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Fenn G.

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Содержание

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Chapter One
“In the West Countree.”

“Take care, Mr Luke Vine, sir. There’s a big one coming.”

The thin, little, sharp-featured, grey-haired man on a rock looked sharply round, saw the “big one coming,” stooped, picked up a large basket, and, fishing-rod in hand, stepped back and climbed up a few feet, just as a heavy swell, which seemed to glide along rapidly over the otherwise calm sea, heaved, flooded the rock, on which he had been standing, ran right up so high as to bathe his feet, then sank back in a series of glittering falls which sparkled in the glorious sunshine; there was a hissing and sighing and sucking noise among the rocks, and the wave passed on along the rugged coast, leaving the sea calm and bright once more.

“Many a poor lad’s been took like that, Mr Luke, sir,” said the speaker, “and never heard of again. Why, if I hadn’t called out, it would have took you off your legs, and the current’s so strong here you’d have been swept away.”

“And there’d been an end of me, Polly, and nobody a bit the worse, eh?”

The last speaker seemed to fill his sharp, pale face full of tiny wrinkles, and reduced his eyes to mere slits, as he looked keenly at the big robust woman at his side. She was about fifty, but with her black hair as free from grey as that of a girl, her dark eyes bright, and her sun-tanned face ruddy with health, as she bent forward with a great fish-basket supported on her back by means of a broad leather strap passed over her print sun-bonnet and across her forehead.

“Nobody the worse, Mr Luke, sir?” cried the woman. “What a shame to talk like that! You aren’t no wife, nor no child, but there’s Miss Louise.”

“Louisa, woman, Louisa,” said the fisher sharply.

“Well, Louisa, sir. I only want to be right; but it was only yes’day as old Miss Vine, as stood by when I was selling her some hake, shook her finger at me and said I was to say Miss Louise.”

“Humph! Never mind what my sister says. Christened Louisa. – That ought to fetch ’em.”

“Yes, sir; that ought to fetch ’em,” said the woman in a sing-song way, as the elderly man gave the glistening bait at the end of his running line a deft swing and sent it far out into the bright sea. “I’ve seen the water boiling sometimes out there with the bass leaping and playing. What, haven’t you caught none, sir?”

“No, Polly, not one; so just be off about your business, and don’t worry me with your chatter.”

“Oh, I’m a-going, sir,” said the woman good-humouredly; “only I see you a-fishing, and said to myself, ‘maybe Mr Luke Vine’s ketched more than he wants, and he’d like to sell me some of ’em for my customers.’”

“And I haven’t seen a bass this morning, so be off.”

“To be sure, Mr Luke Vine, sir; and when are you going to let me come up and give your place a good clean? I says to my Liza up at your brother’s, sir, only yes’day – ”

“Look here, Polly Perrow,” cried the fisher viciously, “will you go, or must I?”

“Don’t be criss-cross, sir, I’m going,” said the woman, giving her basket a hitch. “Here’s Miss Louise – isa – coming down the rocks with Miss Madlin.”

“Hang her confounded chatter!” snarled the fisher, as he drew out his bait, unwound some more line, and made another throw, “bad as those wretched stamps.”

He cast an angry glance up at the mining works high on the cliff-side, whose chimney shaft ran along the sloping ground till it reared itself in air on the very top of the hill, where in constant repetition the iron-shod piles rose and fell, crushing the broken ore to powder. “A man might have thought he’d be free here from a woman’s tongue.”

He gave another glance behind him, along the rocky point which jutted out several hundred yards and formed a natural breakwater to the estuary, which ran, rock-sheltered, right up into the land, and on either side of which were built rugged flights of natural steps, from the bright water’s edge to where, five hundred feet above, the grey wind-swept masses of granite looked jagged against the sky.

Then he watched his great pointed float, as it ran here and there in the eddies of the tremendous Atlantic currents which swept along by the point. The sea sparkled, the sun shone, and the grey gulls floated above the deep blue transparent water, uttering a querulous cry from time to time, and then dipping down at the small shoals of fry which played upon the surface.

Far away seaward a huge vessel was going west, leaving behind a trail of smoke; on his right a white-sailed yacht or two glistened in the sun. In another direction, scattered here and there, brown-sailed luggers were passing slowly along; while behind the fisher lay the picturesque straggling old town known as East and West Hakemouth, with the estuary of the little river pretty well filled with craft, from the fishing luggers and trawlers up to the good-sized schooners and brigs which traded round the coast or adventured across the Bay of Storms, by Spain and through the Straits, laden with cargoes of pilchards for the Italian ports.

“Missed him,” grumbled the fisher, withdrawing his line to rebait with a pearly strip of mackerel. “Humph! now I’m to be worried by those chattering girls.”

The worry was very close at hand, for directly after balancing themselves on the rough rocks, and leaping from mass to mass, came two bright-looking girls of about twenty, their faces flushed by exercise, and more than slightly tanned by the strong air that blows health-laden from the Atlantic.

As often happens in real life as well as in fiction, the companions were dark and fair; and as they came laughing and talking, full of animation, looking a couple of as bonny-looking English maidens as the West Country could produce, their aspect warranted, in reply to the greetings of “Ah, Uncle Luke!” “Ah, Mr Vine!” something a little more courteous than —

“Well, Nuisance?” addressed with a short nod to the dark girl in white serge, and “Do, Madelaine?” to the fair girl in blue.

The gruffness of the greeting seemed to be taken as a matter of course, for the girls seated themselves directly on convenient masses of rock, and busied themselves in the governance of sundry errant strands of hair which were playing in the breeze.

The elderly fisher watched them furtively, and his sour face seemed a little less grim, and as if there was something after all pleasant to look upon in the bright youthful countenances before him.

“Well, uncle, how many fish?” said the dark girl.

“Bah! and don’t chatter, or I shall get none at all. How’s dad?”

“Quite well. He’s out here somewhere.”

“Dabbling?”

“Yes.”

The girl took off her soft yachting cap, and fanned her face; then ceased and half closing her eyes and throwing back her head, let her red lips part slightly as she breathed in full draughts of the soft western breeze.

“If he ever gives her a moment’s pain,” said the old man to himself as he jerked a look up at the mining works, “I’ll kill him.” Then, turning sharply to the fair girl, he said aloud: – “Well, Madelaine, how’s the *bon père*?”

“Quite well and very busy seeing to the lading of the *Corunna*,” said the girl with animation.

“Humph! Old stupid. Worrying himself to death money grubbing. Here, Louie, when’s that boy going back to his place?”

"To-morrow, uncle."

"Good job too. What did he want with a holiday? Never did a day's work in his life. Here! Hold her, Louie. She's going to peck," he added in mock alarm, and with a cynical sneering laugh, as he saw his niece's companion colour slightly, and compress her lips.

"Well, it's too bad of you, uncle. You are always finding fault about Harry."

"Say Henri, pray, my child, and with a good strong French accent," cried the old man with mock remonstrance. "What would Aunt Marguerite say?"

"Aunt Margaret isn't here, uncle," cried the girl merrily; "and it's of no use for you to grumble and say sour things, because we know you by heart, and we don't believe in you a bit."

"No," said the fisherman grimly, "only hate me like poison, for a sour old crab. Never gave me a kiss when you came."

"How could I without getting wet?" said the girl with a glance at the tiny rock island on which the fisher stood.

"Humph! Going back to-morrow, eh? Good job too. Why, he has been a whole half-year in his post."

"Yes, uncle, a whole half-year!"

"And never stayed two months before at any of the excellent situations your father and I worried ourselves and our friends to death to get for him."

"Now, uncle – "

"A lazy, thoughtless, good-for-nothing young vag – There, hold her again, Louie. She's going to peck."

"And you deserve it, uncle," cried the girl, with a smile at her companion, in whose eyes the indignant tears were rising.

"What! for speaking the truth, and trying to let that foolish girl see my lord in his right colours?"

"Harry's a good affectionate brother, and I love him very dearly," said Louise, firmly; "and he's your brother's son, uncle, and in your heart, you love him too, and you're proud of him, as proud can be."

"You're a silly, young goose, and as feather-brained as he is. Proud of him? Bah! I wish he'd enlist for a soldier, and get shot."

"For shame, uncle!" cried Louise indignantly; and her face flushed too as she caught and held her companion's hand.

"Yes. For shame! It's all your aunt's doing, stuffing the boy's head full of fantastic foolery about his descent, and the disgrace of trade. And now I am speaking, look here," he cried, turning sharply on the fair girl, and holding his rod over her as if it were a huge stick which he was about to use. "Do you hear, Madelaine?"

"I'm listening, Mr Vine," said the girl, coldly.

"I've known you ever since you were two months old, and your silly mother must insist upon my taking hold of you – you miserable little bit of pink putty, as you were then, and fooled me into being godfather. How I could be such an ass, I don't know – but I am, and I gave you that silver cup, and I've wanted it back ever since."

"Oh, uncle, what a wicked story!" cried Louise, laughing.

"It's quite true, miss. Dead waste of money. It has never been used, I'll swear."

"No, Mr Vine, never," said Madelaine, smiling now.

"Ah, you need not show your teeth at me because you're so proud they're white. Lots of the fisher-girls have got better. That's right, shut your lips up, and listen. What I've got to say is this; if I see any more of that nonsense there'll be an explosion."

"I don't know what you mean," said Madelaine, colouring more deeply.

"Yes, you do, miss. I saw Harry put his arm round your waist, and I won't have it. What's your father thinking about? Why, that boy's no more fit to be your husband than that great, ugly, long brown-bearded Scotchman who poisons the air with his copper mine, is to be Louie's."

"Uncle, you are beyond bearing to-day."

"Am I? Well then be off. But you mind, Miss Maddy, I won't have it. You'll be silly enough to marry some day, but when you do, you shall marry a man, not a feather-headed young ass, with no more brains than that bass. Ah, I've got you this time, have I?"

He had thrown in again, and this time struck and hooked a large fish, whose struggles he watched with grim satisfaction, till he drew it gasping and quivering on to the rock – a fine bass, whose silver sides glistened like those of a salmon, and whose sharp back fin stood up ready to cut the unwitting hand.

"Bad for him, Louie," said the old man with a laugh; "but one must have dinners, eh? What a countenance!" he continued, holding up his fish, "puts me in mind of that fellow you have up at the house, what's his name, Priddle, Fiddle?"

"Pradelle, uncle."

"Ah, Pradelle. Of course he's going back too."

"Yes, uncle."

"Don't like him," continued Uncle Luke, rebaiting quickly and throwing out; "that fellow has got scoundrel written in his face."

"For shame! Mr Vine," said Madelaine, laughing. "Mr Pradelle is very gentlemanly and pleasant."

"Good-looking scoundrels always are, my dear. But he don't want you. I watched him. Going to throw over the Scotchman and take to Miss Louie?"

"Uncle, you've got a bite," said the girl coolly.

"Eh? So I have. Got him, too," said the old man, striking and playing his fish just as if he were angling in fresh water. "Thumper."

"What pleasure can it give you to say such unpleasant things, uncle?" continued the girl.

"Truths always are unpleasant," said the old man, laughing. "Don't bother me, there's a shoal off the point now, and I shall get some fish."

"Why you have all you want now, uncle."

"Rubbish! Shall get a few shillings' worth to sell Mother Perrow."

"Poor Uncle Luke!" said the girl with mock solemnity; "obliged to fish for his living."

"Better than idling and doing nothing. I like to do it, and – There he is again. Don't talk."

He hooked and landed another fine bass from the shoal which had come up with the tide that ran like a millstream off the point, when as he placed the fish in the basket he raised his eyes.

"Yah! Go back and look after your men. I thought that would be it. Maddy, look at her cheeks."

"Oh, uncle, if I did not know you to be the best and dearest of – "

"Tchah! Carney!" he cried, screwing up his face. "Look here, I want to catch a few fish and make a little money, so if that long Scot is coming courting, take him somewhere else. Be off!"

"If Mr Duncan Leslie is coming to say good-day, uncle, I see no reason why he should not say it here," said Louise, calmly enough now, and with the slight flush which had suffused her cheeks fading out.

"Good-day. A great tall sheepish noodle who don't know when he's well off," grumbled the fisher, throwing out once more as a tall gentlemanly-looking young fellow of about eight-and-twenty stepped actively from rock to rock till he had joined the group, raising his soft tweed hat to the ladies and shaking hands.

"What a lovely morning!" he said eagerly. "I saw you come down. Much sport, Mr Vine?" he added, as he held out his hand.

"No," said Uncle Luke, nodding and holding tightly on to his rod. "Hands full. Can't you see?"

"Oh, yes, I see. One at you now."

"Thankye. Think I couldn't see?" said the old man, striking and missing his fish. "Very kind of you to come and see how I was getting on."

"But I didn't," said the new-comer, smiling. "I knew you didn't want me."

"Here, Louie, make a note of that," said Uncle Luke, sharply. "The Scotch are not so dense as they pretend they are."

"Uncle!"

"Oh, pray, don't interpose, Miss Vine. Your uncle and I often have a passage of arms together."

"Well, say what you've got to say, and then go back to your men. Has the vein failed?"

"No, sir; it grows richer every day."

"Sorry for it. I suppose you'll be burrowing under my cottage and burying me one of these days before my time?"

"Don't be alarmed, sir."

"I'm not," growled Uncle Luke.

"Uncle is cross, because he is catching more fish than he wants this morning," said Louise quietly.

"Hear that, Maddy, my dear?" said the old man, sharply. "Here's a problem for you: – If my niece's tongue is as keen-edged as that before she is twenty, what will it be at forty?"

The girl addressed laughed and shook her head.

"Any one would think it would be a warning to any sensible man to keep his distance."

"Uncle! Pray!" whispered the niece, looking troubled; but the old man only chuckled and hooked another fish.

"Going to make a fortune out of the old mine, Leslie?" he said.

"Fortune? No, sir. A fair income, I hope."

"Which with prudence and economy – Scottish prudence and economy," he added, meaningly, "would keep you when you got to be an old man like me. Bah!"

He snatched out his line and gave an impatient stamp with his foot.

"What is the matter, uncle?"

"What's the matter? It was bad enough before. Look there?"

Chapter Two
Elements of a Whole

Madelaine Van Heldre had seen the object of Uncle Luke's vexation before he called attention to it; and at the first glance her eyes had lit up with pleasure, but only to give place to an anxious, troubled look, and faint lines came across her brow.

"Why, it is only Harry with his friend," said Louise quietly.

"Yes: flopping and splashing about in the boat. There will not be a fish left when they've done."

"I'll tell them to land at the lower stairs," said Louise eagerly.

"No; let 'em come and do their worst," said the old man, with quite a snarl. "Why doesn't Harry row, instead of letting that miserable cockney fool about with an oar?"

"Miserable cockney!" said Duncan Leslie to himself; and his face, which had been overcast, brightened a little as he scanned the boat coming from the harbour.

"Mr Pradelle likes exercise," said Louise quietly.

Duncan's face grew dull again.

"Then I wish he would take it in London," said the old man, "jumping over his desk or using his pen, and not come here."

The water glistened and sparkled with the vigorous strokes given by the two young men who propelled the boat, and quickly after there was a grating noise as the bows ground against the rocks of the point and a young man in white flannels leaped ashore, while his companion after awkwardly laying in his oar followed the example, balancing himself as he stepped on to the gunwale, and then after the fashion of a timid horse at a gutter, making a tremendous bound on to the rocks.

As he did this his companion made a quick leap back into the bows to seize the chain, when he had to put out an oar once more and paddle close up to the rock, the boat having been sent adrift by the force of the other's leap.

"What a fellow you are, Pradelle!" he said, as he jumped on to a rock, and twisted the chain about a block.

"Very sorry, dear boy. Didn't think of that."

"No," said the first sourly, "you didn't."

He was a well-knit manly fellow, singularly like his sister, while his companion, whom he had addressed as Pradelle, seemed to be his very opposite in every way, though on the whole better looking; in fact, his features were remarkably handsome, or would have been had they not been marred by his eyes, which were set close together, and gave him a shifty look.

"How are you, uncle? How do, Leslie?" said Harry, as he stood twirling a gold locket at the end of his chain, to receive a grunt from the fisherman, and a friendly nod from the young mine-owner. "So here you are then," he continued; "we've been looking for you everywhere. You said you were going along the west walk."

"Yes, but we saw uncle fishing, and came down to him."

"Well, come along now."

"Come? Where?"

"Come where? Why for a sail. Wind's just right. Jump in."

Duncan Leslie looked grave, but he brightened a little as he heard what followed.

"Oh no, Harry."

As she spoke, Louise Vine glanced at her companion, in whose face she read an eager look of acquiescence in the proposed trip, which changed instantly to one of agreement with her negative.

"There, Vic. Told you so. Taken all our trouble for nothing."

"But, Harry – "

"Oh, all right," he cried, interrupting her, in an ill-used tone. "Just like girls. Here's our last day before we go back to the confounded grindstone. We've got the boat, the weather's lovely; we've been looking for you everywhere, and it's 'Oh no, Harry!' And Madelaine looking as if it would be too shocking to go for a sail."

"We don't like to disappoint you," said Madelaine, "but – "

"But you'd rather stay ashore," said the young man shortly. "Never mind, Vic, old chap, we'll go alone, and have a good smoke. Cheerful, isn't it? I say, Uncle Luke, you're quite right."

"First time you ever thought so then," said the old man shortly.

"Perhaps Miss Vine will reconsider her determination," said the young man's companion, in a low soft voice, as he went toward Louise, and seemed to Duncan Leslie to be throwing all the persuasion possible into his manner.

"Oh, no, thank you, Mr Pradelle," she replied hastily, and Duncan Leslie once more felt relieved and yet pained, for there was a peculiar consciousness in her manner.

"We had brought some cans with us and a hammer and chisel," continued Pradelle. "Harry thought we might go as far as the gorns."

"Zorns, man," cried Harry.

"I beg pardon, zorns, and get a few specimens for Mr Vine."

"It was very kind and thoughtful of Harry," said Louise hastily, "and we are sorry to disappoint him – on this his last day – but – "

"Blessed *but*!" said Harry, with a sneer; and he gave Madelaine a withering look, which made her bite her lip.

"And the fish swarming round the point," said Uncle Luke impatiently. "Why don't you go with them, girls?"

"Right again, uncle," said Harry.

The old man made him a mocking bow.

"Go, uncle?" said Louise eagerly, and then checking herself.

Duncan Leslie's heart sank like an ingot of his own copper dropped in a tub.

"Yes, go."

"If you think so, uncle – "

"Well, I do," he said testily, "only pray go at once."

"There!" cried Harry. "Come, Maddy."

He held out his hand to his sister's companion, but she hesitated, still looking at Louise, whose colour was going and coming as she saw Pradelle take off his cap and follow his friend's example, holding out his hand to help her into the boat.

"Yes, dear," she said to Madelaine gravely. "They would be terribly disappointed if we did not go."

The next moment Madelaine was in the boat, Louise still hanging back till, feeling that it would be a slight worse than the refusal to go if she ignored the help extended to her, she laid her hand in Pradelle's and stepped off the rock into the gently rising and falling boat.

"Another of my mistakes," said Duncan Leslie to himself; and then he started as if some one had given him an electric shock.

"Hullo!" cried the old man, "You're going too?"

"I? going?"

"Yes, of course! To take care of them. I'm not going to have them set off without some one to act as ballast to those boys."

Louise mentally cast her arms round the old man's neck and kissed him.

Harry, in the same manner, kicked his uncle into the sea, and Pradelle's eyes looked closer together than usual, as he turned them upon the young mine-owner.

"I should only be too happy," said the latter, "if – "

"Oh, there's plenty of room, Mr Leslie," cried the girls in duet. "Pray come."

The invitation was so genuine that Leslie's heart seemed to leap.

"Oh, yes, plenty of room," said Harry, "only if the wind drops, you'll have to pull an oar."

"Of course," said Leslie, stepping in.

Harry raised the boat-hook, and thrust the little vessel away, and then began to step the mast.

"Lay hold of the rudder, Leslie," he cried. "Send us up some fish for tea, uncle."

"I'll wait and see first whether you come back," said the old man. "Good-bye, girls. Don't be uneasy. I'll go and tell the old people if you're drowned."

"Thank you," shouted back the young man as he hoisted the little sail, which began to fill at once, and by the time he had it sheeted home, the boat was swiftly running eastward with the water pattering against her bows, and a panorama of surpassing beauty seeming to glide slowly by them on the left.

"There!" cried Harry to his friend, who had seated himself rather sulkily forward, the order to take the tiller having placed Leslie between Louise and Madelaine. "Make much of it, Vic: Paddington to-morrow night, hansom cab or the Underground, and next morning the office. Don't you feel happy?"

