."

"I can spare you a minute, not more. I expect father. He has gone to look at the hay."

Mehetabel disengaged her shoulder from his grasp. She stepped back. She had no liking for the Broom-Squire. Indeed,

he inspired her with a faint, undefined repugnance.

Jonas was now a middle-aged man, still occupying his farm in the Punch-Bowl, making brooms, selling holly, cultivating his patch of land, laying by money and still a bachelor.

He had rounded shoulders and a short neck; this made him thrust his head forward in a peering manner, like a beast of prey watching for a victim. His eyes were keen and restless. His hair was short-cut, and his ears projected from the sides of his head like those of a bat. Otherwise he was not a bad-looking man. His features were good, but his expression was unpleasant. The thin lip was curled contemptuously; and he had a trick of thrusting forth his sharp tongue to wet his lips before making a spiteful remark.

He was a frequent visitor at the Ship, and indeed his inclination for liquor was his one weakness.

Of late he had been much oftener at this inn than formerly. Latterly he had been profuse in his compliments to Mehetabel, which she had put aside, much as she brushed empty tankards, and tobacco ash off the table. He was no welcome guest. His bitter tongue was the occasion of strife, and a brawl was no infrequent result of the appearance of the Broom-Squire in the public house. Sometimes he himself became the object of attack, but usually he succeeded in setting others by the ears and in himself escaping unmolested. But on one of the former occasions he had lost two front teeth, and through the gap thus formed he was wont to thrust his tongue.

"I am glad to have caught you," said the Broom-Squire; "and caught you alone – it is hard to find you so – as it's hard to find a treacle cask without flies round it."

"What have you to say?"

"You have always slipped out of my way when I thought I had you."

"I did not know that you had a fancy to catch me alone." She made as if to proceed on her course.

"Stand still," said he imperiously. "It must come out. Do not look at me with that keep-your-distance air. I mean no incivility. I care a deal more for you than for any one else."

"That is not saying much."

"I care for you alone in all the world."

"Except yourself."

"Of course."

He breathed as though relieved of a burden.

"Look here, Mehetabel, I've not been a marrying man. Wife and family cost too much. I've been saving and not spending. But this can't go on forever. All good things come to an end some time. It has come to this, I must have a woman to mind the house. My sister and I have had a tiff. You know her, Sarah Rocliffe. She won't do as I like, and what I want. So I'll just shut the door in her face and make a long nose at her, and say, 'Got some one else now.'"

"So," exclaimed Mehetabel, the color rushing to her cheeks in anger, "you want me as your housekeeper that you may make a

nose at your sister and deny her the house."

"I won't have any other woman in my house but yourself."

"You will have to wait a long time before you get me."

"I mean all fair and honorable," said Jonas. "I didn't say housekeeper, did I? I say wife. If any chap had said to me, Bideabout, you are putting your feet into a rabbit net, and will be caught, and – '" he made a sign as if knocking a rabbit's neck to kill it – "I say, had any one said that, I'd a' laughed at him as a fool."

"You may laugh at him still," said the girl. "No one that I know has set any net for you."

"You have," he sniggered. "Aye, and caught me."

"I!" laughed Mehetabel contemptuously, "I spread a net for you? It is you who pursue and pester me. I never gave you a thought save how to make you keep at arm's length."

"You say that to me." His color went.

"It is ridiculous, it is insulting of you to speak to me of netting and catching. What do I want of you save to be let go my way."

"Come, Mehetabel," said the Broom-Squire caressingly, "we won't quarrel about words. I didn't mean what you have put on me. I want you to come and be my wife. It isn't only that I've had a quarrel with my sister. There's more than that. There is something like a stoat at my heart, biting there, and I have no rest till you say – 'I'll have you, Jonas!'"

"The stoat must hang on. I can't say that."

"Why not?"

"I am not obliged to give a reason."

"Will you not have me?"

"No, Bideabout, I will not. How can I take an offer made in this way? When you ask me to enable you to be rude to your sister, when you speak of me as laying traps for you; and when you stay me on my road as if you were a footpad."

Again she made an attempt to go in the direction of the hayfield.

Her bosom was heaving with anger, her nostrils were quivering.

Again he arrested her.

"If you will not let me go," said she, "I will call for help. Here comes father. He shall protect me."

"I'll have you yet," said the Broom-Squire with a sneer. "If it ain't you that nets me, then it'll be I net you, Mehetabel."

CHAPTER X
INTO THE NET

"We must have cake and ale for the hayfield," said Mrs. Verstage.

"Of ale there be plenty in the house, but for cake, I must bake. It ort to ha' been done afore. Fresh cakes goes twice as fast as stale, but blessin's on us, the weather have been that changeable

I didn't know but I might put it off to anywhen."