"Yes, now," said Pradelle, with a glance at Louise.

"Easy, Leslie, easy," cried Harry; "where are you going?"

"I beg pardon," said the young man hastily, for he had unwittingly changed the course of the boat.

"That's better. Any one would think you wanted to give Uncle Luke the job he talked about."

Madelaine looked up hastily.

"No; we will not do that, Miss Van Heldre," said Leslie smiling. "Shall I hold the sheet, Vine?"

"No need," said the young man, making the rope fast.

"But – "

"Oh, all right. I know what you're going to say – puff of wind might lay us over as we pass one of the combes. Wasn't born here for nothing."

Leslie said no more, but deferred to the opinion of the captain of the boat.

"Might as well have brought a line to trail. You'd have liked to fish, wouldn't you, Vic?"

"Only when we are alone," said Pradelle. "Can you tell me the name of that point, Miss Vine?"

"Brea," said Louise quietly.

"And that little valley?"

"Tol Du. The old Cornish names must sound strange to any one from London."

"Oh, no," he said, bending forward to engage her in conversation. "This place is very interesting, and I shall regret going," he added with a sigh, and a thoughtful look toward the picturesque little group of houses on either side of the estuary.

"I should think you will," said Harry. "Never mind, we've had a very jolly time. I say, Maddy," he whispered, "you will write to a fellow, won't you?"

"No," she said quietly; "there is no need."

"No need?"

"Louie will be writing to you every week, and you will answer her. I shall hear how you are getting on."

Harry whistled and looked angrily at his sister, who was replying to some remark made by Leslie.

"Here, Vic," he said, "she's too heavy forward. Come and sit by my sister. That's better. A little more over to the side, Leslie. Always trim your boat."

The changes were made, and the little yawl sped rapidly on past the headland of grey granite hoary and shaggy with moss; past black frowning masses of slaty shale, over and amongst which the waves broke in sparkling foam, and on and on by ferny hollows and rifts, down which trickled tiny

streams. The day was glorious, and the reflection of the sapphire sky dyed the sea tint of a blue that seemed amethystine in its richer transparent hue. The grey gulls floated overhead, and the tiny fish they pursued made the sea flash as they played about and showed their silvery sides.

But the conversation flagged. Possibly the fact of its being the last day of a pleasant sojourn acted upon the spirits of two of the party, while the third of the male occupants of the boat rather welcomed the restraint and silence, for it gave him an opportunity to sit and think and wonder what was to be his future, and what the animated countenance of Louise Vine meant as she answered the questions of her brother's friend.

He was a visitor as well as her brother's companion; he had been staying at Mr Vine's for a fortnight. They had had endless opportunities for conversation and – in short, Duncan Leslie felt uncomfortable.

It was then with a feeling of relief that was shared by both the ladies, that after a few miles' run Henry Vine stood up in the bows, and, keeping a sharp look out for certain rocks, shouted his orders to Leslie as to the steering of the boat, and finally, as they neared the frowning cliffs, suddenly lowered the sail and took up the oars.

They were abreast of a large cave where the swift grey-winged pigeons flew in and out over the swelling waves which seemed to glide slowly on and on, to rush rapidly after the birds and disappear in the gloom beneath the arch. Then there was a low echoing boom as the wave struck far away in the cave, and came back hissing and whispering to be merged in the next.

"Going to row close in?" said Leslie, scanning the weird, forbidding place rather anxiously.

"Going to row right in," said Harry, with a contemptuous smile. "Not afraid, are you?"

"Can't say," replied Leslie. "A little perhaps. The place does not look tempting. Do you think it is safe to go in?"

"Like to land on the rock till we come back?" said Harry instead of answering the question.

"No," said Leslie quietly; "but do you think it wise to row in there?"

"You're not afraid, are you, girls?"

"I always feel nervous till we are outside again," said Louise quietly.

"But you will be very careful, Harry," said Madelaine.

"Think I want to drown myself?" he said bitterly. "I might just as well p'r'aps, as go back to that dismal office in London, to slave from morning till night."

He rested upon his oars for a minute or two, and perhaps from the reflection of the masses of ferns which fringed the arch of the cavern, and which were repeated in the clear waters, Victor Pradelle's face seemed to turn of a sickly green while one hand grasped the edge of the boat with spasmodic force.

"Now then, hold tight," said the rower, as a swell came from seaward, running right in and raising the boat so that by skilful management she was borne forward, right beneath the arch and then away into the depths of the cavern, leaving her rocking upon the watery floor, while it sped on away into the darkness where it broke with a booming noise which echoed, and whispered, and died away in sobs and sighs, and strange hisses and gasps, as if the creatures which made the cavern their lair had been disturbed, and were settling down again to sleep.

"There, Vic," cried Harry, "what do you think of this?"

Pradelle was holding tightly by the side of the boat, and gazing uneasily round.

"Think? Yes: very wild and wonderful," he said huskily.

"Wonderful? I should think it is. Goes in ever so far, only it isn't wide enough for the boat."

Leslie looked back at the mouth, fringed with the fronds of ferns, and at the lovely picture it frame a of sunny amethystine sea; then at the rocky sides, dripping with moisture, and here of a rich metallic green, there covered with glistening weeds of various shades of olive-green and brown.

"Ahoy – oy!" shouted Harry with all his might, and at the same moment he let his oars splash in the water.

Pradelle leaped to his feet as there came a strange echo and a whirring rush, and a dozen pigeons swept past their heads from out of the depths of the water cave, and away into the brilliant sunshine.

"Oh, if I had a gun," cried Pradelle, to hide his confusion.

"What for – to make a miss?" sneered Harry. "Now then, out with those cans. Fill every one, and I'll try and knock off a few anemones for the governor."

As he spoke he laid in his oars, picked a hammer and chisel from out of the locker in the forepart of the boat, and then worked it along by the side of the great cave, as from out of the clefts and crannies above and beneath the water he searched for the semi-gelatinous sea-anemones that clustered among barnacles, and the snail-like whorl molluscs whose home was on the weedy rocks.

The girls aided all they could, pointing out and receiving in the tins a many-rayed creature, which closed up till it resembled a gout of blood; now, still adhering to the rock which Harry chipped off, a beautiful *Actinia* of olive-green with gem-like spots around the mouth and amid its fringe of turquoise blue.

Duncan Leslie eagerly lent his help; and, not to be behindhand, Pradelle took up the boat-hook and held on, but with the smoothness and care of a sleek tom-cat, he carefully avoided wetting his hands.

"Nothing very new here," said Harry at last, as the waves that kept coming in made the boat rise and fall gently; "there's another better cave than this close by. Let's go there; or what do you say to stopping here and having a smoke till the tide has risen and shut us in?"

"Is there any risk of that?" said Pradelle anxiously.

"Oh, yes, plenty."

Leslie glanced at Louise and thought that it would be very pleasant to play protector all through the darkness till the way was open and daylight shone again. He caught her eyes more than once and tried to read them as he wondered whether there was hope for him; but so surely as she found him gazing rather wistfully at her, she hurriedly continued the collecting, pointing out one of the beautiful objects they sought beneath the surface, and asking Pradelle to shift the boat a little farther along.

"All my vanity and conceit," said Leslie to himself with a sigh; "and why should I worry myself about a woman? I have plenty to do without thinking of love and marriage. If I did, why not begin to dream about pleasant, straightforward Madelaine Van Heldre? There can be nothing more than a friendly feeling towards Master Harry here."

"Now then, sit fast," cried the latter object of his thoughts; "and if we are capsized, girls, I'll look after you, Maddy. Pradelle here will swim out with Louie, and I shall leave you to bring out the boat, Leslie. You can swim, can't you?"

"A little," said the young man drily.

Pradelle looked rather more green, for the light within the cave was of a peculiar hue, and he began to think uneasily of bathing out of a machine at Margate, holding on to a rope, and also of the effort he once made to swim across a tepid bath in town. But he laughed heartily directly after as he realised that it was all banter on his friend's part, while, in spite of himself, he gave a sigh of relief as, riding out on the crest of a broken wave, they once more floated in the sunshine.

Ten minutes' careful rowing among the rocks, which were now four or five feet beneath the water, now showing their weedy crests above, brought them to the mouth of another cave, only approachable from the sea, and sending the boat in here, the collection went on till it was deemed useless to take more specimens, when they passed out again, greatly to Pradelle's satisfaction.

"How's time?" said Harry. "Half-past four? Plenty of time. High tea at six. What shall we do – sail right out and tack, or row along here in the smooth water among the rocks?"

"Row slowly back," said Louise: and Pradelle took an oar.

At the end of half a mile he ceased rowing.

"Tired?" said Harry.

"No; I have a blister on my hand; that's all."

"Come and pull, Leslie," said Harry. "You'd better steer, Louie, and don't send us on to a rock."

The exchange of places was made, and once more they began to progress with the boat, travelling far more swiftly as they glided on close in to the mighty cliff which rose up overhead, dappled with mossy grey and patches of verdure, dotted with yellow and purple blooms.

"To go on like this for ever!" thought Leslie as he swung to and fro, his strong muscles making the water foam as he dipped his oar, watching Louise as she steered, and seemed troubled and ready to converse with Pradelle whenever she caught his eye.

"Starn all!" shouted Harry suddenly, as about three miles from home they came abreast of a narrow opening close to the surface of the water.

The way of the boat was checked, and Harry looked at the hole into which the tide ran and ebbed as the swell rose and fell, now nearly covering the opening, now leaving it three or four feet wide.

"Bound to say there are plenty of good specimens in there," he said. "What do you say, Vic, shall we go in?"

"Impossible."

"Not it. Bound to say that's the opening to quite a large zorn. I've seen the seals go in there often."

"Has it ever been explored?" said Leslie, who felt interested in the place.

"No; it's nearly always covered. It's only at low tides like this that the opening is bared. If the girls were not here I'd go in."

"How?" said Pradelle.

"How? – why swim in."

"And be shut up by the tide and drowned," said Louise.

"Good thing too," said Harry, with the same look of a spoiled boy at Madelaine. "I don't find life go very jolly. Boat wouldn't pass in there."

He had risen from his seat and was standing with one foot on the gunwale, the other on the thwart, gazing curiously at the dark orifice some forty yards away, the boat rising and falling as it swayed here and there on the waves, which ran up to the face of the cliff and back, when just as the attention of all was fixed upon the little opening, from which came curious hissing and rushing noises, the boat rose on a good-sized swell, and as it sank was left upon the top of a weedy rock which seemed to rise like the shaggy head of a huge sea-monster beneath the keel.

There was a bump, a grinding, grating noise, a shout and a heavy splash, and the boat, after narrowly escaping being capsized, floated once more in deep water; but Harry had lost his balance, gone overboard, and disappeared.

Madelaine uttered a cry of horror, and then for a few moments there was a dead silence, during which Louise sat with blanched face, parted lips, and dilated eyes, gazing at the spot where her brother had disappeared. Pradelle held on by the side of the boat, and Leslie sprang up, rapidly stripped off coat and vest, and stood ready to plunge in.

Those moments seemed indefinitely prolonged, and a terrible feeling of despair began to attack the occupants of the boat as thought after thought, each of the blackest type, flashed through their brains. He had been sucked down by the undertow, and was being carried out to sea – he was entangled in the slimy sea-wrack, and could not rise again – he had struck his head against the rocks, stunned himself, and gone down like a stone, and so on.

Duncan Leslie darted one glance at the pale and suffering face of the sister, placed a foot on the gunwale, and was in the act of gathering himself up to spring from the boat, when Harry's head rose thirty yards away.

"Ahoy!" he shouted, as he began to paddle and tread water. "Hallo, Leslie, ready for a bathe? Come out! Water's beautiful. Swim you back to the harbour."

There was a long-drawn breath in the boat which sounded like a groan, as the terrible mental pressure was removed, and the young man began to swim easily and slowly towards his friends.

"Mind she doesn't get on another rock, Leslie," he cried.

"Here, catch hold of this," cried Pradelle, whose face was ashy, and he held out the boat-hook as far as he could reach.

"Thank ye," said Harry mockingly, and twenty yards away. "Little farther, please. What a lovely day for a swim!"

"Harry, pray come into the boat," cried Louise excitedly.

"What for? Mind the porpoise."

He gave a few sharp blows on the water with his hands, raising himself up and turning right over, dived, his legs just appearing above the surface, and then there was an eddy where he had gone down.

"Don't be frightened," whispered Madelaine, whose voice sounded a little husky.

"Here we are again!" cried Harry, reappearing close to the boat and spluttering the water from his lips, as with all the gaiety of a boy he looked mirthfully at the occupants of the boat. "Any orders for pearls, ladies?"

"Don't be foolish, Harry," said Louise, as he swam close to them.

"Not going to be. I say, Leslie, take the boat-hook away from that fellow, or he'll be making a hole in the bottom of the boat."

As he spoke, he laid a hand upon the gunwale and looked merrily from one to the other.

"Don't touch me, girls. I'm rather damp," he said. "I say, what a capital bathing dress flannels make!"

"Shall I help you in?" said Leslie.

"No, thank ye, I'm all right. As I am in, I may as well have a swim."

"No, no, Harry, don't be foolish," cried Louise.

"There, you'd better hitch a rope round me, and tow me behind, or I shall swamp the boat."

"Harry! what are you going to do?" cried Madelaine, as he loosened his hold of the gunwale, and began to swim away.

"Wait a bit and you'll see," he cried. "Leslie, you take care of the boat. I shan't be long."

"But Harry – "

"All right, I tell you."

"Where are you going?"

"In here," he shouted back, and he swam straight to the low opening at the foot of the massive granite cliff, paddled a little at the mouth till the efflux of water was over, and then as the fresh wave came, he took a few strokes, gave a shout, and to the horror of the two girls seemed to be sucked right into the opening.

As he disappeared, he gave another shout, a hollow strange echoing "Good-bye," and a few moments after there was a run back of the water and a hollow roar, and it needed very little exercise of the imagination to picture the rugged opening as the mouth of some marine monster into which the young man had passed.

Chapter Three
Discords

"Don't be alarmed," said Leslie quietly, "I daresay it is like one of the zorns yonder, only the mouth is too narrow for a boat."

"But it is so foolish," said Louise, giving him a grateful look.

"Yes, but he swims so easily and well, there is nothing to mind. What are you going to do, Mr Pradelle?"

"Work the boat close up so as to help him," said Pradelle shortly.

"No, don't do that. We have had one escape from a capsize. We must keep out here in deep water."

Pradelle frowned.

"I think I know what I'm about, sir," he said sharply; "do you suppose I am going to sit here when my friend may be in danger?"

"I have no doubt you know what you are about in London, sir," said Leslie quietly, "but this is not a pavement in the Strand, and it is not safe to take the boat closer in."

Pradelle was about to make some retort, but Louise interposed.

"Try if you can get nearer the mouth of that dreadful place, Mr Leslie," she said, "I am getting terribly alarmed."

Leslie seated himself, took the oars, turned the boat, and backed slowly and cautiously in, holding himself ready to pull out again at the slightest appearance of danger. For the sea rushed against the rocky barrier with tremendous force, while even on this calm day, the swing and wash and eddy amongst the loose rocks was formidable.

By skilful management Leslie backed the boat to within some thirty feet of the opening; but the position was so perilous that he had to pull out for a few yards to avoid a couple of rocks, which in the movement of the clear water seemed to be rising toward them from time to time, and coming perilously near.

Then he shouted, but there was no answer. He shouted again and again, but there was no reply, and a chill of horror, intensifying from moment to moment, came upon all.

"Harry! Harry!" cried Louise, now raising her voice, as Madelaine crept closer to her and clutched her hand.

But there was no reply. No sound but the rush and splash and hiss of the waters as they struck the rocks, and came back broken from the attack.

"What folly!" muttered Leslie, with his face growing rugged. Then quickly, "I don't think you need feel alarmed; I dare say he has swum in for some distance, and our voices do not reach him. Stop a moment."

He suddenly remembered a little gold dog-whistle at his watch-chain, and raising it to his lips he blew long and shrilly, till the ear piercing note echoed along the cliff, and the gulls came floating lazily overhead and peering wonderingly down.

"I say, Harry, old man, come out now," cried Pradelle, and then rising from his seat, he placed his hands on either side of his lips, and uttered the best imitation he could manage of the Australian call, "Coo-ey! Coo-ey!"

There were echoes and whispers, and the rush and hiss of the water. Then two or three times over there came from out of the opening a peculiar dull hollow sound, such as might be made by some great animal wallowing far within.

"Mr Leslie," said Louise in a low appealing voice, "what shall we do?"

"Oh, wait a few minutes, my dear Miss Vine," interposed Pradelle, hastily. "He'll be out directly. I assure you there is no cause for alarm."

Leslie frowned, but his face coloured directly, for his heart gave a great throb.

Louise paid not the slightest heed to Pradelle's words, but kept her limpid eyes fixed appealingly upon Leslie's, as if she looked to him for help.

"I hardly know what to do," he said in a low business-like tone. "I dare not leave you without some one to manage the boat, or I would go in."

"Yes, yes, pray go!" she said excitedly, "Never mind us."

"We could each take an oar and keep the boat here," said Madelaine quickly, "we can both row."

"No, really; I'll manage the boat," said Pradelle.

"I think you had better leave it to the ladies, Mr Pradelle," said Leslie coldly. "They know the coast."

"Well really, sir, I – "

"This is no time for interference," cried Madelaine with a flush of excitement, and she caught hold of an oar. "Louie dear, quick!"

The other oar was resigned, and as Leslie passed aft, he gave Louise one quick look, reading in her face, as he believed, trust and thankfulness and then dread.

"No, no, Mr Leslie, I hardly dare let you go," she faltered.

Plash!

The boat was rolling and dancing on the surface, relieved of another burden, and Duncan Leslie was swimming toward the opening.

The two girls dipped their oars from time to time, for their seaside life had given them plenty of experience of the management of a boat; and as Pradelle sat looking sulky and ill-used, they watched the swimmer as he too timed his movements, so that he gradually approached, and then in turn was sucked right into the weird water-way, which might lead another into some terrible chasm from which there was no return.

A low hoarse sigh, as if one had whispered while suffering pain the word "Hah!" And then with dilated eyes the two girls sat watching the black opening for what seemed a terrible interval of time, before, to their intense relief, there came a shout of laughter, followed by the appearance of Leslie, who swam out looking stern, and closely followed by Harry.

"It is not the sort of fun I can appreciate, Mr Vine," said Leslie, turning as he reached the stern of the boat.

"Well, I know that," cried Harry mockingly. "Scotchmen never can appreciate a joke."

"There, ladies, what did I tell you?" cried Pradelle triumphantly.

There was no reply, and the visitor from London winced, for his presence in the boat seemed to be thoroughly *de trop*.

"Miss Vine – Miss Van Heldre," said Leslie quietly, "will you change places now? Get right aft and we will climb in over the bows."

"But the boat?" faltered Louise, whose emotion was so great that she could hardly trust herself to speak.

"We'll see to that," said Leslie. "Your brother and I will row back."

It did not seem to trouble him now that the two girls took their places, one on either side of Pradelle, while as soon as they were seated he climbed in streaming with water, seating himself on the gunwale, Harry climbing in on the other side.

"Harry, how could you?" cried Louise, now, with an indignant look.

"Easily enough," he said, seating himself calmly. "Thought you'd lost me?"

He looked at Madelaine as he spoke, but she turned her face away biting her lips, and it was Louise who replied:

"I did not think you could have been so cruel."

"Cruel be hanged!" he retorted. "Thought I'd find out whether I was of any consequence after all. You people seem to say I'm of none. Did they begin to cry, Vic?"

"Oh, I'm not going to tell tales," said Pradelle with a smile.

"I should have had a pipe in there, only my matches had got wet."

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Pradelle, and the mirth sounded strange there beneath the rocks, and a very decided hiss seemed to come from out of the low rugged opening.

"Try again, Vic," said Harry mockingly, but his friend made no reply, for he was staring hard and defiantly at Leslie, who, as he handled his oar, gave him a calmly contemptuous look that galled him to the quick.

"Ready, Leslie?" said Harry.

"Yes."

The oars dipped, Leslie pulling stroke, and the boat shot out from its dangerous position among the rocks, rose at a good-sized swelling wave, topped it, seemed to hang as in a balance for a moment, and then glided down and went forward in response to a few vigorous strokes.

"Never mind the tiller, Vic," said Harry; "let it swing. We can manage without that. All right, girls?"

There was no reply.

"Sulky, eh? Well, I'd a good mind to stop in. Sorry you got so wet, Leslie."

Still no reply.

"Cheerful party, 'pon my word!" said Harry, with a contemptuous laugh. "Hope no one objects to my smoking."

He looked hard at Madelaine, but she avoided his gaze, and he uttered a short laugh.

"Got a cigar to spare, Vic?"

"Yes, dear boy, certainly."

"Pass it along then and the lights. Hold hard a minute, Leslie."

The latter ceased rowing as Pradelle handed a cigar and the matches to his friend.

"Will you take one, Mr Leslie?" said Pradelle.

"Thanks, no," said Leslie quietly, and to the would-be donor's great relief, for he had only two left. Then once more the rowing was resumed, Pradelle striking a match to light a cigar for himself, and then recollecting himself and throwing the match away.

"Well, we're enjoying ourselves!" cried Harry after they had proceeded some distance in silence. "I say, Vic, say something!"

Pradelle had been cudgelling his brains for the past ten minutes, but the more he tried to find something *à propos* the more every pleasant subject seemed to recede.

In fact it would have been difficult just then for the most accomplished talker to have set all present at their ease, for Harry's folly had moved his sister so that she feared to speak lest she should burst into a hysterical fit of weeping, and Madelaine, as she sat there with her lips compressed, felt imbued with but one desire, which took the form of the following words:

"Oh, how I should like to box his ears!"

"Getting dry, Leslie?" said Harry after a long silence.

"Not very," was the reply.

"Ah well, there's no fear of our catching cold pulling like this."

"Not the slightest," said Leslie coldly; then there was another period of silence, during which the water seemed to patter and slap the bows of the boat, while the panorama of rock and foam and glittering cascade, as the crags were bathed by the Atlantic swell, and it fell back broken, seemed perfectly fresh and new as seen from another point of view.

At last Harry, after trying two or three times more to start a conversation, said shortly —

"Well, this is my last day at home, and I think I ought to say, 'Thank goodness!' This is coming out for a pleasant sail, and having to row back like a galley-slave! Oh, I beg your pardon, ladies! All my mistake. I am highly complimented. All this glumminess is because I am going away."

He received such a look of reproach that he uttered an angry ejaculation and began to pull so hard that Leslie had to second his movement to keep the boat's head straight for the harbour, whose farther point soon after came in sight, with two figures on the rocks at the end.

"Papa along with Uncle Luke," said Louise softly.

"Eh?" said Harry sharply; "the old man still fishing?"

"Yes," said Louise rather coldly; "and, Maddy, dear, is not that Mr Van Heldre?"

Madelaine shaded her eyes from the western sun, where it was sinking fast, and nodded.

"Where shall we land you?" said Harry sulkily now, "at the point, or will you go up the harbour?"

"If there is not too much sea on, at the point," said Louise gravely.

"Oh, I dare say we can manage that without wetting your plumes," said the young man contemptuously; and after another ten minutes' pulling they reached the harbour mouth and made for the point, where Uncle Luke stood leaning on his rod watching the coming boat, in company with a tall grey man with refined features, who had taken off the straw hat he wore to let the breeze play through his closely-cut hair, while from time to time he turned to speak either to Uncle Luke or to the short thick set man who, with his pointed white moustache and closely clipped peaked beard, looked in his loose holland blouse like a French officer taking his vacation at the seaside.

"Mind how you come," said the latter in a sharp, decided way. "Watch your time, Leslie. Back in, my lad. Can you manage it, girls?"

"Oh, yes," they cried confidently. "Sit still then till the boat's close in, then one at a time. You first, my dear."

This to Louise, as he stepped actively down the granite rocks to a narrow natural shelf, which was now bare, now several inches deep in water.

"If we manage it cleverly we can get you ashore without a wetting."

The warnings were necessary, for the tide ran fast, and the Atlantic swell made the boat rise and fall, smooth as the surface was.

"Now then," cried the French-looking gentleman, giving his orders as if he were an officer in command, "easy, Harry Vine; back a little, Mr Leslie. Be ready, Louie, my dear. That's it: a little more. I have you. Bravo!"

The words came slowly, and with the latter there was a little action; as he took the hands outstretched to him, when the boat nearly grazed the rock, there was a light spring, the girl was on the narrow shelf, and the boat, in answer to a touch of the oars, was half-a-dozen yards away rising and falling on the swell.

"Give me your hand, my dear," said the tall grey gentleman, leaning down.

"Oh, I can manage, papa," she cried, and the next moment she was by his side. Looking back, "Thank you, Mr Van Heldre," she said.

"Eh? All right, my child. Now, Maddy. Steady, my lads. Mind that ledge; don't get her under there. Bravo! that's right. Now, my girl. Well done."

Madelaine leaped to his side, and was in turn assisted to the top, she accepting the tall gentleman's help, while Uncle Luke, with his hands resting on his rod, which he held with the butt on the rock, stood grimly looking down at the boat.

"I think I'll land here," said Leslie. "You don't want my help with the boat."

"Oh, no; we can manage," said Harry sourly; and Leslie gave up his oar and leaped on to the rock as the boat was again backed in.

"That chap looks quite green," said Uncle Luke with a sneering laugh. "Our London friend been poorly, Louie?"

Before she could answer the tall gentleman cried to those in the boat —

"Don't be long, my boy. Tea will be waiting."

"All right, dad. Lay hold of this oar, Vic, and let's get her moored."

"Why, you're wet, Mr Leslie," said the tall gentleman, shaking hands.

"Only sea-water, sir. It's nothing."

"But," said the former speaker, looking quickly from one to the other, and his handsome thoughtful face seemed troubled, "has there been anything wrong?"

"Harry fell in," said Louise, speaking rather quickly and excitedly; "and, Mr Leslie – "

"Ah!" ejaculated the tall gentleman excitedly.

"It was nothing, sir," said Leslie hastily. "He swam in among the rocks – into a cave, and he was a long time gone, and I went after him; that's all."

"But, my dear boy, you must make haste and change your things."

"I shall not be hurt, Mr Vine."

"And – and – look here. Make haste and come on then to us. There will be a meal ready. It's Harry's last day at home."

"Oh, thank you, Mr Vine; I don't think I'll come to-night."

"But you have been one of the party so far, and I should – Louie, my dear – "

"We shall be very glad if you will come, Mr Leslie," said Louise, in response to her father's hesitating words and look, and there was a calm, ingenious invitation in her words that made the young man's heart throb.

"I, too, shall be very glad," he said quietly.

"That's right, that's right," said Mr Vine, laying one of his long thin white hands on the young man's arm: and then changing its position, so that he could take hold of one of the buttons on his breast. Then turning quickly: "Madelaine's coming, of course."

"Louie says so," said the girl quietly.

"To be sure; that's right, my dear; that's right," said the old man, beaming upon her as he took one of her hands to hold and pat it in his. "You'll come too, Van?"

"I? No, no. I've some bills of lading to look over."

"Yah!" ejaculated Uncle Luke with a snarl.

"Yes; bills of lading, you idle old cynic. I can't spend my time fishing."

"Pity you can't," said Uncle Luke. "Money, money, always money."

"Hear him, Mr Leslie?" said Van Heldre smiling. "Are you disposed to follow his teachings?"

"I'm afraid not," said Leslie.

"Not he," snarled Uncle Luke.

"But you will come, Van?" said Mr Vine.

"My dear fellow, I wish you would not tempt me. There's work to do. Then there's my wife."

"Bring Mrs Van Heldre too," said Louise, laying her hand on his.

"Ah, you temptress," he cried merrily.

"It's Harry's last evening," said Mr Vine.

"Look here," said Van Heldre, "will you sing me my old favourite if I come, Louie?"

"Yes; and you shall have a duet too."

"Ah, never mind the duet," said Van Heldre laughingly; "I can always hear Maddy at home. There, out of pocket again by listening to temptation. I'll come."

"Come and join us too, Luke," said Mr Vine.

"No!" snapped the old fisher.

"Do, uncle," said Louise.

"Shan't," he snarled, stooping to pick up his heavy basket.

"But it's Harry's last – "

"Good job too," snarled the old man.

"I'm going your way, Mr Luke Vine," said Leslie. "Let me carry the basket?"

"Thank ye; I'm not above carrying my own fish," said the old man sharply; and he raised and gave the basket a swing to get it upon his back, but tottered with the weight, and nearly fell on the uneven rocks.

"There, it is too heavy for you," said Leslie, taking possession of the basket firmly; and Louise Vine's eyes brightened.

"Be too heavy for you when you get as old as I am," snarled the old man.

"I daresay," said Leslie quietly; and they went off together.

"Luke's in fine form this afternoon," said Van Heldre, nodding and smiling.

"Yes," said the brother, looking after him wistfully. "We shall wait till you come, Mr Leslie," he shouted, giving vent to an afterthought.

The young man turned and waved his hand.

"Rather like Leslie," said Van Heldre. "Maddy, you'll have to set your cap at him."

Madelaine looked up at him and laughed.

"Yes, poor Luke!" said Mr Vine thoughtfully, as he stooped and picked up a small net and a tin can, containing the treasures he had found in sundry rock pools. "I'm afraid we are a very strange family, Van," he added, as they walked back towards the little town.

"Very, old fellow," said his friend smiling. "I'll be with you before Leslie gets back, wife and the necessary change of dress permitting."

Chapter Four
A Thunderbolt

George Vine, gentleman, as he was set down in the parish books and the West-Country directory, lived in a handsome old granite-built residence that he had taken years before, when, in obedience to his sister's wish, he had retired from the silk trade a wealthy man. But there he had joined issue with the lady in question, obstinately refusing to make France his home and selecting the house above named in the old Cornish port for two reasons: one, to be near his old friend Godfrey Van Heldre, a well-to-do merchant who carried on rather a mixed business, dealing largely in pilchards, which he sent in his own ships to the Italian ports, trading in return in such produce of the Levant as oranges, olives, and dried fruit; the other, so that he could devote himself to the branch of natural history, upon which he had grown to be an authority so great that his work upon the Actiniadae of our coast was looked forward to with no little expectation by a good many people, in addition to those who wrote F.Z.S. at the end of their names.

The pleasant social meal known as high tea was spread in the long low oak-panelled dining-room, whose very wide bay window looked right over the town from its shelf upon the huge granite cliffs, and far away westward from whence came the gales which beat upon the old mansion, whose granite sides and gables had turned them off for the past two hundred years.

It was a handsomely furnished room, thoroughly English, and yet with a suggestion of French in the paintings of courtly-looking folk, which decorated the panels above the old oak sideboard and dressers, upon which stood handsome old chased cups, flagons and salvers battered and scratched, but rich and glistening old silver all the same, and looking as if the dents and scratches were only the natural puckers and furrows such venerable pieces of plate should possess.

There was another suggestion of the foreign element, too, in the glazing of the deeply embayed window, for right across and between all the mullions, the leaden lattice panes gave place, about two-thirds of the way up, to a series of artistically painted armorial bearings in stained glass, shields and helmets with their crests and supporters, and beneath the escutcheon in the middle, a ribbon with triple curve and fold bearing the words *Roy et Foy*.

The furniture had been selected to be thoroughly in keeping with the antiquity of the mansion, and the old oak chairs and so much of the table as could be seen for the long fine white linen cloth, was of the oldest and darkest oak.

The table was spread with the abundant fare dear to West-Country folk; fruit and flowers gave colour, and the thick yellow cream and white sugar were piled high in silver bowls. The great tea urn was hissing upon its stand, the visitors had arrived, and the host was dividing his time between fidgeting to and fro from the door to Van Heldre, who was leaning up against one of the mullions of the great bay window talking to Leslie upon subjects paramount in Cornwall – fish and the yielding of the mines.

The young people were standing about talking, Louise with her hand resting on the chair where sat a pleasant-looking, rosy little woman with abundant, white hair, and her mittened hands crossed over the waist of her purple velvet gown enriched with good French lace.

"Margaret Vine's keeping us waiting a long time this evening," she said.

"Mamma!" said Madelaine reproachfully.

"Well, my dear, it's the simple truth. And so you go back to business to-morrow, Harry?"

"Yes, Mrs Van Heldre. Slave again."

"Nonsense, my boy. Work's good for every one. I'm sure your friend, Mr Pradelle, thinks so," she continued, appealing to that gentleman.

"Well," he said, with an unpleasant laugh, "nobody left me a fortune, so I'm obliged to say yes."

"Ah, here she is!" said Mr Vine, with a sigh of relief, as the door opened, and with almost theatrical effect a rather little sharp-looking woman of about sixty entered, gazing quickly round and pausing just within the room to make an extremely formal old-fashioned courtesy – sinking nearly to the ground as if she were a telescopic figure disappearing into the folds of the stiff rich brocade silk dress, of a wonderful pattern of pink and green, and cut in a fashion probably popular at Versailles a hundred years ago. She did not wear powder, but her white hair turned up and piled upon her head after the fashion of that blooming period, produced the same effect; and as she gave the fan she held a twitch which spread it open with a loud rattling noise, she seemed, with her haughty carriage, handsome aquiline face with long chin, that appeared to have formed the pattern for her stomacher, like one of the paintings on the panelled wall suddenly come to life, and feeling strange at finding herself among that modern company.

"I hope you have not waited for me," she said, smiling and speaking in a high-pitched musical voice. "Louise, my child, you should not. Ah!" she continued, raising her gold-rimmed eye-glass to her thin arched nose and dropping it directly, "Mrs Van Heldre, Mr Van Heldre, pray be seated. Mr Victor Pradelle, will you be so good?"

The young man had gone through the performance several times before, and he was in waiting ready to take the tips of the gloved fingers extended to him, and walking over the thick Turkey carpet with the lady to the other end of the room in a way that seemed to endow him with a court suit and a sword, and suggested the probability of the couple continuing their deportment walk to the polished oak boards beyond the carpet, and then after sundry bows and courtesies going through the steps of the *menuet de la cour*.

As a matter of fact, Pradelle led the old girl, as he called her, to the seat she occupied at the end of the table, when she condescended to leave her room; the rest of the company took their seats, and the meal began.

Harry had tried to ensconce himself beside Madelaine, but that young lady had made a sign to Duncan Leslie, who eagerly took the chair beside her, one which he coveted, for it was between her and Louise, now busy with the tea-tray; and in a sulky manner, Harry obeyed the motion of the elderly lady's fan.

"That's right, Henri, *mon cher*," she said, smiling, "come and sit by me. I shall miss you so, my darling, when you are gone back to that horrible London, and that wretched business."

"Don't, don't, don't, Margaret, my dear," said Mr Vine, good-humouredly. "You will make him unhappy at having to leave home."

"I hope so, George," said the lady with dignity, and pronouncing his Christian name with the softness peculiar to the French tongue; "and," she added with a smile, "especially as we have company, will you oblige me – Marguerite, if you please?"

"Certainly, certainly, my dear."

"Is that Miss Van Heldre?" said the lady, raising her glass once more. "I beg your pardon, my child: I hope you are well."

"Quite well, thank you, Miss Marguerite Vine," said Madelaine quietly, and her bright young face looked perfectly calm, though there was a touch of sarcasm in her tone.

"Louise, dearest, my tea a little sweeter, please."

The meal progressed, and the stiffness produced by the *entrée* of the host's sister – it was her own term for her appearance – soon wore off, the lady being very quiet as she discussed the viands placed before her with a very excellent appetite. Mrs Van Heldre prattled pleasantly on, with plenty of homely commonsense, to her host. Van Heldre threw in a word now and then, joked Louise and his daughter, and made a wrinkle on his broad forehead, which was his way of making a note.

The note he made was that a suspicion which had previously entered his brain was correct.

"He's taken with her," he said to himself, as he glanced at Louise and then at Duncan Leslie, who seemed to be living in a dream. As a rule he was an energetic, quick, and sensible man; on this

occasion he was particularly silent, and when he spoke to either Madelaine or Louise, it was in a softened voice.

Van Heldre looked at his daughter.

Madelaine looked at her father, and they thoroughly read each other's thoughts, the girl's bright grey eyes saying to him as plainly as could be —

"You are quite right."

"Well," said Van Heldre to himself, as he placed a spoonful of black currant jam on his plate, and then over that two piled-up table-spoonfuls of clotted cream – "she's as nice and true-hearted a girl as ever stepped, and Leslie's a man, every inch of him. I'd have said *yes* in a moment if he had wanted my girl. I'm glad of it; but, poor fellow, what he'll have to suffer from that terrible old woman!"

He had just thought this, and was busy composing a *nocturne* or a *diurne*– probably the latter from its tints of red and yellow – upon his plate, which flowed with jam and cream, when Aunt Marguerite, who had eaten all she wished, began to stir her tea with courtly grace, and raised her voice in continuation of something she had been saying, but it was twenty-four hours before.

"Yes, Mr Pradelle," she said, so that everyone should hear: "my memories of the past are painful, and yet a delight. We old Huguenots are proud of our past."

"You must be, madam."

"And you too," said the lady. "I feel sure that if you will take the trouble you will find that I am right. The Pradelles must have been of our people."

"I'll look into it as soon as I get back to town," said the young man.

Harry gave him a very vulgar wink.

"Do," said Aunt Marguerite. "By the way, I don't think I told you that though my brother persists in calling himself Vine, our name is des Vignes, and we belong to one of the oldest families in Auvergne."

"Yes, that's right, Mr Pradelle," said the host, nodding pleasantly; "but when a cruel persecution drove us over here, and old England held out her arms to us, and we found a kindly welcome – "

"My dear George!" interposed Aunt Marguerite.

"Let me finish, my dear," said Mr Vine, good-temperedly. "It's Mr Pradelle's last evening here."

"For the present, George, for the present."

"Ah, yes, of course, for the present, and I should like him to hear my version too."

Aunt Marguerite tapped the back of her left hand with her fan impatiently.

"We found here a hearty welcome and a home," continued Mr Vine, "and we said we can never – we will never – return to the land of fire and the sword; and then we, some of us poor, some of us well-to-do, settled down among our English brothers, and thanked God that in this new Land of Canaan we had found rest."

"And my dear Mr Pradelle," began Aunt Marguerite, hastily; but Mr Vine was started, and he talked on.

"In time we determined to be, in spite of our French descent, English of the English, for our children's sake, and we worked with them, and traded with them; and, to show our faith in them, and to avoid all further connection and military service in the country we had left, we even anglicised our names. My people became Vines; the D'Aubigneys, Daubney or Dobbs; the Boileaus, Drinkwater; the Guipets, Guppy. Vulgarising our names, some people say; but never mind, we found rest, prosperity and peace."

"Quite right, Mr Pradelle," said Van Heldre, "and in spite of my name and my Huguenot descent, I say, thank Heaven I am now an Englishman."

"No, no, no, no. Mr Van Heldre," said Aunt Marguerite throwing herself back, and looking at him with a pitying smile. "You cannot prove your Huguenot descent."

"Won't contradict you, ma'am," said Van Heldre. "Capital jam this, Louise."

"You must be of Dutch descent," said Aunt Marguerite.

"I went carefully over my father's pedigree, Miss Marguerite," said Madelaine quietly.

"Indeed, my child?" said the lady, raising her brows.

"And I found without doubt that the Venelttes fled during the persecutions to Holland, where they stayed for half a century, and changed their names to Van Heldre before coming to England."

"Quite right," said Van Heldre in a low voice. "Capital cream."

"Ah, yes," said Aunt Margaret; "but, my dear child, such papers are often deceptive."

"Yes," said Van Heldre, smiling, "often enough, so are traditions and many of our beliefs about ancestry; but I hope I have enough of what you call the *haute noblesse* in me to give way, and not attempt to argue the point."

"No, Mr Van Heldre," said Aunt Margaret, with a smile of pity and good-humoured contempt; "we have often argued together upon this question, but I cannot sit in silence and hear you persist in that which is not true. No: you have not any Huguenot blood in your veins."

"My dear madam, I feel at times plethoric enough to wish that the old-fashioned idea of being blooded in the spring were still in vogue. I have so much Huguenot blood in my veins, that I should be glad to have less."

Aunt Margaret shook her head, and tightened her lips.

"Low Dutch," she said to herself, "Low Dutch."

Van Heldre read her thoughts in the movement of her lips.

"Don't much matter," he said. "Vine, old fellow, think I shall turn over a new leaf."

"Eh? New leaf?"

"Yes; get a good piece of marsh, make a dam to keep out the sea and take to keeping cows. What capital cream!"

"Yes, Mr Pradelle," continued Aunt Margaret; "we are Huguenots of the Huguenots, and it is the dream of my life that Henri should assert his right to the title his father repudiates, and become Comte des Vignes."

"Ah!" said Pradelle.

"Vigorous steps have only to be taken to wrest the family estates in Auvergne from the usurpers who hold them. I have long fought for this, but so far, I grieve to say, vainly. My brother here has mistaken notions about the respectability of trade, and is content to vegetate."