This was said on the morrow of the occurrence just described.

Whilst Mrs. Verstage was engaged in the baking she had not time for much talk, but she asked abruptly: "What's that as to Bideabout? Father said he'd come on you and him, and you was both in a sort o' take on."

Mehetabel had no reason for reticence, and she told the hostess of the suit of the Broom-Squire, and of the manner in which he made his proposal. Mrs. Verstage said nothing at the time. She was occupied – too occupied for comments. But when the cake was in the oven, she seated herself at the kitchen table, with a sigh of relief, and beckoned to Mehetabel to do the same.

Mrs. Verstage was warm, both on account of the heat of the morning, but also because she had been hard at work. She fanned herself with a dish, and as she did so looked at the girl.

"So – the Broom-Squire offered himself, did he?"

Mehetabel made a sign in the affirmative.

"Well," continued the hostess, "if he weren't so good a customer here he would be suitable enough. But yet a good wife will soon cure him. A hudger (bachelor) does things as a married man don't allow himself."

Mehetabel looked questioningly at the landlady.

She said: "There must be good stuff in a man, or marriage won't bring it out."

"Who says there ain't good stuff in Bideabout?"

"I have never seen the glint of it."

"You don't see the iron ore as lies under the sand, but there it is, and when wanted it can be worked. I like a man to show his wust side forefront. There's many a man's character is like his wesket, red plush and flowers in front and calico in rags behind hid away under his coat."

Mehetabel was surprised, troubled. She made no response, but color drifted across her face.

"After all," pursued Mrs. Verstage, "he may ha' come here not after liquor, but drawed by you. Then you see he's been alone all these years, and scriptur' saith it ain't good for a man to be that. They goes sour and mouldy – men do if unmarried. I think you'd be fulfillin' your dooty, and actin' accordin' to the word o' God if you took him."

"I – mother! I!" The girl shrank back. "Mother, let him take some one else. I don't want him."

"But he wants you, and he don't want another. Matabel, it's all moonshine about leap year. The time never comes when the woman can ax the man. It's tother way up – and Providence made it so. Bideabout has a good bit o' land, for which he is his own landlord, he has money laid by, so folks tell. You might do worse. It's a great complerment he's paid you. You see he's well off, and you have nothin'. Men generally, nowadays, look out for wives that have a bit o' money to help buy a field, or a cow, or nothin' more than a hog. You see Bideabout's above that sort o' thing. If you can't have butter to your bread, you must put up wi' drippin."

"I'm not going to take Bideabout," said Mehetabel.

"I don't say you should. But he couldn't a took a fancy to you wi'out Providence ordainin' of it."

"And if I don't like him," threw in the girl, half angry, half in tears, "I suppose that is the doings of Providence too?"

Mrs. Verstage evaded a reply to this. She said: "I do not press you to take him. You are kindly welcome to stay on with us a bit, till you've looked about you and found another. We took you up as a babe and cared for you; but the parish allowance was stopped when you was fourteen. It shan't be said of us that bare we took you in and bare we turn you out. But marry you must. It's ordained o' nature. There's the difference atwixt a slug and a snail. The snail's got her own house to go into. A slug hasn't. When she's uncomfortable she must go underground."

The hostess was silent for awhile. Mehetabel said nothing. Her cheeks burned. She was choking.

Mrs. Verstage went on: "There was Betsy Purvis – she was a bit of a beauty, and gave herself airs. She wouldn't have Farmer James, as his legs was so long, he looked like a spider – and she wouldn't have Odger Kay, as his was too short – he looked like a dachs-dog. It came in the end she married Purvis, who had both his legs shot off in the wars, 'cos and why? she couldn't get another. She'd been too finical in choosin'."

"Are you tired of me?" gasped the girl. "Do you wish to be rid of me?"

"Not at all," answered the landlady. "It's becos we're so fond of you, father and I, that we want to see you well settled."

"And father – does he wish me to take Bideabout?"

Mrs. Verstage hesitated.

"He hasn't said that right out. You see he didn't know for certain Jonas were hoppin' about you. But he'd be tremendous pleased to have you well married."

"And you think I should be well married if I became Bideabout's wife?"

"Of course. He's a great catch for the likes of you, who belong to nobody and to no place, properly. Beggars mustn't be choosers."

Mehetabel sprang to her feet.

"It is so. I am a beggar. I am only a charity girl, nothing else."

She struck her head against the wall. "Let me beat my brains out if I am in your way. Why should I be thrown into the arms of any passer-by?