"Oh, you miserable old vegetable!" said Van Heldre to himself, as he gave his friend a droll look, and shook his head.

"To vegetate in this out-of-the-way place when he should be watching over the welfare of his country, and as a nobleman of that land, striving to stem the tide of democracy. He will not do it; but if I live my nephew Henri shall, as soon as he can be rescued from the degrading influence of trade, and the clerk's stool in an office. Ah, my poor boy, I pity you and I say out boldly that I am not surprised that you should have thrown up post after post in disgust, and refused to settle down to such sordid wretchedness."

"My dear Marguerite! our visitors."

"I must speak, George. Mr Van Heldre loves trade."

"I do, ma'am."

"Therefore he cannot feel with me."

"Well, never mind, my dear. Let some one else be Count des Vignes, only let me be in peace, and don't fill poor Harry's head with that stuff just before he's leaving home to go up to the great city, where he will I am sure redeem the follies of the past, and prove himself a true man. Harry, my dear boy, we'll respect Aunt Margaret's opinion; but we will not follow them out. Van, old fellow, Leslie, Mr Pradelle, a glass of wine. We'll drink Harry's health. All filled? That's right. Harry, my boy, a true honest man is nature's nobleman. God speed you, my boy; and His blessing be upon all your works. Health and happiness to you, my son!"

"Amen," said Van Heldre; and the simple old-fashioned health was drunk.

"Eh, what's that – letters?" said Vine, as a servant entered the room and handed her master three.

"For you, Mr Pradelle; for you, Harry, and for me. May we open them. Mrs Van Heldre? They may be important."

"Of course, Mr Vine, of course."

Pradelle opened his, glanced at it, and thrust it into his pocket.

Harry did likewise.

Mr Vine read his twice, then dropped it upon the table.

"Papa! – father!" cried Louise, starting from her place, and running round to him as he stood up with a fierce angry light in his eyes, and the table was in confusion.

"Tidings at last of the French estates, Mr Pradelle," whispered Aunt Margaret.

"Papa, is anything wrong? Is it bad news?" cried Louise.

"Wrong! Bad news!" he cried, flashing up from the quiet student to the stern man, stung to the quick by the announcement he had just received. "Van Heldre, old friend, you know how I strove among our connections and friends to place him where he might work and rise and prove himself my son."

"Yes, yes, old fellow, but be calm."

"Father, hush!" whispered Louise, as she glanced at Leslie's sympathetic countenance. "Hush! be calm!"

"How can I be calm!" cried the old man fiercely. "The des Vignes! The family estates! The title! You hear this, Margaret. Here is a fine opportunity for the search to be made – the old castle and the vineyards to be rescued from the occupiers."

"George – brother, what do you mean?" cried the old lady indignantly, and she laid her hand upon her nephew's shoulder, as he sat gazing straight down before him at his plate.

"What do I mean?" cried the indignant father tossing the letter towards her. "I mean that my son is once more dismissed from his situation in disgrace."

Chapter Five
Poison and Antidote

"Now, sir, have the goodness to tell me what you mean to do."

Harry Vine looked at his father, thrust his hands low down into his pockets, leaned back against the mantelpiece, and was silent.

Vine senior leaned over a shallow glass jar, with a thin splinter of wood in his hand, upon which he had just impaled a small fragment of raw, minced periwinkle, and this he thrust down to where a gorgeous sea-anemone sat spread open upon a piece of rock – chipped from out of one of the caverns on the coast.

The anemone's tentacles bristled all around, giving the creature the aspect of a great flower; and down among these the scrap of food was thrust till it touched them, when the tentacles began to curve over, and draw the scrap of shell-fish down toward the large central mouth, in which it soon began to disappear.

Vine senior looked up.

"I have done everything I could for you in the way of education. I have, I am sure, been a most kind and indulgent father. You have had a liberal supply of money, and by the exercise of my own and the personal interests of friends, I have obtained for you posts among our people, any one of which was the beginning of prosperity and position, such as a youth should have been proud to win."

"But they were so unsuitable, father. All connected with trade."

"Shame, Harry! As if there was anything undignified in trade. No matter whether it be trade or profession by which a man honestly earns his subsistence, it is an honourable career. And yet five times over you have been thrown back on my hands in disgrace."

"Well, I can't help it, father; I've done my best."

"Your best!" cried Vine senior, taking up a glass rod, and stirring the water in another glass jar. "It is not true."

"But it's so absurd. You're a rich man."

"If I were ten times as well off, I would not have you waste your life in idleness. You are not twenty-four, and I am determined that you shall take some post. I have seen too much of what follows when a restless, idle young man sits down to wait for his father's money. There, I am busy now. Go and think over what I have said. You must and shall do something. It is now a month since I received that letter. What is Mr Pradelle doing down here again?"

"Come for a change, as any other gentleman would."

"Gentleman?"

"Well, he has a little income of his own, I suppose. If I've been unlucky, that's no reason why I should throw over my friends."

The father looked at the son in a perplexed way, and then fed another sea-anemone, Harry looking on contemptuously.

"Well, sir, you have heard what I said. Go and think it over."

"Yes, father."

The young man left the business-like study, and encountered his sister in the hall.

"Well, Harry?"

"Well, Lou."

"What does papa say?"

"The old story. I'm to go back to drudgery. I think I shall enlist."

"For shame! and you professing to care as you do for Madelaine."

"So I do. I worship her."

"Then prove it by exerting yourself in the way papa wishes. I wonder you have not more spirit."

"And I wonder you have not more decency towards my friends."

Louise coloured slightly.

"Here you profess to believe in my going into trade and drudging behind a counter."

"I did not know that a counter had ever been in question, Harry," said his sister sarcastically.

"Well, a clerk's desk; it's all the same. I believe you would like to see me selling tea and sugar."

"I don't think I should mind."

"No; that's it. I'm to be disgraced while you are so much of the fine lady that you look down on, and quite insult my friend Pradelle."

"Aunt Margaret wishes to speak to you, dear," said Louise gravely. "I promised to tell you as soon as you left the study."

"Then hang it all! why didn't you tell me? Couldn't resist a chance for a lecture. There's only one body here who understands me, and that's aunt. Why even Madelaine's turning against me now, and I believe it is all your doing."

"I have done nothing but what is for your good, Harry."

"Then you own to it? You have been talking to Maddy."

"She came and confided in me, and I believe I spoke the truth."

"Yes, I knew it!" cried Harry warmly. "Then look here, my lady, I'm not blind. I've petted you and been the best of brothers, but if you turn against me I shall turn against you."

"Harry, dear!"

"Ah, that startles you, does it? Then I shall tell the truth, and I'll back up Aunt Margaret through thick and thin."

"What do you mean?"

"What Aunt Margaret says. That long Scotch copper-miner is no match for you."

"Harry!"

"And I shall tell him this, if he comes hanging about here where he sees he is not wanted, and stands in the way of a gentleman of good French Huguenot descent, I'll horsewhip him. There!"

He turned on his heel, and bounded up the old staircase three steps at a time.

"Oh!" ejaculated Louise, as she stood till she heard a sharp tap at her aunt's door and her brother enter and close it after him. "Mr Pradelle, too, of all people in the world!"

"Ah, my darling," cried Aunt Margaret, looking up from the tambour-frame and smoothing out the folds of her antique flowered peignoir. "Bring that stool, and come and sit down here."

Harry bent down and kissed her rather sulkily. Then in a half-contemptuous way he fetched the said stool, embroidered by the lady herself, and placed it at her feet.

"Sit down, my dear."

Harry lowered himself into a very uncomfortable position, while Aunt Margaret placed one arm about his neck, struck a graceful pose, and began to smooth over the young man's already too smooth hair.

"I want to have another very serious talk to you, my boy," she said. "Ah, yes," she continued, raising his chin and looking down in his disgusted face; "how every lineament shows your descent! Henri, I do not mean to die until I have seen you claim your own, and you are received with acclamation as Comte Henri des Vignes."

"I say, aunt, I've just brushed my hair," he protested.

"Yes, dear, but you should not hide your forehead. It is the brow of the des Vignes."

"Oh, all right, auntie, have it your own way. But, I say, have you got any money?"

"Alas! no, my boy."

"I don't mean now. I mean haven't you really got any to leave me in your will?"

There was a far-off look in Aunt Margaret's eyes as she slowly shook her head.

"You will leave me what you have, aunt?"

"If I had hundreds of thousands, you should have all, Henri; but, alas, I have none. I had property once."

"What became of it?"

"Well, my dear, it is a long story and a sad one. I could not tell it to you even in brief, but you are a man now, and must know the meaning of the word love."

"Oh; yes, I know what that means; but I say, don't fidget my hair about so."

"I could not tell you all, Henri. It was thirty years ago. He was a French gentleman of noble descent. His estates had been confiscated, and I was only too glad to place my little fortune at his disposal to recover them."

"And did he?"

"No, my dear. Those were terrible times. He lost all; and with true nobility, he wrote to me that he loved me too well to drag me down to poverty – to share his lot as an exile. I have never seen him since. But I would have shared his lot."

"Humph! Lost it? Then if I had money and tried for our family estates, I might lose it too."

"No, no, my boy; you would be certain to win. Did you do what I told you?"

"Yes, aunt; but I can't use them down here."

"Let me look, my dear; and I do not see why not. You must be bold; and proud of your descent."

"But they'd laugh."

"Let them," said Aunt Margaret grandly. "By-and-by they will bow down. Let me see."

The young man took a card-case from his pocket, on which was stamped in gold a French count's coronet.

"Ah! yes; that is right," said the old lady, snatching the case with trembling fingers, opening it, and taking out a card on which was also printed a coronet. "*Comte Henri des Vignes*," she read, in an excited manner, and with tears in her eyes. "My darling boy! that will carry conviction with it. I am very glad it is done."

"Cost a precious lot, aunt; made a regular hole in your diamond ring."

"Did you sell it?"

"No; Vic Pradelle pawned it for me."

"Ah! he is a friend of whom you may be proud, Henri."

"Not a bad sort of fellow, aunt. He got precious little on the ring, though, and I spent it nearly all."

"Never mind the ring, my boy, and I'm very glad you have the cards. Now for a little serious talk about the future."

"Wish to goodness there was no future," said Harry glumly.

"Would you like to talk about the past, then?" said the old lady playfully.

"Wish there was no past neither," grumbled Harry.

"Then we will talk about the present, my dear, and about – let me whisper to you – love!"

She placed her thin lips close to her nephew's ear, and then held him at arm's length and smiled upon him proudly.

"Love! Too expensive a luxury for me, auntie. I say, you are ruffling my hair so."

"Too expensive, Henri? No, my darling boy; follow my advice, and the richest and fairest of the daughters of France shall sue for your hand, and be proud to take your noble name."

"I say, auntie," he said laughingly, "aren't you laying on the colour rather thick?"

"Not a bit, my darling; and that's why I want to talk to you about your sister's friend."

"What, Maddy?" he said eagerly; "then you approve of it."

"Approve! Bah! you are jesting, my dear. I approve of your making an alliance with a fat Dutch fraülein!"

"Oh, come, aunt!" said Harry, looking nettles; "Madelaine is not Dutch, nor yet fat."

"I know better, my boy. Dutch! Dutch! Dutch! Look at her father and her mother! No, my boy, you could not make an alliance with a girl like that. She might do for a kitchen-maid."

"Auntie, she's a very charming girl."

"Silly boy! Go and travel, and see the daughters of France."

"And she'll be rich some day."

"If she were heiress to millions she could not marry you. As some writer says, eagles do not mate with plump Dutch ducklings. No, Henri, my boy, you must wait."

Harry frowned, but Aunt Margaret paid no heed.

"That is a boyish piece of nonsense, unworthy the Comte des Vignes, my dear boy. But tell me – you have been with your father – what does he say now?"

"The old story. I'm to choose what I will do. I must go to work."

"Poor George!" sighed Aunt Margaret; "always so sordid in his ideas in early life; now that he is wealthy, so utterly wanting in aspirations! Always dallying over some miserable shrimp. He has no more ambition than one of those silly fish over which he sits and dreams. Oh, Henri, my boy, when I look back at what our family has been – right back into the distant ages of French history – valorous knights and noble ladies; and later on, how they graced the court at banquet and at ball, I weep the salt tears of misery to see my brother sink so low, and so careless about the welfare of his boy."

"Ah! well, it's of no use, aunt. I must go and turn somebody's grindstone again."

"No, Henri, it shall not be," cried the old lady, with flashing eyes. "We must think; we must plot and plan. You must get money somehow, so as to carry on the war; and we will have back the estate in Auvergne; and a noble future shall be yours; and – "

"If you please, ma'am, I've brought your lunch," said a voice; and Liza, the maid, who bore a strong resemblance to the fish-woman who had accosted Uncle Luke at the mouth of the harbour, set down a delicately-cooked cutlet and bit of fish, and spread on a snowy napkin, with the accompaniments of plate, glass, and a decanter of sherry.

"Ah! yes, my lunch," said Aunt Margaret, with a sigh. "Go, and think over what I have said, my dear, and we will talk again another time."

"All right, auntie," said the young man, rising slowly; "but it seems to me as if the best thing I could do would be to jump into the sea."

"No, no, Henri," said Aunt Margaret, taking up a silver spoon and shaking it slowly at her nephew, "a des Vignes was ready with his sword in defence of his honour, and to advance his master's cause; but he never dreamed of taking his own life. That, my dear, would be the act of one of the low-born *canaille*. Remember who you are, and wait. I am working for you, and you shall triumph yet. Consult your friend."

"Sometimes I think it's all gammon," said Harry, as he went slowly down-stairs, and out into the garden, "and sometimes it seems as if it would be very jolly. I dare say the old woman is right, and – "

"What are you talking about – muttering aside like the wicked man on the stage?"

"Hullo, Vic! You there?"

"Yes, dear boy. I'm here for want of somewhere better."

"Consult your friend!" Aunt Margaret's last words.

"Been having a cigar?"

"I've been hanging about here this last hour. How is it she hasn't been for a walk?"

"Louie? Don't know. Here, let's go down under the cliff, and find a snug corner, and have a talk over a pipe."

"The latter, if you like; never mind the former. Yes, I will: for I want a few words of a sort."

"What about?" said Harry, as they strolled away.

"Everything. Look here, old fellow; we've been the best of chums ever since you shared my desk."

"Yes, and you shared my allowance."

"Well, chums always do. Then I came down with you, and it was all as jolly as could be, and I was making way fast, in spite of that confounded red-headed porridge-eating fellow. Then came that upset, and I went away. Then you wrote to me in answer to my letter about having a good thing on, and said 'Come down.'"

"And you came," said Harry thoughtfully, "and the good thing turned out a bad thing, as every one does that I join in."

"Well, that was an accident; speculators must have some crust as well as crumb."

"But I get all crust."

"No, I seem to be getting all crust now from your people. Your aunt's right enough, but your father casts his cold shoulder and stale bread at me whenever we meet; and as for a certain lady, she regularly cut me yesterday."

"Well, I can't help that, Vic. You know what I said when you told me you were on that. I said that I couldn't do anything, and that I wouldn't do anything if I could: but that I wouldn't stand in your way if you liked to try."

"Yes, I know what you said," grumbled Pradelle, as they strolled down to the shore, went round the rocks, and then strolled on over and amongst the shingle and sand, till – a suitable spot presenting itself, about half a mile from the town – they sat down on the soft sand, tilted their hats over their eyes, leaned their backs against a huge stone, and then lit up and began to smoke.

"You see, it's like this," said Pradelle; "I know I'm not much of a catch, but I like her, and that ought to make up for a great deal."

"Yes," said Harry, whose mind was wandering elsewhere, and he was hesitating as to whether he should take his friend into his counsels or not.

"She don't know her own mind, that's about it," continued Pradelle; "and a word from you might do a deal."

"Got any money, Vic?"

"Now there's a mean sort of a question to ask a friend! Have I got any money? As if a man must be made of money before he may look at his old chum's sister."

"I wasn't thinking about her, but of something else," said Harry hastily.

"Ah, well, I wasn't. I've got a little bit of an income, a modest one I suppose you'd call it, and – but look there!"

"What at?" said Harry, whose eyes were shut, and his thoughts far away.

"Them. They're going for a walk. Why, Hal, old chap, they saw us come down here."

Harry started into wakefulness, and realised the fact that his sister and Madelaine Van Heldre were passing before them, but down by the water's edge, while the young men were close up under the towering cliff.

"Let's follow them," said Pradelle eagerly.

"Wait a moment."

Harry waited to think, and scraps of his aunt's remarks floated through his brain respecting the fair daughters of France, who would fall at the feet of the young count when he succeeded to his property, and the castle in the air which she reconstructed for him to see mentally.

Harry cogitated. The daughters of France were no doubt very lovely, but they were imaginative; and though Madelaine Van Heldre might, as his aunt said, not be of the pure Huguenot blood, still that fact did not seem to matter to him. For that was not imagination before him, but the bright, natural, clever girl whom he had known from childhood, his old playfellow, who had always seemed to supply a something wanting in his mental organisation, the girl who had led him and influenced his career, and whom he now told himself he loved very dearly, principally because he felt bound to look up to her and submit to all she said.

It was a very raw, green, and acrid kind of love, though Harry Vine was not aware of the fact, and he leaped to his feet.

“Bother Aunt Marguerite!” he said to himself, and then a loud, “Come along!” in happy ignorance of the fact that his good genius had prepared for him an antidote for the poison of vanity lately administered by his aunt.

Chapter Six
Harry Vine Speaks Plainly; So Does His Friend

In perfect ignorance of their presence, Louise and Madelaine went on down by the water's edge, picking their way among the rocks with an activity that would have startled some of their contemporaries, whose high heeled shoes and non perpendicular walk would have rendered such progress impossible. They were in profound ignorance of the fact that they were followed at a distance of about a couple of hundred yards, for Harry kept back his more eager friend, partly from a peculiar shrinking of a duplex nature, relating as it did to whether he was doing right in letting Pradelle make such very pronounced approaches to his sister, and the reception his own words would have upon Madelaine.

The two friends female were then in profound ignorance of the fact that they were watched, so were the two friends male.

For some time past the owner of the mine high up on the cliff, whose engine shaft went trailing along the ground like a huge serpent, higher and higher, till it reared its head for a landmark on the hill overlooking the sea, had for some time past been awakening to the fact that he had a heart, and that this heart was a good deal moved by Louise Vine. Till now he had been a thoroughly energetic man of business, but after the first introduction to the Vine family his business energy seemed to receive an impetus. He was working for her, everything might be for her.

Then came Pradelle upon the scene, and the young Scot was not long in seeing that the brother's London friend was also impressed, and that his advances found favour with Harry. Whether they did with the sister he could not tell.

The consequence was that there was a good deal of indecision on Duncan Leslie's part, some neglect of his busy mine, and a good deal of use of a double glass, which was supposed to be kept in a room, half office, half study and laboratory, for the purpose of scanning the shipping coming into port.

On the day in question the glass was being applied to a purpose rather reprehensible, perhaps, but with some excuse of helping Duncan Leslie's affair of the heart. From his window he could see the old granite-built house, and with interruptions, due to rocks and doublings and jutting pieces of cliff, a great deal of the winding and zig-zag path, half steps, which led down to the shore.

As, then, was frequently the case, the glass was directed toward the residence of the Vines, and Duncan Leslie saw Louise and Madelaine go down to the sea, stand watching the receding tide, and then go off west.

After gazing through the glass for a time he laid it down, with his heart beating faster than usual, as he debated within himself whether he should go down to the shore and follow them.

It was a hard fight, and inclination was rapidly mastering etiquette, when two figures, hitherto concealed came into view from beneath the cliff and began to follow the ladies.

Duncan Leslie's eyes flashed as he caught up the glass again, and after looking through it for a few minutes he closed it and threw it down.

"I'm making a fool of myself," he said bitterly. "Better attend to my business and think about it no more."

The desire was upon him to focus the glass again and watch what took place, but he turned away with an angry ejaculation and put the glass in its case.

"I might have known better," he said, "and it would be like playing the spy."

He strode out and went to his engine-house, forcing himself to take an interest in what was going on, and wishing the while that he had not used that glass in so reprehensible a way.

Oddly enough, just at that moment Uncle Luke was seated outside the door of his little cottage in its niche of the cliff below the mine, and wishing for this very glass.

His was a cottage of the roughest construction, which he had bought some years before of an old fisherman; and his seat – he could not afford chairs, he said – was a rough block of granite, upon which he was very fond of sunning himself when the weather was fine.