"You misjudge and misunderstand me," said Mrs. Verstage, hotly. "Because you have been with me so long, and because I love you, I want to see you settled. Because I can't give you a prince in spangles and feathers you fly out against me."

"I don't ask for a prince, only to be let alone. I am happy here, as a girl, working for you and father."

"But we shall not live forever. We are growing old, and shall have to give up. Iver may return any day, and then – "

The hostess became crimson to the temples; she knew how handsome the girl was, doubly handsome she seemed now, in her heat and agitation, and it occurred to Mrs. Verstage that Iver with his artistic appreciation of the beautiful, might also think her handsome, that the old childish fancy for each other might spring to new and to stronger life, and that he might even think of Mehetabel as a wife. That would never, never do. For Iver something better must be found than a girl without means, friends, and name.

"What then?" asked Mehetabel. "Suppose Iver do come here and keep the inn. I can go with you wherever you go, and if you become old, I can attend to you in your old age."

"You are good," said Mrs. Verstage; but although her words were gracious, her manner was chilling. "It is for us to think of you and your future, not you to consider for us. The Broom-Squire – "

"I tell you, mother, I don't like him."

"You must hear me out. You do not love him. Lawk-a-

jimmeny! we can't all marry for love. You don't suppose I was in love with Simon when I took him? I was a good-looking wench in my day, and I had many admirers, and were more of tragedy-kings than Simon. But I had sense, and I took him for the sake of the Ship Inn and the farm. We have lived happy together, and if it hadn't been for that matter of Iver, there'd not ha' been a cloud between us. Love grows among married folk, like chickweed in a garden. You can't keep it out. It is thick everywhere, and is never out o' season. I don't say there ain't a ripping of it out one day – but it comes again, twice as thick on the morrow, and much good it does! I don't think I cared for Simon when I took him any more than you care for Jonas, but I took him, and we've fared well enough together." After a pause the hostess said, "Talkin' of marriage, I have a fine scheme in my head. If Iver comes back, as I trust he will, I want him to marry Polly Colpus."

"Polly Colpus, mother!"

"She's James Colpus's only child, and will come in for money. James Colpus is a wonderful thrivin' man."

"But she has a moustache."

"What of that, if she have money?"

"But – Iver – if he couldn't bear an ugly signboard to the house, will he relish an ugly figure-head to his wife within it?"

"She has gold which will gild her moustache."

"I don't know," said Mehetabel; "Iver wouldn't take the business at his father's wish, will he take a wife of his mother's providing?"

"He will know which side his bread is buttered better than some persons I could name."

"I fancy when folk look out for wives, they don't borrow their mother's eyes."

"You cross me in everything to-day," said the hostess, peevishly.

Mehetabel's tears began to flow.

Mrs. Verstage was a woman who did not need much time or much balancing to arrive at a determination, and when she had formed her resolution, she clung to it with the same tenacity as her husband did to his.

Her maternal jealousy had been roused, and the maternal instinct is the strongest that exists in the female nature. Many a woman would allow herself to be cut to bits for her child. But not only will she sacrifice herself without hesitation, but also any one else who in any way hinders the progress of her schemes for the welfare of her child. Mrs. Verstage entertained affection for the girl, an affection very real, yet not to the extent of allowing it to blind her to the true interests of her own son. She was roused to jealousy by the partiality of Simon for his adopted daughter, to the prejudice of Iver. And now she was gravely alarmed lest on the return of Iver, the young affection of the two children for each other should take a new spell of life, assume a new form, and intensify into passion.

Accordingly she was resolved, if possible, to remove the girl from the Ship before the arrival of Iver. The proposal of the

Broom-Squire was opportune, and she was anxious to forward his suit as the best means for raising an insuperable barrier between her son and the girl, as well as removing her from Simon, who, with his characteristic wrong-headedness, might actually do what he had proposed.

"I don't see what you're crying about," said Mrs. Verstage, testily. "It ain't no matter to you whether Iver takes Polly Colpus or a Royal Princess."

"I don't want him to be worried, mother, when he comes home with having ugly girls rammed down his throat. If you begin that with him he'll be off again."

"Oh! you know that, do you?"

"I am sure of it."

"I know what this means!" exclaimed the angry woman, losing all command over her tongue. "It means, in plain English, just this – 'I'm going to try, by hook or by crook, to get Iver for myself.' That's what you're driving at, hussy! But I'll put you by the shoulders out of the door, or ever Iver comes, that you may be at none of them tricks. Do you think that because he baptized you, that he'll also marry you?"

Mehetabel sprang through the door with a cry of pain, of wounded pride, of resentment at the injustice wherewith she was treated, of love in recoil, and almost ran against the Broom-Squire. Almost without power to think, certainly without power to judge, fevered with passion to be away out of a house where she was so misjudged, she gasped, "Bideabout! will you have me

now – even now. Mother turns me out of doors."