"I've a good mind to go and ask Leslie to lend me his glass," muttered the old man. "No. He'd only begin asking favours of me. But all that ought to be stopped. Wonder whether George knows. What's Van Heldre about? As for those two girls, I'll give them such a talking to – the gipsies! There they go, pretending they can't see that they are followed, and those two scamps making after them, and won't close up till they're round the point. Bah! it's no business of mine! I'm not going to marry."

Uncle Luke was quite right. Harry Vine and his friend were waiting till the jutting mass of cliff was passed – about a quarter of a mile to the westward, and they overtook the objects of their pursuit just as a consultation was taking place as to whether they should sit down and rest.

"Yes, let's sit down," said Madelaine, turning round. "Oh!"

"What is it? sprained your ankle?"

"No. Mr Pradelle and Harry are close by."

"Let's walk on quickly then, and go round back by the fields."

"But it will be six miles."

"Never mind if it's sixteen," said Louise, increasing her pace.

"Hallo, girls," cried Harry, and they were obliged to face round.

There was no warm look of welcome from either, but Pradelle was too much of the London man of the world to be taken aback, and he stepped forward to Louise's side, smiling.

"You have chosen a delightful morning for your walk, Miss Vine."

"Yes, but we were just going back."

"No; don't go back yet," said Harry quickly, for he had strung himself up. "Vic, old boy, you walk on with my sister. I want to have a chat with Miss Van Heldre."

The girls exchanged glances, each seeming to ask the other for counsel.

Then, in a quiet, decisive way, Madelaine spoke.

"Yes, do, Louie dear; I wanted to speak to your brother, too."

There was another quick look passing between the friends, and then Louise bowed and walked on, Pradelle giving Harry a short nod which meant, according to his judgment, "It's all right."

Louise was for keeping close to her companion, but her brother evidently intended her to have a *tête-à-tête* encounter with his friend, and she realised directly that Madelaine did not second her efforts. In fact the latter yielded at once to Harry's manoeuvres, and hung back with him, while Pradelle pressed forward, so that before many minutes had elapsed, the couples, as they walked west, were separated by a space of quite a couple of hundred yards.

"Now I do call that good of you, Maddy," said Harry eagerly. "You are, and you always were, a dear good little thing."

"Do you think so?" she said directly, and her pleasant bright face was now very grave.

"Do I think so! You know I do. There, I want a good talk to you, dear. It's time I spoke plainly, and that we fully understood one another."

"I thought we did, Harry."

"Well, yes, of course, but I want to be more plain. We're no boy and girl now."

"No, Harry, we have grown up to be man and woman."

"Yes, and ever since we were boy and girl, Maddy, I've loved you very dearly."

Madelaine turned her clear searching eyes upon him in the most calm and untroubled way.

"Yes, Harry, you have always seemed to."

"And you have always cared for me very much?"

"Yes, Harry. Always."

"Well, don't say it in such a cold, serious way, dear."

"But it is a matter upon which one is bound to be cool and very serious."

"Well, yes, of course. I don't know that people are any the better for showing a lot of gush."

"No, Harry, it is not so deep as the liking which is calm and cool and enduring."

"I s'pose not," said the young man very disconcertedly. "But don't be quite so cool. I know you too well to think you would play with me."

"I hope I shall always be very sincere, Harry."

"Of course you will. I know you will. We began by being playmates – almost like brother and sister."

"Yes, Harry."

"But I always felt as I grew older that I should some day ask you to be my darling little wife, and, come now, you always thought so too?"

"Yes, Harry, I always thought so too."

"Ah, that's right, dear," said the young man flushing. "You always were the dearest and most honest and plain-spoken girl I ever met."

"I try to be."

"Of course; and look yonder, there's old Pradelle, the dearest and best friend a fellow ever had, talking to Louise as I'm talking to you."

"Yes, I'm afraid he is."

"Afraid? Oh, come now, don't be prejudiced. I want you to like Victor."

"That would be impossible."

"Impossible! What, the man who will most likely be Louie's husband?"

"Mr Pradelle will never be Louie's husband."

"What! Why, how do you know?"

"Because I know your sister's heart too well."

"And you don't like Pradelle?"

"No, Harry; and I'm sorry you ever chose him for a companion."

"Oh, come, dear, that's prejudice and a bit of jealousy. Well, never mind about that now. I want to talk about ourselves."

"Yes, Harry."

"I want you to promise to be my little wife. I'm four-and-twenty, and you are nearly twenty, so it's quite time to talk about it."

Madelaine shook her head.

"Oh, come!" he said merrily, "no girl's coyness; we are too old friends for that, and understand one another too well. Come, dear, when is it to be?"

She turned and looked in the handsome flushed face beside her, and then said in the most cool and matter-of-fact way:

"It is too soon to talk like that. Harry."

"Too soon? Not a bit of it. You have told me that you will be my wife."

"Some day; perhaps."

"Oh, nonsense, dear! I've been thinking this all over well. You see, Maddy, you've let my not sticking to business trouble you."

"Yes, Harry, very much."

"Well, I'm very sorry, dear; and I suppose I have been a bit to blame, but I've been doing distasteful work, and I've been like a boat swinging about without an anchor. I want you to be my anchor to hold me fast. I've wanted something to steady me – something to work for; and if I've got you for a wife I shall be a different man directly."

Madelaine sighed.

"Aunt Marguerite won't like it, because she is not very fond of you."

"No," said Madelaine, "she does not like fat Dutch fraüleins – Dutch dolls."

"Get out! What stuff! She's a prejudiced old woman full of fads. She never did like you."

"Never, Harry."

"Well, that doesn't matter a bit."

"No. That does not matter a bit."

"You see I've had no end of thinks about all this, and it seems to me that if we're married at once, it will settle all the worries and bothers I've had lately. The governor wants me to go to business again; but what's the use of that? He's rich, and so is your father, and they can easily supply us with all that we should want, and then we shall be as happy as can be. Of course I shall work at something. I don't believe in a fellow with nothing to do. You don't either?"

"No, Harry."

"Of course not, but all that toiling and moiling for the sake of money is a mistake. Never mind what Aunt Marguerite says. I'll soon work her round, and of course I can do what I like with the governor. He's so fond of you that he'll be delighted, and he knows it will do me good. So now there's nothing to do but for me to go and see your father and ask his permission. I did think of letting you coax him round; but that would be cowardly, wouldn't it."

"Yes, Harry, very cowardly, and lower you very much in my eyes."

"Of course; but, I say, don't be so serious. Well, it's a bitter pill to swallow, for your governor will be down on me tremendously. I'll face him, though. I'll talk about our love and all that sort of thing, and it will be all right. I'll go to him to-day."

"No, Harry," said Madelaine, looking him full in the face, "don't do that."

"Why?"

"Because it would expose you to a very severe rebuff."

"Will you speak to him then? No; I'll do it."

"No. If you did my father would immediately speak to me, and I should have to tell him what I am going to tell you."

"Well. Out with it."

"Do you suppose," said Madelaine, once more turning her clear frank eyes upon the young man, and speaking with a quiet decision that startled him; "do you suppose I could be so wanting in duty to those at home, so wanting in love to you, Harry, that I could consent to a marriage which would only mean fixing you permanently in your present thoughtless ways? You talk like a foolish boy, and not like the Harry Vine whom I have always looked forward to being my protector through life."

"Madelaine!"

"Let me finish, Harry, and tell what has been on my lips for months past, but which you have never given me the opportunity to say to you till now. I am younger by several years than you, but do you think I am so wanting in worldly experience that I am blind to your reckless folly, or the pain you are giving father and sister by your acts?"

"Why, Maddy," he cried, in a voice full of vexation, which belied the mocking laugh upon his lips, "I didn't think you could preach like that."

"It is time to preach, Harry, when I see you so lost to self-respect, and find that you are ready to place yourself and the girl you wish to call wife, in a dependent position, instead of proudly and manfully making yourself your own master."

"Well, this is pleasant," cried Harry, as soon as he had recovered somewhat from his astonishment, "and am I to understand that you throw me over?"

"No, Harry," said Madelaine sadly, "you are to understand that I care for you too much to encourage you in a weak folly."

"A weak folly – to ask you what you have always expected I should ask!"

"Yes, to ask it at such a time when, after being placed in post after post by my father's help, and losing them one by one by your folly, you – "

"Oh, come, that will do," cried the young man angrily; "if it's to be like this it's a good job that we came to an explanation at once. So this is gentle, amiable, sweet-tempered Madelaine, eh! Hallo! You?"

He turned sharply, for during the latter part of the conversation they had been standing still, and Louise and Pradelle had come over a stretch of sand with their footsteps inaudible.

"It is quite time we returned, Madelaine," said Louise gravely; and without another word the two girls walked away.

"'Pon my word," cried Harry with a laugh, "things are improving. Well, Vic, how did you get on?"

"How did I get on indeed!" cried Pradelle angrily. "Look here, Harry Vine, are you playing square with me?"

"What do you mean?"

"What I say; are you honest, or have you been setting her against me?"

"Why you – no, I won't quarrel," cried Harry.

"What did she say to you?"

"Say to me? I was never so snubbed in my life. Any one would think I had been the dirt under her feet; but I've not done yet. Her ladyship doesn't know me if she thinks I'm going to give up like that."

"There, that'll do, Vic. No threats, please."

"Oh, no; I'm not going to threaten. I can wait."

"Yes," said Harry, thoughtfully; "we chose the wrong time. We mustn't give up, Vic; we shall have to wait."

And they went back to their old nook beneath the cliff to smoke their pipes, while as the thin blue vapour arose, Harry's hot anger grew cool, and he began to think of his aunt's words, of Comte Henri des Vignes, and of the fair daughters of France – a reverie from which he was aroused by his companion, as he said suddenly —

"I say, Harry lad, I want you to lend me a little coin."

Chapter Seven
Chez Van Heldre

The two friends parted at the gate, Madelaine refusing to go in.

"No," she said; "they will be expecting me at home."

They kissed, and then stood holding one another's hands, both wanting to relieve their full hearts, but dreading to begin. Hardly a word had been spoken on their way back, and such words as had been said were upon indifferent subjects.

But now the moment for parting had come, and they gazed wistfully in each other's eyes.

Louise was the first to break the painful since.

"Maddy, dear, ought we not to confide in each other?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Madelaine, with a sigh of relief that the constraint was over. "Yes, dear. Did Mr Pradelle propose to you?"

"Yes."

"And you told him it was impossible?"

"Yes. What did my brother want to say?"

"That we ought to be married now, and it would make him a better man."

"And you told him it was impossible?"

"Yes."

There was another sigh as if of relief on both sides, and the two girls kissed again and parted.

It was a brisk quarter of an hour's walk to the Van Heldre's, which lay at the end of the main street up the valley down which the little river ran; and on entering the door, with a longing upon her to go at once to her room and sit down and cry, Madelaine uttered a sigh full of misery, for she saw that it was impossible.

As she approached the great stone porch leading into the broad hall, which was one of the most attractive looking places in the house, filled as it was with curiosities and other objects brought by the various captains from the Mediterranean, and embracing cabinets from Constantinople with rugs and pipes, little terra-cotta figures from Sardinia, and pictures and pieces of statuary from Rome, Naples, and Trieste – there was the sound of music, but such music as might be expected from a tiny bird organ, whose handle Mrs Van Heldre was turning as she gazed wistfully up at a bullfinch, whose black cap was set on one side, and little beady eyes gazed down from the first one and then the other side of their owner's little black stumpy beak, which it every now and then used to ruffle the delicate red feathers of its breast or the soft grey blue of its back.

The notes that came from the little box-like instrument – a very baby of an organ – as Mrs Van Heldre turned, were feeble in the extreme, but there was a method in the machine which piped forth most irregularly and in the most feeble way the quaint old French air "Ma Normandie;" and as Madelaine heard it, her broad white forehead grew perplexed and a thrill of misery and discomfort ran through her.

"Ah, my dear, I'm so glad you've come back. Where's papa?"

"I have not seen him, mamma."

"Busy, I suppose. How he does work! But do look, dear, at this tiresome bird. He'll never learn to pipe."

"Not with patience, mamma? I think so."

"I don't, Maddy. It seems to take more patience than I've got. It's worse than trying to teach that parrot. It never would learn the words you wanted it to."

"Is it worth the trouble, mamma, dear?"

"No, my dear, I don't think it is; but I seemed to fancy that I should like to have a piping bullfinch. Every body has some fancy, dear; and I'm sure mine's better than Margaret Vine's for aristocratic connections. Ah! how cross that woman does make me feel."

"She is rather irritating," said Madelaine, holding the tip of a white finger between the bars of the cage.

"Irritating?" said the plump little woman flushing; "I call her maddening. The life she leads that poor patient man! dictating as she does, and worrying him about the French estates and the family name, while George Vine is so patient that – "

"He would succeed in teaching a bullfinch to pipe, mamma."

"Ah, now you're laughing at me, and thinking me weak; but it's better to have my weakness than hers. Only fancy: ever since she formed that mad, foolish attachment for that French scoundrel, who coaxed the whole of her money away from her and then threw her over, has George Vine taken her to his home and let her tyrannise over him. A silly woman! Your father always said the man was a scamp. And, by the way, that Mr Pradelle, I don't like him, my dear."

"Neither do I, mamma."

"That's right, my dear; I'm very glad to hear you say so; but surely Louie Vine is not going to be beguiled by him?"

"Oh, no."

"Ah, that's all very well; but Luke Vine came in as he went by, to say in his sneering fashion that Louie and Mr Pradelle were down on the shore, and that you were walking some distance behind with Harry."

"Mr Luke Vine seems to have plenty of time for watching his neighbours," said Madelaine, contemptuously.

"Yes; he is always noticing things; but don't blame him, dear. I'm sure he means well, and I can forgive him anything for that. Ah! here's your father."

"Ah! my dears," said Van Heldre cheerily. "Tired out."

"You must be," said Mrs Van Heldre, bustling about him to take his hat and gloves. "Here do come and sit down."

The merchant went into the drawing-room very readily, and submitted to several little pleasant attentions from wife and daughter, as he asked questions about the bullfinch, laughing slily the while at Madelaine.

Evening came on with Van Heldre seated in his easy chair, thoughtfully watching wife and daughter, both of whom had work in their laps; but Mrs Van Heldre's was all a pretence, for, after a few stitches, her head began to nod forward, then back against the cushion, and then, as if by magic, she was fast asleep.

Madelaine's needle, however, flew fast, and she went on working, with her father watching her attentively, till she raised her eyes, let her hands rest in her lap, and returned his gaze with a frank, calm look of love and trust that made him nod his head in a satisfied way.

"You want to say something to me, Maddy," he said in a low voice.

"Yes, papa."

"About your walk down on the beach?"

Madelaine nodded.

"You know I went."

"Yes; I saw you, and Luke Vine came and told me as well."

"It was very kind of him," said Madelaine, with a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

"Kind and unkind, my dear. You see he has no business – nothing to do but to think of other people. But he means well, my dear, and he likes you."

"I have often thought so."

"Yes; and you were right. He warned me that I was not to let your intimacy grow closer with his nephew."

"Indeed, papa!"

"Yes, my dear. He said that I was a – well, I will not tell you what, for not stopping it directly, for that Harry was rapidly drifting into a bad course – that it was a hopeless case."

"That is not the way to redeem him, father."

"No, my dear, it is not. But you were going to say something to me?"

"Yes," said Madelaine, hesitating. Then putting down her work she rose and went to her father's side, knelt down, and resting her arms upon his knees, looked straight up in his face.

"Well, Maddy?"

"I wanted to speak to you about Harry Vine."

There was a slight twitching about the merchant's brows, but his face was calm directly, and he said coolly —

"What about Harry Vine?"

Madelaine hesitated for a few moments, and then spoke out firmly and bravely.

"I have been thinking about his position, father, and of how sad it is for him to be wasting his days as he is down here."

"Very sad, Maddy. He is, as Luke Vine says, going wrong. Well?"

"I have been thinking, papa, that you might take him into your office and give him a chance of redeeming the past."

"Nice suggestion, my dear. What would old Crampton say?"

"Mr Crampton could only say that you had done a very kind act for the son of your old friend."

"Humph! Well?"

"You could easily arrange to take him, papa, and with your firm hand over him it would do an immense deal of good."

"Not to me."

There was a pause during which Van Heldre gazed into his child's unblenching eyes.

"So we are coming at facts," he said at last. "Harry asked you to interfere on his behalf?"

Madelaine shook her head and smiled.

"Is this your own idea?"

"Entirely."

"Then what was the meaning of the walk on the beach to-day?"

"Harry sought for it, and said that we had been playfellows from children, that he loved me very dearly, and he asked me to be his wife."

"The – "

Van Heldre checked himself.

"And what did you say?"

"That it was impossible."

"Then you do not care for him?" cried Van Heldre eagerly.

Madelaine was silent.

"Then you do not care for him?" said Van Heldre again.

"I'm afraid I care for him very much indeed, father," said Madelaine firmly; "and it grieves me so to see him drifting away that I determined to ask you to come to his help."

"Let me thoroughly understand you, my darling. You love George Vine's son – your old friend's brother?"

"Yes, father," said Madelaine, in a voice little above a whisper.

"And he has asked you to be his wife?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what answer you gave him?"

"In brief, that I would never marry a man so wanting in self-respect and independence as he has shown himself to be."

"Hah!"

It was a softly-uttered ejaculation, full of content.

"He said that our parents were rich, that there was no need for him to toil as he had done, but that if I consented it would give him an impetus to work."

"And you declined conditionally?"

"I declined absolutely, father."

"And yet you love him?"

"I'm afraid I love him very dearly, father."

"You are a strange girl, Madelaine."

"Yes, father."

"Do you know what it means for me to take this wilful young fellow into my office?"

"Much trouble and care."

"Yes. Then why should I at my time of life fill my brain with worry and care?"

"Because, as you have so often taught me, we cannot live for ourselves alone. Because he is the son of your very old friend."

"Yes," said Van Heldre softly.

"Because it might save him from a downward course now that there is, I believe, a crisis in his life."

"And because you love him, Maddy?"

She answered with a look.

"And if I were so insane, so quixotic, as to do all this, what guarantee have I that he would not gradually lead you to think differently – to consent to be his wife before he had redeemed his character?"

"The trust you have in me that I should not do anything you did not consider right."

"Hah!" ejaculated Van Heldre again. And there was another long silence.

"I feel that I must plead for him, father. It would be the turning-point of his life. You could influence him so much."

"I'm afraid not, my child. If he has not the manliness to do what is right for your sake, I'm afraid that anything I could do or say would not be of much avail."

"You underrate your power, father," said Madelaine, with a look full of pride in him.

"And if I did this I might have absolute confidence that matters should go no farther until he had completely changed?"

"You know you might."

"Hah!" sighed Van Heldre. "You will think this over, father?"

"There is no need, my dear."

"No need?"

"No, my child. I have for some days past been thinking over this very thing, just in the light in which you placed it."

"You have, father?"

"Yes, and I had a long talk with George Vine this afternoon respecting his son."

"Oh, father!"

"I told him I could see that the trouble was growing bigger and telling upon him, and proposed that I should take Harry here." Madelaine had started to her feet.

"Presuming that he does not refuse after his father has made my proposals known, Harry Vine comes here daily to work under Crampton's guidance." Madelaine's arms were round her father's neck.

“You have made me feel very happy and satisfied, my dear,” said Van Heldre, pressing her to his breast; “and may heaven speed what is going to be a very arduous task. He will commence in the office next week.”

Just then Mrs Van Heldre raised her head and looked round.

“Bless my heart!” she exclaimed. “I do believe I have nearly been to sleep.”

Chapter Eight
Uncle Luke Speaks His Mind

"Hallo, Scotchman!"

"Hallo, Eng – I mean, French – What am I to call you Mr Luke Vine?"

"Englishman, of course."

Uncle Luke was seated, in a very shabby-looking grey aged Norfolk jacket made long, a garment which suited his tastes, from its being an easy comfortable article of attire. He had on an old Panama hat, a good deal stained, and a thick stick armed with a strong iron point useful for walking among the rocks; and upon this staff he rested as he sat outside his cottage door watching the sea and pondering as to the probability of a shoal of fish being off the point.

His home with its tiny scrap of rough walled-in garden, which grew nothing but sea holly and tamarisk, was desolate looking in the extreme, but the view therefrom of the half-natural pier sheltering the vessels in the harbour of the twin town, with its busy wharves and warehouses and residences, rising in terrace above terrace, and of the blue, ever-changing sea, was glorious.

He had had his breakfast and taken his seat out in the sunshine, when he became aware of the fact that Duncan Leslie was coming down from the mine buildings above, and he hailed him with a snarl and the above words.