"Have you? To be sure I will," said Jonas; then with a laugh out of the side of his mouth, he added in an undertone, "Don't seem to want that I should set a net; she runs right into my hands. Wimen is wimen!"

CHAPTER XI
A SURNAME AT LAST

When Simon Verstage learned that Mehetabel was to be married to the Broom-Squire, he was not lightly troubled. He loved the girl more dearly than he was himself aware. He was accustomed to see her about the house, to hear her cheerful voice, and to be welcomed with a pleasant smile when he returned from the fields. There was constitutional ungraciousness in his wife. She considered it lowering to her dignity, or unnecessary, to put on an amiable face, and testify to him pleasure at his presence. Little courtesies are dear to the hearts of the most rugged men; Simon received them from Mehetabel, and valued them all the more because withheld from him by his wife. The girl had known how to soothe him when ruffled, she had forestalled many of his little requirements, and had exercised a moderating influence in the house. Mrs. Verstage, in her rough, imperious fashion, had not humored him, and many a domestic storm was allayed by the tact of Mehetabel.

Simon had never been demonstrative in his affection, and it was only now, when he was about to lose her, that he became aware how dear she was to his old heart. But what could he do, now that she had given herself to Jonas Kink? Of the manner in which this had been brought about he knew nothing. Had he

been told he would have stormed, and insisted on the engagement coming to an end. But would this have mended matters? Would it not have made Mehetabel's position in the house only more insupportable?

He remained silent and depressed for a week, and when the girl was in the room followed her with his eyes, with a kindly, regretful light in them. When she passed near him, he held out his hand, took hers, squeezed it, and said, "Matabel, we shall miss you: – wun'erful – wun'erful!"

"Dear father!" she would answer, and return the pressure of his hand, whilst her eyes filled.

"I hope you'll be happy," he would say; then add, "I suppose you will. Mother says so, and wimen knows about them sort o' things better nor we."

To his wife Simon said, "Spare nothing. Give her a good outfit, just as if she was our own daughter. She has been a faithful child, and has saved us the expense and worrit of a servant, and I will not have it said – but hang it! what odds to me what is said? I will not have her feel that we begrudge her aught. She has no father and mother other than we, and we must be to her all that we can."

"Leave that to me," said the wife.

Mainly through the instrumentality of Mrs. Verstage the marriage was hastened on; it was to be as soon as the banns had been called thrice.

"Wot's the good o' waitin'?" asked Mrs. Verstage, "where all

is pleasant all round, and all agreed?"

Mehetabel was indifferent, even disposed to have the wedding speedily, there was no advantage in postponing the inevitable. If she were not wanted in the Ship, her presence was desired in the Punch-Bowl, if not by all the squatters there, at all events by the one most concerned.

She felt oppression in the house in which she had been at home from infancy, and was even conscious that her adopted mother was impatient to be rid of her. Mehetabel was proud, too proud to withdraw from her engagement, to acknowledge that she had rushed into it without consideration, and had accepted a man whom she did not love. Too proud, in fine, to continue one day longer than need be, eating the bread of charity.

Seamstresses were summoned, and every preparation made that

Mehetabel should have abundance of clothing when she left the Ship.

"Look here, Susanna," said Simon, "you'll have made a pocket in them gownds, you mind."

"Yes, Simon, of course."

"Becos I means to put a little purse in for Matabel when she goes from us – somethin' to be her own. I won't have the little wench think we han't provided for her."

"How much?" asked Mrs. Verstage, jealously.

"That I'm just about considerin'," answered the old man cautiously.

"Don't you do nothin' reckless and unraysonable, Simon. What will she want wi' money? Hasn't she got the Broom-Squire to pay for all and everything?"

During the three weeks that intervened between the precipitate and ill-considered engagement and the marriage, Mehetabel hardly came to her senses. Sometimes when occupied with her work in the house a qualm of horror came over her and curdled the blood in her heart; then with a cold sweat suffusing her brow, and with pale lips, she sank on a stool, held her head between her palms, and fought with the thoughts that rose like spectres, and with the despair that rolled in on her soul like a dark and icy tide. The words spoken by the hostess had made it impossible for her to retrace her steps. She could not understand what had come over Mrs. Verstage to induce her to address her as she had. The after conduct of the hostess was such as showed her that although wishing her well she wished her away, and that though having a kindly feeling towards her, she would not admit a renewal of former relations. They might continue friends, but only on condition of being friends at a distance. Mehetabel racked her brain to find in what manner she had given offence to the old woman, and could find none. She was thrust from the only bosom to which she had clung from infancy, without a reason that she could discover. Meanwhile she drew no nearer to Bideabout. He was delighted at his success, and laid aside for a while his bitterness of speech. But she did not admit him to nearer intimacy. His attempts at familiarity met

with a chilling reception; the girl had to exercise self-restraint to prevent the repugnance with which she received his addresses from becoming obvious to him and others.