"Glorious morning."

"Humph! Yes," said the old man, looking up at the handsome young mine-owner with his face all in lines, "but what's that got to do with you?"

"Everything. Do you suppose I don't like fine weather?"

"I thought you didn't care for anything but money grubbing."

"Then you were mistaken, because I do."

"Nonsense! You think of nothing but copper, spoiling the face of nature with the broken rubbish your men dig out of the bowels of the earth, poisoning the air with the fumes of those abominable furnaces. Look at that!"

The old man raised his stick and made a vicious dig with it in the direction of the mine.

"Look at what?"

"That shaft. Looks like some huge worm that your men disturbed down below, and sent it crawling along the hill slope till it could rear its abominable head in the air and look which way to go to be at rest."

"What an idea! It isn't pretty looking. I must say."

"Pretty looking! No. Why do you have it then?"

"It was there when I bought the mine, and it answers its purpose."

"Bah! What purpose? To make money?"

"Yes; to make money. Very useful thing, Mr Leslie."

"Rubbish! You're as bad as Van Heldre with his ships and his smelting works. Money! Money! Money! Always money, morning, noon and night. One constant hunt for the accursed stuff. Look at me!"

"I was looking at you, old fellow; and studying you."

"Humph! Waste of time, unless you follow my example."

"Then it will be waste of time, sir, for I certainly shall not follow your example."

"Why not, boy? Look at me. I have no troubles. I pay no rent. My wants are few. I am nearly independent of trades-people and tax men. I've no slatternly wife to worry me, no young children to be always tumbling down the rocks or catching the measles. I'm free of all these troubles and I'm a happy man."

"Well, then, your appearance belies you, sir, for you do not look it," said Leslie, laughing.

"Never you mind my appearance," said Uncle Luke sharply. "I am happy; at least, I should be, if you'd do away with that great smoky chimney and stop those rattling stamps."

"Then I'm afraid that I cannot oblige you, neighbour."

"Humph! Neighbour!"

"I fancy that an unbiassed person would blame you and not me."

"Of course he would."

"He'd say if a man chooses to turn himself into a sort of modern Diogenes – "

"Diogenes be hanged, sir! All a myth. I don't believe there ever was such a body. And look here, Leslie, I imitate no man – no myth. I prefer to live this way for my own satisfaction, and I shall."

"And welcome for me, old fellow; only don't scold me for living my way."

"Not going to. Here, stop! I want to talk to you. How's copper?"

"Up a good deal, but you don't want to know."

"Of course I don't. But look here. What do you think of my nephew?"

"Tall, good-looking young fellow."

"Humph! What's the good of that? You know all about him, of course?"

"I should prefer not to sit in judgment on the gentleman in question."

"So I suppose. Nice boy, though, isn't he?"

Leslie was silent.

"I say he's a nice boy; isn't he?" cried the old man, raising his voice.

"I heard what you said. He is your nephew."

"Worse luck! How is he getting on at Van Heldre's?"

"I have not the least idea, sir."

"More have I. They won't tell me. How about that friend of his? What do you think of him?"

"Really, Mr Vine," said Leslie laughing, "I do not set up as a judge of young men's character. It is nothing to me."

"Yes, it is. Do you suppose I'm blind? Do you suppose I can't tell which way the wind blows? If I were young, do you know what I should do?"

"Do away with the chimney shaft and the stamps," said Leslie, laughing.

"No; I should just get hold of that fellow some night, and walk him to where the coach starts."

Leslie's face looked warm.

"And then I should say, 'Jump up, and when you get to the station, book for London; and if ever you show your face in Hakemouth again I'll break your neck.'"

"You must excuse me, Mr Luke; I'm busy this morning," said Leslie; and he walked on and began to descend the steep path.

"Touched him on the tender place," said Uncle Luke, with a chuckle. "Humph! wonder whether Louie will come and see me to-day."

Duncan Leslie went on down the zig-zag cliff path leading from the Wheal Germains copper mine to the town. It was a picturesque way, with a fresh view at every turn west and east; and an advanced member of the town board had proposed and carried the suggestion of placing rough granite seats here and there in the best parts for resting those who climbed, and for giving others attractive places for sunning themselves and looking out to sea.

The plan was a great success, and these seats were largely patronised by the fishermen in the case of those nearest the shore, where they could follow out their favourite pastime to the full, and also by the towns-people, especially by the invalids and those young folk who had arrived at the billing and cooing stage of life, when there are only two people in the world – themselves.

About half way down Leslie passed an invalid, who had taken possession of a seat, and was gazing right away south, and dreaming of lands where the sun always shone – wondering whether the bright maiden Health could be found there.

Lower still Leslie was going on thoughtfully, pondering on Uncle Luke's hints, when the blood suddenly flushed into his cheeks, his heart began to beat rapidly, and he increased his pace. For there unmistakably were two ladies going down the zig-zag, and there were no two others in Hakemouth could be mistaken for them.

He hurried on to overtake them. Then he checked himself.

"Where had they been?"

His sinking heart suggested that they had been on their way to visit Uncle Luke, but that they had caught sight of him, and in consequence returned.

His brow grew gloomy, and he walked slowly on, when the blood flushed to his cheeks again, as if he had been surprised in some guilty act, for a sharp voice said —

"No, Mr Leslie; you would not be able to overtake them now."

He stopped short, and turned to the warm sheltered nook among the rocks where Aunt Margaret was seated; her grey lavender dress was carefully spread about her, her white hair turned back beneath a black velvet satin-lined hood, and a lace fichu pinned across her breast.

"You here, Miss Vine?" said Leslie, hiding his annoyance.

"Yes; and I thought I would save you a thankless effort. I know these paths so well, and they are very deceptive as to distance. You could not overtake the girls unless you ran."

"I was not going to try and overtake them, Miss Vine," said Leslie coldly.

"Indeed! I beg your pardon; I thought you were. But would you mind, Mr Leslie – it is a very trifling request, but I set store by these little relics of our early history – Miss *Marguerite* Vine, if you would be so kind?"

Leslie bowed. "Certainly, Miss Marguerite," he said quietly.

"Thank you," she said, detaining him. "It is very good of you. Of course you are surprised to see me up here?"

"Oh, no," said Leslie quietly. "It is a delightful place to sit and rest and read."

"Ye-es; but I cannot say that I care much for the rough walking of this part of the world, and my brother seems somehow to have taken quite a dislike to the idea of having a carriage?"

"Yes?"

"So I am obliged to walk when I do come out. There are certain duties one is forced to attend to. For instance, there is my poor brother up yonder. I feel bound to see him from time to time. You see him frequently, of course?"

"Every day, necessarily. We are so near."

"Poor fellow! Yes. Very eccentric and peculiar; but you need be under no apprehension, Mr Leslie. He is quite harmless, I am sure."

"Oh, quite harmless, Miss Marguerite. Merely original."

"It is very good of you to call it originality; but as friends, Mr Leslie, there is no harm in our alluding to his poor brain. Softening, a medical man told me."

"Hardening, I should say," thought Leslie.

"Very peculiar! very peculiar! Father and uncle both so different to my dear nephew. So you were going to overtake the girls?"

"No, Miss Marguerite; I had no such idea."

"Indeed! They walked with me as far as here; and then I said, 'My dears, it is impossible for me to go up to Uncle Luke to-day, so I will sit down and rest, and go back alone.' I believe the air will refresh me."

"I am sure it will. It is so fresh and sweet up here."

"Ye-es," said Aunt Marguerite. "Have you seen my nephew to-day? No? Poor boy! He is in very bad spirits. Ah! Mr Leslie, I shall be very glad to see him once more as a des Vignes should be. With him placed in the position that should be his, and that engagement carried out regarding my darling Louise's future, I could leave this world of sorrow without a sigh."

Leslie winced, but it was not perceptible to Aunt Marguerite, who, feeling dissatisfied with the result of her shot, fired again.

"Of course it would involve losing my darling: but at my time of life, Mr Leslie, one has learned that it is one's duty always to study self-sacrifice. The des Vignes were always a self-sacrificing family. When it was not for some one or other of their kindred it was for their king, and then for their faith. You know our old French motto, Mr Leslie?"

"I? No. I beg pardon."

"Really? I should have thought you could not fail to see that. It is almost the only trace of our former greatness that my misguided brother – "

"Were you alluding to Mr Luke Vine?"

"No, no, no, no! To my brother, George des Vignes. Surely, Mr Leslie, you must have noted our arms upon the dining-room windows."

"Oh, yes, of course, of course: and the motto, *Roy et Foy*."

"Exactly," said Aunt Marguerite, smiling, "I thought it must have caught your eye."

Something else was catching Duncan Leslie's eye just then – the last flutter of the scarf Louise wore before it disappeared round the foot of the cliff.

"I shall bear it, I daresay, and with fortitude, Mr Leslie, for it will be a grand position that she will take. The de Lignys are a family almost as old as our own; and fate might arrange for me to visit them and make a long stay. She's a sweet girl, is she not, Mr Leslie?"

"Miss Vine? Yes: you must be very proud of her," said the young man, without moving a muscle.

"We are; we are indeed, Mr Leslie; but I am afraid I am detaining you."

"I will not call it detaining me, Miss Marguerite," said Leslie, mockingly assuming a courtly manner in accord with that of his tormentor. "The Scotch had so much intercourse with the French years ago that they gave us a little polish, and I hope we have some trace of the old politeness left."

He smiled and bowed before passing on, and Aunt Marguerite watched him till he disappeared down the zig-zag path, her own smile remaining so fixed that it seemed to be frozen on her lip, the more so that it was a cold, cruel-looking smile, verging on the malignant as she said softly – "That will be something for you to think about, Mr Duncan Leslie; and you shall find I am not a woman to be despised."

"It is curious," said the object of her thoughts, as he walked slowly down the cliff path. "Surely there was never a family before whose various members were so different in their ways. De Ligny, de Ligny? Who is de Ligny? Well," he added with a sigh, "I ought to thank Heaven that the name is not Pradelle."

Chapter Nine
In Office Hours

"Now, my dear Mr Crampton, believe me, I am only actuated by a desire to do good."

"That's exactly what actuates me, sir, when I make bold, after forty years' service with you and your father, to tell you that you have made a great mistake."

"All men make mistakes, Crampton," said Van Heldre, to his plump, grey, stern-looking head clerk.

"Yes, sir; but if they are then worth their salt they see where they have made a mistake, and try and correct it. We did not want him."

"As far as actual work to be done, no; but I will tell you plainly why I took on the young man. I wish to help my old friend in a peculiarly troubled period of his life."

"That's you all over, Mr Van Heldre," said the old clerk, pinching his very red nose, and then arranging his thin hair with a pen-holder; "but I can't feel that it's right. You see the young man don't take to his work. He comes and goes in a supercilious manner, and treats me as if I were his servant."

"Oh, that will soon pass off, Crampton."

"I hope so, Mr Van Heldre, sir, but his writing's as bad as a schoolboy's."

"That will improve."

"He's always late of a morning."

"I'll ask him to correct that."

"And he's always doing what I hate in a young man, seeing how short is life, sir, and how soon we're gone – he's always looking at the clock and yawning."

"Never mind, Crampton, he'll soon give up all that sort of thing. The young man is like an ill-trained tree. He has grown rather wild, but now he has been transplanted to an orderly office, to be under your constant supervision, he will gradually imbibe your habits and precision. It will be his making."

"Now, now, now," said the old clerk, shaking his head, "that's flattering, sir. My habits and precision. No, no, sir; I'm a very bad clerk, and I'm growing old as fast as I can."

"You are the best clerk in the west of England, Crampton, and you are only growing old at the customary rate. And now to oblige me, look over these little blemishes in the young man's character. There is a good deal of the spoiled boy in him, but I believe his heart's right; and for more reasons than one I want him to develop into a good man of business – such a one as we can make of him if we try."

"Don't say another word, Mr Van Heldre. You know me, and if I say as long as the young man is honest and straightforward I'll do my best for him, I suppose that's sufficient."

"More than sufficient, Crampton."

"But you know, sir, he ought to have made some little advance in a month."

"No, no, Crampton," said Van Heldre, smiling, "he has not grown used to the new suit yet: have patience, and he'll come right."

"That's enough, sir," said Crampton, climbing on to a high stool in front of a well-polished desk, "now for business. The *Saint Aubyn* has taken in all her cargo, and will sail to-morrow. We ought soon to have news of the *Madelaine*. By the way, I hope Miss Madelaine's quite well, sir. Haven't seen her for a day and a half."

"Quite well, Crampton."

"That's right, sir," said the old man, smiling and rubbing his hands. "Bless her! I've only one thing against her. Why wasn't she a boy?"

Van Heldre smiled at his old confidential man, who still rubbed his hands softly, and gazed over his silver-rimmed spectacles at a file of bills of lading hanging from the wall.

"What a boy she would have made, and what a man I could have made of him! Van Heldre and Son once more, as it ought to be. I'd have made just such a man of business of him as I made of you. Going, sir?"

"Yes, I'm going up to Tolzarn. By the way, send Mr Henry Vine up to me about twelve."

"Yes," said Crampton, beginning to write away very busily. "I suppose he'll come?"

"Of course, of course," said Van Heldre hastily, and leaving the office he went into the house just as Mrs Van Heldre had made her way into the hall to cover up her bullfinch's cage; and her hand was upon the bird organ when she heard her husband's step, when, colouring like a girl, she hurried up-stairs.

Van Heldre crossed the hall and entered the morning-room, where Madelaine was busy with her needle.

She looked at him in an inquiring way, to which he had become accustomed during the past month, and in accordance with an unwritten contract.

"No, my dear, not come yet."

Madelaine's countenance changed as she saw her father glance at his watch, and she involuntarily darted a quick look at the clock on the chimney-piece.

"I'm going up to the works," continued Van Heldre. "Back before one. Morning."

Madelaine resumed her work for a few minutes, and then rose to stand where, unseen, she could watch the road. She saw her father go by up the valley, but her attention was turned toward the sea, from which direction Harry Vine would have to come.

She stood watching for nearly a quarter of an hour before she heard a familiar step, and then the young man passed smoking the end of a cigar, which he threw away before turning in at the way which led to Van Heldre's offices.

Directly after, as Madelaine sat looking very thoughtful over her work, there was the quick patter of Mrs Van Heldre's feet.

"Madelaine, my dear," she said as she entered; "I thought you said that Mr Pradelle had gone away a fortnight ago."

"I did, mamma."

"Well, then, he has come back again."

"Back again?" said Madelaine, letting her work fall in her lap.

"Yes, I was at the up-stairs window just now, and I saw him pass as I was looking out for Harry Vine. He's very late this morning, and it does make papa so vexed."

It was late, for instead of being nine o'clock, the clock in the office was on the stroke of ten as Harry Vine hurriedly entered, and glanced at the yellowy-white faced dial.

"Morning, Mr Crampton. I say that clock's fast, isn't it?"

"Eh? fast?" said the old man grimly. "No, Mr Harry Vine; that's a steady old time-keeper, not a modern young man."

"Disagreeable old hunks," said Harry to himself, as he hung up his hat. "Bad headache this morning, Mr Crampton, thought I shouldn't be able to come."

"Seidlitz powder," said the old man, scratching away with his pen, and without looking up.

"Eh?"

"Dissolve the blue in a tumbler of warm water."

"Bother!" muttered Harry, frowning.

"The white in a wineglassful of cold. Pour one into the other – and – drink – while effervescing."

The intervals between some of the words were filled up by scratches of the pen.

"Headache, eh? Bad things, sir, bad things."

He removed himself from his stool and went to the safe in the inner office, where Van Heldre generally sat, and Harry raised his head from his desk and listened, as he heard the rattling of keys and the clang of a small iron door.

"Yes, bad things headaches, Mr Harry," said the old man returning. "Try early hours for 'em, and look here: Mr Van Heldre says – "

"Has he been in the office this morning?" cried Harry hastily.

"Yes, sir, he came in as soon as I'd come, nine to the minute, and he wants you to join him at the tin works about twelve."

"Wigging!" said guilty conscience.

"Do your head good, sir."

Old Crampton resumed his seat, and for an hour and three-quarters, during which period Harry had several times looked at the clock and yawned, there was a constant scratching of pens.

Then Harry Vine descended from his stool.

"I'd better go now?"

"Yes, sir, you'd better go now. And might have gone before for all the good you've done," grumbled the old man, as Harry passed the window. "Tut – tut – tut! What careless writing. He's spoiling my books, that he is."

The old man had hardly spent another half-hour over his work when there was a sharp tapping at the door, such as might be given by the knob on a stick.

"Come in."

The door was opened, and Pradelle entered and gave a sharp look round.

"Morning," he said in a cavalier way. "Tell Mr Vine I want to speak to him for a moment."

Old Crampton looked up from his writing, and fixed his eyes on the visitor's hat.

"Not at home," he said shortly.

"How long will he be?"

"Don't know."

"Where has he gone?"

"Tin works," said Crampton, resuming his writing.

"Confounded old bear!" muttered Pradelle as he went out, after frowning severely at the old clerk, who did not see it.

"Idle young puppy!" grumbled Crampton, dotting an I so fiercely that he drove his pen though the paper. "I'd have knocked his hat off if I had had my ruler handy. Now what does he want, I wonder?"

Van Heldre was busy at work with a shovel when Harry Vine reached the tin-smelting works, which the merchant had added to his other ventures. He was beside a heap of what rather resembled wet coarsely ground coffee.

"Ah, Harry," he said, "you may as well learn all these things. Be useful some day. Take hold of that shovel and turn that over. Tell me what you think of it."

A strong mind generally acts upon one that is weak, and it was so here.

Harry felt disposed, as he looked at his white hands, the shovel, and the heap, to thrust the said white hands in his pocket and walk away.

But he took the shovel and plunged it in the heap, lifted it full, and then with a look of disgust said: —

"What am I to do with it?"

"Shovel it away and get more out of the centre."

Harry obeyed, and looked up for fresh orders.

"Now take a couple of handfuls and examine them. Don't be afraid, man, it's honest dirt."

Van Heldre set the example, took a handful and poured it from left to right and back again.

"Now," he said, "take notice; that's badly washed."

"Not soap enough," said Harry, hiding his annoyance with an attempt at being facetious.

"Not exactly," said Van Heldre drily; "bad work. Now when that tin is passed through the furnace, there'll be twice as much slag and refuse as there ought to be. That will do. Leave the shovel,

I want you to take account of those slabs of tin. Mark them, number them, and enter them in this book. It will take you an hour. Then bring the account down to me at the office."

"I can have a man to move the slabs?" said Harry.

"No, they are all busy. If I were doing it, I should work without a man."

"Hang it all! I'm about sick of this," said Harry, after he had been alone about half an hour, and feeling more disgusted moment by moment with his task. "How mad Aunt Marguerite would be if she could see me now!"

He looked round at the low dirty sheds on one side, at the row of furnaces on the other, two of which emitted a steady roar as the tin within gradually turned from a brown granulated powder to a golden fluid, whose stony scum was floating on the top.

"It's enough to make any man kick against his fate. Nice occupation for a gentleman, 'pon my word!"

A low whistle made him look up quickly, and his countenance brightened.

"Why, Vic," he cried; "I thought you were in town."

"How are you, my Trojan?" cried the visitor boisterously. "I was in town, but I've come back. I say, cheerful work this for Monsieur le Comte Henri des Vignes!"

"Don't chaff a fellow," said Harry angrily. "What brought you down?"

"Two things."

"Now, look here, Vic. Don't say any more about that. Perhaps after a time I may get her to think differently, but now – "

"I was not going to say anything about your sister, my dear boy. I can wait and bear anything. But I suppose I may say something about you?"

"About me?"

"Yes. I've got a splendid thing on. Safe to make money – heaps of it."

"Yes; but your schemes always want money first."

"Well, hang it all, lad! you can't expect a crop of potatoes without planting a few bits first. It wouldn't want much. Only about fifty pounds. A hundred would be better, but we could make fifty do."

Harry shook his head.

"Come, come; you haven't heard half yet. I've the genuine information. It would be worth a pile of money. It's our chance now – such a chance as may never occur again."

"No, no; don't tempt me, Vic," said Harry, after a long whimpered conversation.

"Tempt? I feel disposed to force you, lad. It makes me half wild to see you degraded to such work as this. Why, if we do as I propose you will be in a position to follow out your aunt's instructions, engage lawyers to push on your case, and while you obtain your rights, I shall be in a position to ask your sister's hand without the chance of a refusal. I tell you the thing's safe."

"No, no," said Harry, shaking his head; "it's too risky. We should lose and be worse off than ever."

"With a horse like that, and me with safe private information about him!"