Happily for her peace of mind, he was a good deal away, engaged in getting his house into order. It needed clearing out, cleansing and repairing. No money had been expended on dilapidations, very little soap and water on purification, since his mother's death.

His sister, Mrs. Rocliffe, some years older than himself, living but a few yards distant, had done for him what was absolutely necessary, and what he had been unable to do for himself; but her interest had naturally been in her own house, not in his.

Now that he announced to her that he was about to marry, Sarah Rocliffe was angry. She had made up her mind that Jonas would continue a "hudger," and that his house and land would fall to her son, after his demise. This was perhaps an unreasonable expectation, especially as her own conduct had precipitated the engagement; but it was natural. She partook of the surly disposition of her brother. She could not exist without somebody or something to fall out with, to scold, to find fault with. Her incessant recrimination had at length aroused in Jonas the resolve to cast her wholly from his dwelling, to have a wife of his own, and to be independent of her service.

Sarah Rocliffe ascertained that she had overstepped the mark in quarrelling with her brother, but instead of blaming herself she turned the fault on the head of the inoffensive girl who was to

supplant her. She resolved not to welcome her sister-in-law with even a semblance of cordiality.

Nor were the other colonists of the Bowl favorably disposed. It was a tradition among them that they should inter-marry. This rule had once been broken through with disastrous results. The story shall be told presently.

The squatter families of the Punch-Bowl hung together, and when Sarah Rocliffe took it in dudgeon that her brother was going to marry, then the entire colony of Rocliffes, Boxalls, Nashes, and Snellings adopted her view of the case, and resented the engagement as though it were a slight cast on them.

As if the Bowl could not have provided him with a mate meet for him! Were there no good wenches to be found there, that he must go over the lips to look for a wife? The girls within the Bowl, thanks be, had all surnames and kindred. Matabel had neither.

It was not long before Bideabout saw that his engagement to Mehetabel was viewed with disfavor by him immediate neighbors, but he was not the man to concern himself about their opinions. He threw about his jibes, which did not tend to make things better. The boys in the Bowl had concocted a jingle which they sang under his window, or cast at him from behind a hedge, and then ran away lest he should fall on them with a stick. This was their rhyme: —

"A harnet lived in an 'ollow tree,
A proper spiteful twoad were he.

And he said as married and 'appy he'd be;
But all folks jeered and laughed he-he!"

Mehetabel's cheeks were pale, and her brows were contracted and her lips set as she went to Thursley Church on the wedding-day, accompanied by Mrs. Verstage and some village friends.

Gladly would she have elected to have her marriage performed as quietly as possible, and at an hour and on a day to which none were privy save those most immediately concerned. But this did not suit the pride of the hostess, who was resolved on making a demonstration, of getting to herself the credit of having acted a generous and even lavish part towards the adopted child.

Mehetabel held up her head, not with pride, but with resolution not to give way. Her brain was stunned. Thought would no more flow in it than veins of water through a frozen soil. All the shapes of human beings that passed and circled around her were as phantasms. In church she hardly gathered her senses to know when and what to respond.

She could scarcely see the register through the mist that had formed over her eyes when she was required to sign her Christian name, or collect her thoughts to understand the perplexity of the parson, as to how to enter her, when she was without a surname.

When congratulated with effusion by Mrs. Verstage, with courtesy by the Vicar, and boisterously by the boys and girls who were present, she tried to force a smile, but ineffectually, as her features were set inflexibly.

The bridegroom kissed her cheek. She drew back as if she had been stung, as a sensitive plant shrinks from the hand that grasps it.

The previous day had been one of rain, so also had been the night, with a patter of raindrops on the roof above Mehetabel's attic chamber, and a flow of tears beneath.

During the morning, on the way to church, though there had been no rain, yet the clouds had hung low, and were threatening.

They separated and were brushed aside as the wedding party issued from the porch, and then a flood of scorching sunlight fell over the bride and bridegroom. For the first time Mehetabel raised her head and looked up. The impulse was unconscious – it was to let light shine into her eyes and down into the dark, despairing chambers of her soul filled only with tears.

The villagers in the churchyard murmured admiration; as she issued from the gates they cheered.