"No," said Harry, "I won't. I'm going to keep steadily on here, and, as the governor calls it, plod."

"That you're not, if I know it," cried Pradelle indignantly. "I won't stand it. It's disgraceful. You shan't throw yourself away."

"But I've got no money, old fellow."

"Nonsense! Get some of the old man."

"No; I've done it too often. He won't stand it now."

"Well, of your aunt."

"She hasn't a penny but what my father lets her have."

"Your sister. Come, she would let you have some."

Harry shook his head.

"No, I'm not going to ask her. It's no good, Vic; I won't."

"Well," said Pradelle, apostrophising an ingot of tin as it lay at his feet glistening with iridescent hues, "if any one had told me, I wouldn't have believed it. Why, Harry, lad, you've only been a month at this mill-horse life, and you're quite changed. What have they been doing to you, man?"

"Breaking my spirit, I suppose, they'd call it," said the young man bitterly.

"Nonsense! yours isn't a spirit to be broken in to a beggarly trade. Think of what your aunt has said to you, as well as to me. Your estates, your title, the woman you are to marry. Why, Harry, lad, you don't think I'm going to sit still and see you break down without a word?"

Harry shook his head.

"Get out! I won't have it. You want waking up," said Pradelle in a low, earnest voice. "Think, lad, a few pounds placed as I could place 'em, and there's fortune for in both, without reckoning on what you could do in France. As your aunt say, there's money and a title waiting for you if you'll only stretch out your hand to take 'em. Come, rouse yourself. Harry Vine isn't the lad to settle down to this drudgery. Why, I thought it was one of the workmen when I came up."

"It's of no use," said Harry gloomily, as he seated himself on the ingots of tin. "A man must submit to his fate."

"Bah! a man's fate is what he makes it. Look here; fifty or a hundred borrowed for a few days, and then repaid."

"But suppose – "

"Suppose!" cried Pradelle mockingly; "a business man has no time to suppose, he strikes while the iron's hot. You're going to strike iron, not tin."

"How? Where's the money?"

"Where's the money?" said Pradelle mockingly. "You want fifty or a hundred for a few days, when you would return it fifty times over; and you say, where's the money?"

"Don't I tell you I have no one I could borrow from?" said Harry angrily.

"Yes, you have," said Pradelle, sinking his voice. "It's easy as easy. Only for a few days. A temporary loan. Look here."

He bent down, and whispered a few words in the young man's ear, words which turned him crimson, and then deadly pale.

"Pradelle!" he cried, in a hoarse whisper; "are you mad?"

"No. I was thinking of coming over to Auvergne to spend a month with my friend, the Count. By-and-by, dear lad – by-and-by."

"No, no; it is impossible," said Harry hoarsely, and he gave a hasty glance round.

"No," whispered Pradelle, "no; it is not impossible, but as simple as A B C."

"But," faltered Harry, who was trembling now.

"Hush! some one coming. No; you need not mind," said Pradelle with a sneer; "only two ladies walking up the road. Now, I wonder whom they've come to see."

"No, no," said Harry in a husky whisper, as his companion's last words seemed unheeded; "I couldn't do that."

"You could," said Pradelle, and then to himself: "and, if I know you, Harry Vine, you shall."

Chapter Ten
Harry Vine has a Want

Breakfast-time, with George Vine quietly partaking of his toast, and giving furtive glances at a *Beloe* in a small squat bottle. He was feeding his mind at the same time that he supplied the wants of his body. Now it was a bite of toast, leaving in the embrowned bread such a mark as was seen by the dervish when the man asked after the lost camel: for the student of molluscous sea life had lost a front tooth. Now it was a glance at the little gooseberry-shaped creature, clear as crystal, glistening in the clear water with iridescent hues, and trailing behind it a couple of filaments of an extreme delicacy and beauty that warranted the student's admiration.

Louise was seated opposite, performing matutinal experiments, so it seemed, with pots, cups, an urn, and various infusions and crystals.

Pradelle was reading the paper, and Harry was dividing his time between eating some fried ham and glancing at the clock, which was pointing in the direction of the hour when he should be at Van Heldre's.

"More tea, Louie; too sweet," said the head of the house, passing his cup, *via* Pradelle.

The cup was filled up and passed back, Louise failing to notice that Pradelle manoeuvred to touch her hand as he played his part in the transfer. Then the door opened, and Liza, the brown-faced, black-haired Cornish maid, entered, bearing a tray with an untouched cup of tea, a brown piece of ham on its plate, and a little covered dish of hot toast.

"Please, 'm, Miss Vine says she don't want no breakfast this morning."

The *Beloe* bottle dropped back into George Vine's pocket.

"Eh? My sister ill?" he said anxiously.

"No, sir; she seems quite well, but she was gashly cross with me, and said why didn't Miss Louie bring it up."

"Liza, I forbade you to use that foolish word – 'gashly,'" said Louise, pouring out a fresh cup of tea, and changing it for the one cooling on the tray.

"Why don't you take up auntie's breakfast as you always do? You know she doesn't like it sent up."

Louise made no reply to her brother, but turned to Pradelle.

"You will excuse me for a few minutes, Mr Pradelle," she said as she rose.

"Excuse – you?" he replied with a peculiar smile; and, rising in turn he managed so badly as he hurried to the door to open it for Louise's passage with the tray, that he and Liza, bent on the same errand, came into collision.

"Thank you, Mr Pradelle," said Louise, quietly, as she passed out with the tray, and Liza gave him an indignant glance as she closed the door.

"Ha, ha! What a bungle!" cried Harry mockingly, as he helped himself to more ham.

George Vine was absorbed once more in the study of the *Beloe*.

"Never you mind, my lord the count," said Pradelle in an undertone; "I don't see that you get on so very well."

Harry winced.

"What are you going to do this morning?"

"Fish!"

"Humph! well to be you," said Harry, with a vicious bite at his bread, while his father was too much absorbed in his study even to hear. "You're going loafing about, and I've got to go and turn that grindstone."

"Which you can leave whenever you like," said Pradelle meaningly.

"Hold your tongue!" cried Harry roughly, as the door re-opened, and Louise, looking slightly flushed, again took her place at the table.

"Aunt poorly?" said Vine.

"Oh, no, papa; she is having her breakfast now."

"If you're too idle to take up auntie's breakfast, I'll take it," said Harry severely. "Don't send it up by that girl again."

"I shall always take it myself. Harry," said Louise quietly.

The breakfast was ended; George Vine went to his study to feed his sea-anemones on chopped whelk; Pradelle made an excuse about fishing lines, after reading plainly enough that his presence was unwelcome; and Harry stood with his hands in his pockets, looking on as his sister put away the tea-caddy.

"Will you not be late, Harry?"

"Perhaps," he said, ill-humouredly. "I shall be there as soon as old bottle nose, I daresay."

"How long is Mr Pradelle going to stay?"

"Long as I like."

There was a pause. Then Harry continued: "He's a friend of mine, a gentleman, and Aunt Marguerite likes him to stay."

"Yes," said Louise gravely. "Aunt Marguerite seems to like him."

"And so do you, only you're such a precious coquette."

Louise raised her eyebrows. This was news to her, but she said nothing.

"The more any one sees of Pradelle the more one likes him. Deal nicer fellow than that Scotch prig Leslie."

There was a slight flush on Louise Vine's face, but she did not speak, merely glanced at the clock.

"All right; I'm not going yet."

Then, changing his manner —

"Oh, Lou, you can't think what a life it is," he cried impetuously.

"Why, Harry, it ought to be a very pleasant one."

"What, with your nose over an account book, and every time you happen to look up, old Crampton staring at you as much as to say, 'Why don't you go on?'"

"Never mind, dear. Try and think that it is for your good."

"For my good!" he said with a mocking laugh.

"Yes, and to please father. Why, Harry, dear, is it not something to have a chance to redeem your character?"

"Redeem my grandmother! I've never lost it. Why, Lou, it's too bad. Here's father rich as a Jew, and Uncle Luke with no end of money."

"Has he, Harry?" said Louise thoughtfully. "Really I don't know."

"I'm sure he has – lots. A jolly old miser, and no one to leave it to; and I can't see then why I should be ground down to work like an errand boy."

"Don't make a sentimental grievance of it, dear, but go and do your duty like a man."

"If I do my duty like a man I shall go and try to recover the French estates which my father neglects."

"No, don't do that, dear; go and get my old school spelling-book and read the fable of the dog and the shadow."

"There you go, sneering again. You women can't understand a fellow. Here am I worried to death for money, and have to drudge as old Van Heldre's clerk."

"Worried for money, Harry? What nonsense!"

"I am. You don't know. I say, Lou, dear."

"Now, Harry! you will be so late."

"I won't go at all if you don't listen to me. Look here; I want fifty pounds."

"What for?"

"Never mind. Will you lend it to me?"

"But what can you want with fifty pounds, Harry? You're not in debt?"

"You've got some saved up. Now, lend it to me, there's a good girl; I'll pay you again, honour bright."

"Harry, I've lent you money till I'm tired of lending, and you never do pay me back."

"But I will this time."

Louise shook her head.

"What, you don't believe me?"

"I believe you would pay me again if you had the money; but if I lent it you would spend it, and be as poor as ever in a month."

"Not this time, Lou. Lend it to me."

She shook her head.

"Then hang me if I don't go and ask Duncan Leslie."

"Harry! No; you would not degrade yourself to that."

"Will you lend it?"

"No."

"Then I will ask him. The poor fool will think it will please you, and lend it directly. I'll make it a hundred whilst I'm about it."

"Harry!"

"Too late now," he cried, and he hurried away.

"Oh!" ejaculated Louise, as she stood gazing after him with her cheeks burning. "No," she said, after a pause; "It was only a threat; he would not dare."

"Harry gone to his office?" said Vine, entering the room.

"Yes, dear."

"Mr Pradelle gone too?"

"Yes, dear; fishing, I think."

"Hum. Makes this house quite his home."

"Yes, papa! and do you think we are doing right?"

"Eh?" said Vine sharply, as he dragged his mind back from where it had gone under a tide-covered rock. "Oh, I see, about having that young man here. Well, Louie, it's like this: I don't want to draw the rein too tightly. Harry is at work now, and keeping to it. Van Heldre says his conduct is very fair. Harry likes Mr Pradelle, and they are old companions, so I feel disposed to wink at the intimacy, so long as our boy keeps to his business."

"Perhaps you are right, dear," said Louise.

"You don't like Mr Pradelle, my dear?"

"No, I do not."

"No fear of his robbing me of you, eh?"

"Oh, father!"

"That's right; that's right; and look here, as we're talking about that little thing which makes the world go round, please, understand this, and help me, my dear. There's to be no nonsense between Harry and Madelaine."

"Then you don't like Madelaine?"

"Eh? What? Not like her? Bless her! You've almost cause to be jealous, only you need not be, for I've room in my heart for both of you. I love her too well to let her be made uncomfortable by our family scape-grace. Dear me! I'm sure that it has."

"Have you lost anything, dear?"

"Yes, a glass stopper. Perhaps I left it in my room. Mustn't lose it; stoppers cost money."

"And here's some money of yours, father."

"Eh? Oh, that change."

"Twenty-five shillings."

"Put it on the chimney-piece, my dear; I'll take it presently. We will not be hard on Harry. Let him have his companion. We shall get him round by degrees. Ah, here comes some one to tempt you away."

In effect Madelaine was passing the window on her way to the front entrance; but Vine forgot all about his glass stopper for the moment, and threw open the glass door.

"Come in here, my dear," he said. "We were just talking about you."

"About me, Mr Vine? Whatever were you saying?"

"Slander of course, of course."

"My father desired to be kindly remembered, and I was to say, 'Very satisfactory so far.'"

"Very satisfactory so far?" said Vine, dreamily.

"He said you would know what it meant."

"To be sure – to be sure. Louie, my dear, I'm afraid your aunt is right. My brain is getting to be like that of a jelly fish."

He nodded laughingly and left the room.

"Did you meet Harry as you came?" said Louise, as soon as they were alone.

"Yes; but he kept on one side of the street, and I was on the other."

"Didn't he cross over to speak?"

"No; he couldn't see the Dutch fraülein – the Dutch doll."

"Oh, that's cruel, Maddy. I did not think my aunt's words could sting you."

"Well, sometimes I don't think they do, but at others they seem to rankle. But, look, isn't that Mr Pradelle coming?"

For answer Louise caught her friend's hand to hurry her out of the room before Pradelle entered.

Chapter Eleven
Aunt Marguerite studies a Comedy

That morning after breakfast Aunt Marguerite sat by her open window in her old-fashioned French *peignoir*.

She saw Pradelle go out, and she smiled and beamed as he turned to look up at her window, and raised his hat before proceeding down into the back lanes of the port, to inveigle an urchin into the task of obtaining for him a pot of ragworms for bait.

Soon after she saw her nephew go out, but he did not raise his head. On the contrary, he bent it down, and heaved up his shoulders like a wet sailor, as he went on to his office.

"*Mon pauvre enfant*!" she murmured, as she half-closed her eyes, and kissed the tips of the fingers. "Just wait a while, Henri, *mon enfant*, and all shall be well."

There was a lapse of time devoted to thought, and then Aunt Marguerite's eyes glistened with malice as she saw Madelaine approach.

"Pah!" she ejaculated softly. "This might be Amsterdam or the Boompjes. Wretched Dutch wench! How can George tolerate her presence here?"

Then Pradelle came back, but he did not look up this time, merely went to the door and entered, his eyes looking searchingly about as if in search of Louise.

Lastly, a couple of particularly unseamanlike men, dressed in shiny tarpaulin hats and pea-jackets, with earrings and very smooth pomatumy hair, came into sight. Each man carried a pack and a big stick, and as they drew near their eyes wandered over window and door in a particularly searching way.

They did not come to the front, but in a slouching, furtive way went past the front of the house, and round to the back, where the next minute there was a new tapping made by the knob of a stick on a door, and a moment later a buzzing murmur of voices arose.

Aunt Marguerite had nothing whatever to do, and the murmur interested her to the extent of making her rise, go across her room, and through a door at the back into her bed-chamber, where an open lattice window had a chair beneath, and the said window being just over the back entrance from whence the murmur came. Aunt Marguerite had nothing to do but go and sit down there unseen, and hear every word that was said.

"Yes," said the familiar voice of brown-faced, black-haired Liza; "they're beautiful, but I haven't got the money."

"That there red ribbon'd just soot you, my lass," said a deep voice, so fuzzy that it must have come from under a woollen jacket.

"Just look at that there hankychy, too," said another deep voice. "Did you ever see a better match?"

"Never," said the other deep voice emphatically.

"Yes, they're very lovely, but I ain't got the money. I let mother have all I had this week."

"Never mind the gashly money, my lass," said the first deep-voiced man huskily, "ain'tcher got nothing you can sell?"

Then arose a good deal of murmuring whisper, and Aunt Marguerite's lips became like a pale pink line drawn across the lower part of her face, and both her eyes were closely shut.

"Well, you wait," was the concluding sentence of the whispered trio, and then the door was heard to shut.

The click of a latch rose to where Aunt Marguerite sat, and then there was a trio once again – a whispered trio – ending with a little rustling, and the sound of heavy steps.

Then the door closed, and Liza, daughter of Poll Perrow, the fish-woman, who carried a heavy maund by the help of a strap across her forehead, hurried up to her bedroom, and threw herself upon her knees as she spread two or three yards of brilliant red ribbon on the bed, and tastefully placed beside the ribbon an orange silk kerchief, whose united colours made her dark eyes sparkle with delight.

The quick ringing of a bell put an end to the colour-worship, and Liza, with a hasty ejaculation, opened her box, thrust in her new treasures, dropped the lid, and locked it again before hurrying down to the dining-room, where she found her young mistress, her master, and Madelaine Van Heldre.

"There was some change on the chimney-piece, Liza," said Louise. "Did you see it?"

"No, miss."

"It is very strange. You are quite sure you did not take it, papa?"

"Quite, my dear."

"That will do, Liza."

The girl went out, looking scared.

"It is very strange," said Vine.

"Yes, dear; and it is a great trouble to me. This is the third time money has been missing lately. I don't like to suspect people, but one seems to be forced."

"But surely, Louie, dear, that poor girl would not take it."

"I have always tried to hope not, Maddy," said Louise sadly.

"You had better make a change."

"Send her away, father? How can I do that? How can I recommend her for another situation?"

"Ah! it's a puzzle – it's a puzzle," said Vine irritably. "One of the great difficulties of domestic service. I shall soon begin to think that your uncle Luke is right after all. He has no troubles, eh, Louise?"

She looked up in his face with a peculiar smile, but made no reply. Her father, however, seemed to read her look, and continued:

"Ah, well, I daresay you are right, my dear; we can't get away from trouble; and if we don't have one kind we have another. Get more than our share, though, in this house."

Louise smiled in his face, and the comical aspect of chagrin displayed resulted in a general laugh.

"Is one of the sea-anemones dead?"

"Yes, confound it! and it has poisoned the water, so that I'm afraid the rest will go."

"I think we can get over that trouble," said Louise, laughing. "It will be an excuse for a pleasant ramble with you."

"Yes," said Vine dryly, "but we shall not get over the trouble of the thief quite so well. I'm afraid these Perrows are a dishonest family. I'll speak to the girl."

"No, father, leave it to me."

"Very well, my child; but I think you ought to speak." The old man left the room, the bell was rung, and Liza summoned, when a scene of tears and protestations arose, resulting in a passionate declaration that Liza would tell her mother, that she would not stop in a house were she was going to be suspected, and that she had never taken anybody's money but her own.

"This is the third time that I have missed money, Liza, or I would not have spoken. If you took it, confess like a good girl, and we'll forgive you if you promise never to take anything of the kind again."

"I can't confess, miss, and won't confess," sobbed the girl. "Mother shall come and speak to you. I wouldn't do such a thing."

"Where did you get the money with which you bought the red ribbon and orange kerchief this morning, Liza?" said a voice at the door.

All started to see that Aunt Marguerite was there looking on, and apparently the recipient of all that had been said.

Liza stood with eyes dilated, and jaw dropped.

"Then you've been at my box," she suddenly exclaimed. "Ah, what a shame!"

"At your box, you wretched creature!" said Aunt Marguerite contemptuously. "Do you suppose I should go into your room?"

"You've been opening my box," said the girl again, more angrily; "and it's a shame."

"I saw her take them up to her room, Louise. My dear, she was buying them under my window, of some pedlar. You had better send her away."

Liza did not wait to be sent away from the room, but ran out sobbing, to hurry up-stairs to her bed-chamber, open her box, and see if the brilliant specimens of silken fabric were safe, and then cry over them till they were blotched with her tears.

"A bad family," said Aunt Marguerite. "I'm quite sure that girl stole my piece of fine lace, and gave it to that wretched woman your uncle Luke encourages."

"No, no, aunt, you lost that piece of lace one day when you were out."

"Nonsense, child! your memory is not good. Who is that with you? Oh, I see; Miss Van Heldre."

Aunt Marguerite, after suddenly becoming aware of the presence of Madelaine, made a most ceremonious curtsey, and then sailed out of the room.

"Louise must be forced to give up the companionship of that wretched Dutch girl," she said as she reached her own door, at which she paused to listen to Liza sobbing.

"I wonder what Miss Vine would have been like," thought Madelaine, "if she had married some good sensible man, and had a large family to well employ her mind?" Then she asked herself what kind of man she would have selected as possessing the necessary qualifications, and concluded that he should have been such a man as Duncan Leslie, and wondered whether he would marry her friend.

"Why, Madelaine," said Louise, breaking her chain of thought, "what are you thinking about?"

"Thinking about?" said the girl, starting, and colouring slightly. "Oh, I was thinking about Mr Leslie just then."

Chapter Twelve
Uncle Luke's Spare Cash

"Late again," said old Crampton, as Harry Vine entered the office.

"How I do hate the sight of that man's nose!" said the young man; and he stared hard, as if forced by some attraction.

The old clerk frowned, and felt annoyed. "I beg pardon," he said. "Granted," said Harry, coolly. "I said I beg pardon, Mr Harry Vine."

"I heard you."

"But I thought you spoke."

"No," grumbled Harry. "I didn't speak."

"Then I will," said old Crampton merrily. "Good morning, Mr Harry Vine," and he rattled the big ruler by his desk.

"Eh? oh, yes, I see. Didn't say it as I came in. Good morning, Mr Crampton."

"Lesson for the proud young upstart in good behaviour," grumbled old Crampton.

"Mother him!" muttered Harry, as he took his place at his desk, opened a big account book Crampton placed before him, with some amounts to transfer from one that was smaller, and began writing.