Bideabout was elate; he was proud to know that the handsomest girl in the neighborhood was now his. It was rare for a sarcastic curl to leave his lips and the furrow to be smoothed on his brow. Such a rare occasion was the present. And the Broom-Squire had indeed secured one in whom his pride was justifiable.

No one could say of Mehetabel that she had been frivolous and forward. Reserved, even in a tavern: always able to maintain her dignity; respecting herself, she had enforced respect from others. That she was hard-working, shrewd, thrifty, none who visited the Ship could fail to know.

Many a lad had attempted to win her favor, and all had been repulsed. She could keep forward suitors at a distance without wounding their self-esteem, without making them bear her a grudge. She was tall, well-built and firmly knit. There was in her evidence of physical as well as of moral strength.

Though young, Mehetabel seemed older than her years, so fully developed was her frame, so swelling her bosom, so set were her features.

Usually the girl wore a high color, but of late this had faded out of her face, which had been left of an ashen hue. Her pallor, however, only gave greater effect to the lustre and profusion of her dark hair and to the size and to the velvet depth and softness of her hazel eyes.

The girl had finely-moulded eyebrows, which, when she frowned through anger, or contracted them through care, met in one band, and gave a lowering expression to her massive brow.

An urchin in the rear nudged a ploughboy, and said in a low tone,

"Jim! The old harnet out o' the 'ollow tree be in luck to-day. Wot'll he do with her, now he's ketched a butterfly?"

"Wot be he like to do?" retorted the bumpkin. "A proper spiteful twoad such as he – why, he'll rumple all the color and booty out o' her wings, and sting her till her blood runs pison."

Then from the tower pealed the bells.

Jonas pressed the arm of Mehetabel, and leering into her face, said: "Come, say a word o' thanks. Better late than never. At the

last, through me, you've gotten a surname."

CHAPTER XII
UNEXPECTED

The wedding party was assembled at the Ship, which for this day concerned itself not with outsiders, but provided only for such as were invited to sit and drink, free of charge, to the health and happiness of bride and bridegroom.

The invitation had been extended to the kinsfolk of Jonas in the Punch-Bowl, as a matter of course; but none had accepted, one had his farm, another his business, and a third could not go unless his wife let him.

Consequently the bridegroom was badly supported. He was not the man to make friends, and such acquaintances of his as appeared did so, not out of friendship, but in expectation of eating and drinking at the landlord's table.

This angered Jonas, who, in church, on looking around, had noticed that his own family had failed to attend, but that they should fail also at the feast was what surprised him.

"It don't matter a rush," scoffed he in Mehetabel's ear, "we can get along without 'em, and if they won't come to eat roast duck and green peas, there are others who will and say 'Thank'y.'"

The announcement of Jonas's engagement had been indeed too bitter a morsel for his sister to swallow. She resented his matrimonial project as a personal wrong, as a robbery committed

on the Rocliffes. Her husband was not in good circumstances; in fact, the family had become involved through a marriage, to which allusion has already been made; and had not thereafter been able to recover from it.

She had felt the pressure of debt, and the struggle for existence. It had eaten into her flesh like a canker, and had turned her heart into wormwood. In her pinched circumstances, even the pittance paid by her brother for doing his cooking and washing had been a consideration. This now was to be withdrawn.

Sarah Rocliffe had set her ambition on the acquisition of her brother's estate, by which means alone, as far as she could see, would the family be enabled to shake off the incubus that oppressed it. Content in her own lifetime to drudge and moil, she would have gone on to the end, grumbling and fault-finding, indeed, but satisfied with the prospect that at some time in the future her son would inherit the adjoining farm and be lifted thereby out of the sorry position in which was his father, hampered on all sides, and without cheeriness.

But this hope was now taken from her. Jonas was marrying a young and vigorous wife, and a family was certain to follow.

The woman had not the command over herself to veil her feelings, and put on a semblance of good humor, not even the grace to put in an appearance at the wedding.

The story must now be told which accounts for the embarrassed circumstances of the Rocliffe family.

This shall be done by means of an extract from a periodical

of the date of the event which clouded the hitherto flourishing condition of the Rocliffes. The periodical from which the quotation comes is "The Royal Magazine, or Gentleman's Monthly Companion" for 1765.

"A few weeks ago a gentlewoman, about twenty-five years of age, applied to a farmer and broom-maker, near Hadleigh, in Hants[1] for a lodging, telling them that she was the daughter of a nobleman, and forced from her father's house by his ill-treatment. Her manner of relating the story so affected the farmer that he took her in, and kindly entertained her.

"In the course of conversation, she artfully let drop that she had a portion of L90,000, of which she should be possessed as soon as her friends in London knew where she was.

"After some days' stay she told the farmer the best return in her power for this favor would be to marry his son, Thomas (a lad about eighteen), if it was agreeable to him. The poor old man was overjoyed at the proposal, and in a short time they were married; after which she informed her father-in-law she had great, interest at Court, and if he could for the present raise money to equip them in a genteel manner, she could procure a colonel's commission for her husband.

"The credulous farmer thereupon mortgaged his little estate for L100, and everything necessary being bought for the new married couple, they took the rest of the money and set out for London, accompanied by three of the farmer's friends, and got

[1] Not really in Hants, but in Surrey, adjoining the County demarcation.

to the Bear Inn, in the Borough, on Christmas eve; where they lived for about ten days in an expensive manner; and she went in a coach every morning to St. James's end of the town, on pretence of soliciting for her husband's commission, and to obtain her own fortune. But it was at length discovered that the woman was an impostor; and the poor country people were obliged to sell their horses by auction towards defraying the expenses of the inn before they could set out on their return home, which they did on foot, last Saturday morning."

If the hundred pounds raised on mortgage had covered all the expenses incurred, the Rocliffes might have been satisfied.

Unhappily they got further involved. They fell into the hands of a lawyer in Portsmouth, who undertook to see them righted, but the only advantage they gained from his intervention was the acquisition of certain information that the woman who had married Thomas had been married before.

Accordingly Thomas was free, and he used his freedom some years later, when of a ripe age, to marry Sarah Kink, the sister of Bideabout.

Rocliffe had never been able to shake himself free of the ridicule that attended to him, after the expedition to London, and what was infinitely more vexatious and worse to endure was the burden of debt that had then been incurred, and which was more than doubled through the activity of the lawyer by whom he had been inveigled into submitting himself and his affairs to him.

As the eating and drinking proceeded, the Broom-Squire

drank copiously, became noisy, boastful, and threw out sarcastic remarks calculated to hit those who ate and drank with him, but were mainly directed against those of his own family who had absented themselves, but to whose ears he was confident they would be wafted.

Mehetabel, who saw that he was imbibing more than he could bear without becoming quarrelsome lost her pallor, and a hectic flame kindled in her cheek.

Mrs. Verstage looked on uneasily. She was familiar with the moods of Bideabout, and feared the turn matters would take.

Presently he announced that he would sing a song, and in harsh tones began: —

"A cobbler there was, and he lived in a stall,
But Charlotte, my nymph, had no lodging at all.
And at a Broom-Squire's, in pitiful plight,
Did pray and beseech for a lodging one night,
Derry-down, derry-down.

"She asked for admittance, her story to tell.
Of all her misfortunes, and what her befel,
Of her parentage high, – but so great was her grief,
Shed never a comfort to give her relief,
Derry-down, derry-down.[2]

[2] This is the beginning of a long ballad based on the incidents above mentioned, which is still current in the neighborhood.

"Now, look here," said Simon Verstage, interrupting the singer, "We all of us know that there ballet, pretty well. It's vastly long, if I remembers aright, something like fourteen verses; and I think we can do very well wi'out it to-night. I fancy your brother-inlaw, Thomas, mightn't relish it."

"He's not here," said the Broom-Squire.

"But I am here," said the landlord, "and I say that the piece is too long for singing, 'twill make you too hoarse to say purty speeches and soft things to your new missus, and it's a bit stale for our ears."

"It's an ill bird that befouls its own nest," said a young fellow present.

Bideabout overheard the remark. "What do you mean by that? Was that aimed at me?" he shouted and started to his feet.

A brawl would have inevitably ensued, but for a timely interruption.

In the door stood a well-dressed, good-looking young man, surveying the assembled company with a smile.

Silence ensued. Bideabout looked round.

Then, with a cry of joy, mingled with pain, Mrs. Verstage started from her feet.

"It is Iver! my Iver!"

In another moment mother and son were locked in each other's arms.

The guests rose and looked questioningly at their host, before they welcomed the intruder.

Simon Verstage remained seated, with his glass in his hand, gazing sternly into it. His face became mottled, red spots appeared on the temples, and on the cheekbones; elsewhere he was pale.

Mehetabel went to him, placed her hand upon his, and said, in a trembling voice, "Dear father, this is my wedding day. I am about to leave you for good. Do not deny me the one and only request I make. Forgive Iver."

The old man's lips moved, but he did not speak. He looked steadily, somewhat sternly, at the young man and mustered his appearance.

Meanwhile Iver had disengaged himself from his mother's embrace, and he came towards his father with extended hand.

"See," said he cheerily, "I am free to admit, and do it heartily, that I did wrong, in painting over the stern of the vessel, and putting it into perspective as far as my lights went. Father! I can remove the coat of paint that I put on, and expose that outrageous old stern again. I will do more. I will violate all the laws of perspective in heaven and earth, and turn the bows round also, so as to thoroughly show the ship's head, and make that precious vessel look like a dog curling itself up for a nap. Will that satisfy you?"

All the guests were silent, and fixed their eyes anxiously on the taverner.

Iver was frank in speech, had lost all provincial dialect, was quite the gentleman. He had put off the rustic air entirely. He was

grown a very handsome fellow, with oval face, full hair on his head, somewhat curling, and his large brown eyes were sparkling with pleasure at being again at home. In his whole bearing there was self-confidence.

"Simon!" pleaded Mrs. Verstage, with tears in her voice, "he's your own flesh and blood!"

He remained unmoved.

"Father!" said Mehetabel, clinging to his hand, "Dear, dear father! for my sake, whom you have loved, and whom you lose out of your house to-day."

"There is my hand," said the old man.

"And you shall have the ship again just as suits your heart," said Iver.

"I doubt," answered the taverner, "it will be easier to get the Old Ship to look what she ort, than it will be to get you to look again like a publican's son."

The reconciliation on the old man's side was without cordiality, yet it was accepted by all present with cheers and handshakings.

It was but too obvious that the modish appearance of his son had offended the old man.

"Heaven bless me!" exclaimed Iver, when this commotion was somewhat allayed. He was looking with undisguised admiration and surprise at Mehetabel.

"Why," asked he, pushing his way towards her, "What is the meaning of all this?"

"That is Matabel, indeed," explained his mother. "And this is her wedding day."

"You married! You, Matabel! And, to-day! The day of my return!

Where is the happy man? Show him to me."

His mother indicated the bridegroom. Mehetabel's heart was too

full to speak; she was too dazed with the new turn of affairs to know what to do.

Iver looked steadily at Jonas.

"What!" he exclaimed, "Bideabout! Never, surely! I cannot mistake your face nor the look of your eyes. So, you have won the prize – you!"

Still he looked at Jonas. He refrained from extending his hand in congratulation. Whether thoughtlessly or not, he put it behind his back. An expression passed over his face that the bride observed, and it sent the blood flying to her cheek and temples.

"So," said Iver, and now he held out both hands, "Little Matabel,

I have returned to lose you!"

He wrung her hands, both, – he would not let them go.

"I wish you all joy. I wish you everything, everything that your heart can desire. But I am surprised. I can't realize it all at once. My little Matabel grown so big, become so handsome – and, hang me, leaving the Old Ship! Poor Old Ship! Bideabout, I ought to have been consulted. I gave Matabel her name. I have

certain rights over her, and I won't surrender them all in a hurry. Here, mother, give me a glass, 'tis a strange day on which I come home."

Dissatisfaction appeared in his face, hardly to be expected in one who should have been in cloudless radiance on his return after years of absence, and with his quarrel with the father at an end.

Now old acquaintances crowded about him to ask questions as to how he had lived during his absence, upon what he had been employed, how the world had fared with him, whether he was married, and if so, how many children he had got, and what were their respective ages and sexes, and names and statures.

For a while bride and bridegroom were outside the circle, and Iver was the centre of interest and regard. Iver responded good-humoredly and pleaded for patience. He was hungry, he was thirsty, he was dusty and hot. He must postpone personal details till a more convenient season. Now his mind was taken up with the thought, not of himself, but of his old playmate, his almost sister, his – he might dare to call her, first love – who was stepping out of the house, out of his reach, just as he stepped back into it, strong with the anticipation of finding her there. Then raising his glass, and looking at Matabel, he said: "Here's to you, Matabel, and may you be very happy with the man of your choice."

"Have you no good wish for me?" sneered the Broom-Squire.

"For you, Bideabout," answered Iver, "I do not express a wish.

I know for certainty that you, that any man, not may, but must be happy with such a girl, unless he be a cur."

CHAPTER XIII
HOME

Bideabout was driving his wife home.

Home! There is no word sweeter to him who has created that reality to which the name belongs; but there is no word more full of vague fears to one who has it to create.

Home to Bideabout was a rattle-trap farmhouse built partly of brick, mainly of timber, thatched with heather, at the bottom of the Punch-Bowl.

It was a dwelling that served to cover his head, but was without pleasant or painful associations – a place in which rats raced and mice squeaked; a place in which money might be made and hoarded, but on which little had been spent. It was a place he had known from childhood as the habitation of his parents, and which now was his own. His childhood had been one of drudgery without cheerfulness, and was not looked back on with regret. Home was not likely to be much more to him in the future than it was in the present. More comfortable perhaps, certainly more costly. But it was other with Mehetabel.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.