But as he wrote, the figures seemed to join hands and dance before him; then his pen ceased to form others, and an imaginary picture painted itself on the delicately tinted blue paper with its red lines – a pleasant landscape in fair France with sunny hill-sides on which ranged in rows were carefully cultured vines. To the north and cast were softened bosky woods, and dominating all, one of those antique castellated châteaux with pepperbox towers and gilded vanes, such as he had seen in pictures or read of in some books.

"If I only had the money," thought Harry, as he entered a sum similar to that which Pradelle had named. "He knows all these things. He has good advice from friends, and if we won, – Hah!"

The château rose before his eyes again, bathed in sunshine. Then he pictured the terrace overlooking the vineyards – a grey old stone terrace, with many seats and sheltering trees, and along that terrace walked just such a maiden as Aunt Marguerite had described.

Scratch! Scratch! Scratch! Scratch! His pen and Crampton's pen; and he had no money, and Pradelle's project to borrow as he had suggested was absurd.

Ah, if he only had eighty-one pounds ten shillings and sixpence! the sum he now placed in neat figures in their appropriate columns.

Old Crampton tilted back his tall stool, swung himself round, and lowered himself to the ground. Then crossing the office, he went into Van Heldre's private room, and there was the rattle of a key, a creaking hinge, as an iron door was swung open; and directly after the old man returned.

Harry Vine could not see his hands, and he did not raise his eyes to watch the old clerk; but in the imagination which so readily pictured the château that was not in Spain, he seemed to see as he heard every movement of the fat white fingers, when a canvas bag was dumped down on the mahogany desk, the string untied, and a little heap of coins were poured out. Then followed the scratching of those coins upon the mahogany, as they were counted, ranged in little piles, and finally, after an entry had been checked, they were replaced in the bag, which the old man bore back into the safe in the private room.

"Fifty or a hundred pounds," said Harry to himself, as a curious sensation of heat came into his cheeks, to balance which there seemed to be a peculiarly cold thrill running up his spine, to the nape of his neck.

"Anybody at home?"

"Yes, sir; here we are hard at work."

Harry had looked up sharply to see Uncle Luke standing in the opening, a grim-looking grey figure in his old Norfolk jacket and straw hat, one hand resting on his heavy stick, the other carrying a battered fish-basket. The old man's face was in shadow, for the sunshine streamed in behind him; but there was plenty of light to display his grim, sardonic features, as, after a short nod to Crampton, he gazed from under his shaggy brows piercingly at his nephew.

"Well, quill-driver," he said sneeringly; "doing something useful at last?"

"Morning, uncle," said Harry shortly; and he muttered to himself, "I should like to throw the ledger at him."

"Hope he's a good boy, hey?"

"Oh, he's getting on, Mr Luke Vine – slowly," said Crampton unwillingly. "He'll do better by-and-by."

A sharp remark was on Harry's lips, but he checked it for a particular reason. Uncle Luke might have the money he wanted.

"Time he did," said the old man. "Look here, boy," he continued with galling, sneering tone in his voice. "Go and tell your master I want to see him."

Harry drew a long breath, and his teeth gritted together.

"I caught a splendid conger this morning," continued Uncle Luke, giving his basket a swing, "and I've brought your master half."

"My master!" muttered Harry.

"Like conger-pie, boy?"

"No," said Harry, shortly.

"More nice than wise," said Uncle Luke. "Always were. There, be quick. I want to see your master."

"To see my master," thought Harry, with a strange feeling of exasperation in his breast as he looked up at Crampton.

Crampton was looking up at him with eyes which said very clearly, "Well, why don't you go?"

"They'll make me an errand boy next," said the young man to himself, as after twisting his locket round and round like a firework, he swung himself down, "and want me to clean the knives and boots and shoes."

"Tell him I'm in a hurry," said Uncle Luke, as Harry reached the door which led into the private house along a passage built and covered with glass, by one side of what was originally a garden.

"Ah," said Uncle Luke, going closer to old Crampton's desk, and taking down from where it rested on two brass hooks the heavy ebony ruler. "Nice bit o' wood that."

"Yes, sir," said the old clerk, in the fidgety way of a workman who objects to have his tools touched.

"Pretty weighty," continued Uncle Luke, balancing it in his hand. "Give a man a pretty good topper that, eh?"

"Yes, Mr Luke Vine – I should like to give him one with it," thought Crampton.

"Do for a constable's staff, or to kill burglars, eh?"

"Capitally, sir."

"Hah! You don't get burglars here, though, do you?"

"No, sir; never had any yet."

"Good job, too," said Uncle Luke, putting the ruler back in its place, greatly to Crampton's relief. "Rather an awkward cub to lick into shape, my nephew, eh?"

"Rather, sir."

"Well, you must lick away, Crampton, not with that ruler though," he chuckled. "Time something was made of him – not a bad sort of boy; but spoiled."

"I shall do my best, Mr Luke Vine," said Crampton dryly; "but I must tell you candidly, sir, he's too much of the gentleman for us, and he feels it."

"Bah!"

"Not at all the sort of young man I should have selected for a clerk."

"Never mind; make the best of him."

"Mr Van Heldre is coming, sir," said Harry coldly, as he re-entered the office.

"Bah! I didn't tell you to bring him here. I want to go in there."

As Luke Vine spoke, he rose and moved to the door.

"Be a good boy," he said, turning with a peculiar smile at his nephew. "I daresay you'll get on."

"Oh!" muttered Harry, as he retook his place at his desk; "how I should like to tell you, Uncle Luke, just what I think."

The door closed behind the old man, who had nearly reached the end of the long passage, when he met Van Heldre.

"Ah, Luke Vine, I was just coming."

"Go back," said the visitor, making a stab at the merchant with his stick. "Brought you something. Where's Mrs Van Heldre?"

"In the breakfast-room. Come along."

Van Heldre clapped the old man on the shoulder, and led him into the room where Mrs Van Heldre was seated at work.

"Ah, Mr Luke Vine," she cried, "who'd have thought of seeing you?"

"Not you. How are you? Where's the girl?"

"Gone up to your brother's."

"Humph! to gad about and idle with Louie. I suppose. Here, I've brought you some fish. Caught it at daylight this morning. Ring for a dish."

"It's very kind and thoughtful of you, Luke Vine," said Mrs Van Heldre, with her pink face dimpling as she rang the bell, and then trotted to the door which she opened, and cried, "Bring in a large dish, Esther! I always like to save the servant's legs if I can," she continued as she returned to her seat, while Van Heldre stood with his hands in his pockets, waiting. He knew his visitor.

Just then a neat-looking maid-servant entered with a large blue dish, and stood holding it by the door, gazing at the quaint-looking old man, sitting with the basket between his legs, and his heavy stick resting across his knees.

"Put it down and go."

The girl placed the dish on the table hurriedly, and left the room.

"See if she has gone."

"No fear," said Van Heldre, obeying, to humour his visitor. "I don't think my servants listen at doors."

"Don't trust 'em, or anybody else," said Uncle Luke with a grim look, as he opened his basket wide. "Going to trust her?"

"Well, I'm sure, Mr Luke Vine!" cried Mrs Van Heldre, "I believe you learn up rude things to say."

"He can't help it," said Van Heldre laughing. "Yes," he continued, with a droll look at his wife, which took her frown away, "I think we'll trust her, Luke, my lad – as far as the fish is concerned."

"Eh! What?" said Uncle Luke, snatching his hands from his basket. "What do you mean?"

"That the dish is waiting for the bit of conger."

"Let it wait," said the old man snappishly. "You're too, clever Van – too clever. Look here; how are you getting on with that boy?"

"Oh, slowly. Rome was not built in a day."

"No," chuckled the old man, "no. Work away, and make him a useful member of society – like his aunt, eh Mrs Van."

"Useful!" cried Mrs Van. "Ah!"

Then old Luke chuckled and drew the fish from the basket.

"Fine one, ain't it?" he said.

"A beauty," cried Mrs Van Heldre ecstatically.

"Pshah!" ejaculated Uncle Luke. "Ma'am you don't care for it a bit; but there's more than I want, and it will help keep your servants."

"It would, Luke," said Van Heldre laughing as the fish was laid in the dish, "but they will not touch it. Well?"

"Eh? What do you mean by well?" snorted the old man with a suspicious look. "Out with it."

"Out with what?"

"What you have brought."

The two men gazed in each other's faces, the merchant looking half amused, the visitor annoyed; but his dry countenance softened into a smile and he turned to Mrs Van Heldre. "Artful!" he said dryly. "Don't you find him too cunning to get on with?"

"I should think not indeed," said Mrs Van Heldre indignantly.

"Might have known you'd say that," sneered Uncle Luke. "What a weak, foolish woman you are!"

"Yes, I am, thank goodness! I wish you'd have a little more of my foolishness in you, Mr Luke Vine. There, I beg your pardon. What have you got there, shrimps?"

"Yes," said Uncle Luke grimly, as he brought a brown paper parcel from the bottom of his basket, where it had lain under the wet piece of conger, whose stain was on the cover, "some nice crisp fresh shrimps. Here, Van – catch."

He threw the packet to his brother's old friend and comrade, by whom it was deftly caught, while Mrs Van Heldre looked on in a puzzled way.

"Put 'em in your safe till I find another investment for 'em. Came down by post this morning, and I don't like having 'em at home. Out fishing so much."

"How much is there?" said Van Heldre, opening the fishy brown paper, and taking therefrom sundry crisp new Bank of England notes.

"Five hundred and fifty," said Uncle Luke. "Count 'em over."

This was already being done, Van Heldre having moistened a finger, and begun handling the notes in regular bank-clerk style.

"All right; five fifty," he said.

"And he said they were shrimps," said Mrs Van Heldre.

"Eh? I did?" said Uncle Luke with a grim look and a twinkle of the eye. "Nonsense, it must have been you."

"Look here, Luke Vine," said Van Heldre; "is it any use to try and teach you at your time of life?"

"Not a bit; so don't try."

"But why expose yourself to all this trouble and risk? Why didn't your broker send you a cheque?"

"Because I wouldn't let him."

"Why not have a banking account, and do all your money transactions in an ordinary way?"

"Because I like to do things in my own way. I don't trust bankers, nor anybody else."

"Except my husband," said Mrs Van Heldre, beaming.

"Nonsense, ma'am, I don't trust him a bit. You do as I tell you, Van. Put those notes in your safe till I ask you for them. I had that bit of money in a company I doubted, so I sold out. I shall put it in something else soon."

"You're a queer fellow, Luke."

"Eh? I'm not the only one of my family, am I? What's to become of brother George when that young scape-grace has ruined him? What's to become of Louie, when we're all dead and buried, and out of all this worry and care? What's to become of my mad sister, who squandered her money on a French scamp, and made what she calls her heart bankrupt?"

"Nearly done questioning?" said Van Heldre, doubling the notes longwise.

"No, I haven't, and don't play with that money as if it was your wife's curl-papers."

Van Heldre shrugged his shoulders, and placed the notes in his pocket.

"And as I was saying when your husband interrupted me so rudely, Mrs Van Heldre, what's to become of that boy by-and-by? Money's useful sometimes, though I don't want it myself."

"Ah! you needn't look at me, Mr Luke Vine. It's of no use for you to pretend to be a cynic with me."

"Never pretend anything, ma'am," said Uncle Luke rising; "and don't be rude. I did mean to come in and have some conger-pie to-night; now I won't."

"No, you didn't mean to do anything of the sort, Luke Vine," said Mrs Van Heldre tartly; "I know you better than that. If I've asked you to come and have a bit of dinner with us like a Christian once, I've asked you five hundred times, and one might just as well ask the hard rock."

"Just as well, ma'am; just as well. There, I'm going. Take care of that money, Van. I shall think out a decent investment one of these days."

"When you want it there it is," said Van Heldre quietly.

"Hope it will be. And now look here; I want to know a little more about the Count."

"The Count?" said Mrs Van Heldre.

"My nephew, ma'am. And I hope you feel highly honoured at having so distinguished a personage in your husband's service."

"What does he mean, dear?"

"Mean, ma'am? Why you know how his aunt has stuffed his head full of nonsense about French estates."

"Oh! that, and the old title," cried Mrs Van Heldre. "There, don't say any more about it, for if there is anything that worries me, it's all that talk about French descents."

"Why, hang it, ma'am, you don't think your husband is a Frenchman, and that my sister, who has made it all the study of her life, is wrong?"

"I don't know and I don't care whether my husband's a Dutchman or a double Dutchman by birth; all I know is he's a very good husband to me and a good father to his child; and I thank God, Mr Luke Vine, every night that things are just as they are; so that's all I've got to say."

"Tut – tut! tut – tut! This is all very dreadful, Van," said Uncle Luke, fastening his basket, and examining his old straw hat to see which was the best side to wear in front; "I can't stand any more of this. Here, do you want a bit of advice?"

"Yes, if it's good."

"Ah! I was forgetting about the Count. Keep the curb tight and keep him in use."

"I shall do both, Luke, for George's sake," said Van Heldre warmly.

"Good, lad! – I mean, more fool you!" said Uncle Luke, stumping out after ignoring extended hands and giving each a nod. "That's all."

He left the room, closing the door after him as loudly as he could without the shock being considered a bang; and directly after the front door was served in the same way, and they saw him pass the window.

"Odd fish, Luke," said Van Heldre.

"Odd! I sometimes think he's half mad."

"Nonsense, my dear; no more mad than Hamlet. Here he is again."

For the old man had come back, and was tapping the window-frame with his stick.

"What's the matter?" said Van Heldre, throwing open the window, when Uncle Luke thrust in the basket he carried and his stick, resting his arms on the window-sill.

"Don't keep that piece of conger in this hot room all the morning," he said pointing with his stick.

"Why, goodness me, Luke Vine, how can you talk like that?" cried Mrs Van Heldre indignantly.

"Easy enough, ma'am. Forgot my bit of advice," said Uncle Luke, speaking to his old friend, but talking at Mrs Van Heldre.

"What is it?"

"Send that girl of yours to a boarding school."

"Bless my heart, Luke Vine, what for?" cried the lady of the house. "Why, she finished two years ago."

"To keep her out of the way of George Vine's stupid boy, and because her mother's spoiling her. Morning."

Chapter Thirteen
To Reap the Wind

Late dinner was nearly over – at least late according to the ideas of the West-Country family, who sat down now directly Harry returned from his office work. Aunt Marguerite, after a week in her bedroom, had come down that day, the trouble with Liza exciting her; and that maiden had rather an unpleasant time as she waited at table, looking red-eyed and tearful, for Aunt Marguerite watched her with painful, basilisk-like stare all through the meal, the consequence being a series of mishaps and blunders, ending with the spilling of a glass dish of clotted cream.

With old-fashioned politeness, Aunt Marguerite tried to take Pradelle's attention from the accident.

"Are you going for a walk this evening, Mr Pradelle?"

"Yes," he said; "I daresay we shall smoke a cigar together after the labours of the day."

Aunt Marguerite sighed and looked pained.

"Tobacco! Yes, Mr Pradelle," she sighed; and she continued, in a low tone, "Do pray try to use your influence on poor Henri, to coax him from these bad pursuits."

Harry was talking cynically to his sister and Madelaine, who had been pressed by Vine to stay, a message having been sent down to the Van Heldres to that effect.

"The old story," he said to himself; and then, as he caught his sister's eye after she had gazed uneasily in the direction of her aunt; "yes, she's talking about me. Surely you don't mind that."

He, too, glanced now in Aunt Marguerite's direction, as Pradelle talked to her in a slow, impressive tone.

"Ah! no," said Aunt Marguerite, in a playful whisper, "nothing of the kind. A little boy and girl badinage in the past. Look for yourself, Mr Pradelle; there is no warmth there! My nephew cannot marry a Dutch doll."

"Lover's tiff, perhaps," said Pradelle.

"No, no," said Aunt Marguerite, shaking her head confidently. "Harry is a little wild and changeable, but he pays great heed to my words and advice. Still I want your help, Mr Pradelle. Human nature is weak. Harry must win back his French estates."

"Hear that, Louie?" said Harry, for Aunt Marguerite had slightly raised her voice.

"Yes, I heard," said Louise quietly.

"Aunt is sick of seeing her nephew engaged in a beggarly trade."

"For which Mr Henry Vine seems much too good," said Madelaine to herself, as she darted an indignant glance at the young man. "Oh, Harry, what a weak, foolish boy you are! I don't love you a bit. It was all a mistake."

"I hate business," continued Harry, as he encountered her eyes fixed upon him.

"Yes," said Louise coldly, as an angry feeling of annoyance shot through her on her friend's behalf. "Harry has no higher ambition than to lead a lap-dog kind of life in attendance upon Aunt Marguerite, and listening to her stories of middle-aged chivalry."

"Thank goodness?" said Harry, as they rose from the table. "No, no, aunt, I don't want any coffee. I should stifle if I stopped here much longer."

Aunt Marguerite frowned as the young man declined the invitation to come to her side.

"Only be called a lap-dog again. Here Vic, let's go and have a cigar down by the sea."

"Certainly," said Pradelle, smiling at all in turn.

"Yes, the room is warm," said the host, who had hardly spoken all through the dinner, being deep in thought upon one of his last discoveries.

Harry gave his sister a contemptuous look, which she returned with one half sorrowful, half pitying, from which he turned to glance at Madelaine, who was standing by her friend.

Aunt Marguerite smiled, for there was certainly the germ of an incurable rupture between these two, and she turned away her head to hide her triumph.

"She will never forgive him for speaking as he did about the beggarly trade." Then crossing with a graceful old-world carriage, she laid her hand on Madelaine's arm.

"Come into the drawing-room, my dear," she said, smiling, and to Madelaine it seemed that her bright, malicious-looking eyes were full of triumph. "You and I will have a good hard fight over genealogies, till you confess that I am right, and that your father and you have no claim to Huguenot descent."

"Oh, no, Miss Vine," said the girl, laughing, "my father must fight his own battle. As for me, I give up. Perhaps you are right, and I am only a Dutch girl after all."

"Oh, I wish we were back in London!" cried Harry as they strolled along towards the cliff walk.

"Ah, this is a dead-and-alive place, and no mistake," said Pradelle.

"Why don't you leave it then?" said Harry sulkily. "You are free."

"No, I am not. I don't like to see a friend going to the bad; and besides I have your aunt's commission to try and save you from sinking down into a miserable tradesman."

"Why don't you save me, then?"

"That's just like you. Look here, sink all cowardice, and go lip to the old boy like a Trojan. Plenty of money, hasn't he?"

"I suppose so. I don't know."

"He's sure to have."

"But he's such an old porcupine."

"Never mind. Suppose you do get a few pricks, what of that? Think of the future."

"But that venture must be all over now."

"What of that? You get the money and I can find a dozen ways of investing it. Look here, Harry, you profess to by my friend, and to have confidence in my judgment, and yet you won't trust me."

"I trusted you over several things, and see how I lost."

"Come, that's unkind. A man can't always win. There, never look back, look forward. Show some fight, and make one good plunge to get out of that miserable shop-boy sort of life."

"Come along then."

"You'll go up and ask him?"

"Yes, if you'll back me up."

"Back you up, lad? I should think I will. Lead on, I'll follow thee."

"We'll do it sensibly, then. If you speak before Uncle Luke in that theatrical way we shall come down faster then we go up."

"I'll talk to the old man like a young Solomon. And he shall say that never did youth choose more wisely for his friend than Harry Vine, otherwise Henri, Comte des Vignes."

"Look here," said Harry, peevishly – "'otherwise Comte des Vignes.' Why don't you say *alias* at once? Why, if the old man heard that, he'd want to know how long it was since you were in a police-court. Here, you'd better stay down here."

"All right, my dear fellow. Anything to help you on."

"No; I'd rather you came too."

There was a pause in a niche of the rocks, and then, after the scratching of a match, the young men went up the cliff path, smoking furiously, as they prepared themselves for the attack.

Chapter Fourteen
Diogenes in his Tub

Uncle Luke was in very good spirits. He had rid himself of his incubus, as he called the sum of money, and though he would not own it, he always felt better when he had had a little converse with his fellow-creatures. His lonely life was very miserable, and the more so that he insisted upon its being the highest form of happiness to exist in hermit fashion, as the old saints proved.

The desolate hut in its rocky niche looked miserable when he climbed up back on his return from Van Heldre's, so he stopped by the granite wall and smiled.

"Finest prospect in all Cornwall," he said, half aloud; "freshest air. Should like to blow up Leslie's works, though."

The door was locked, but it yielded to the heavy key which secured it against visitors, though they were very rare upon that rocky shelf.

He was the more surprised then, after his frugal mid-day meal, by a sharp rapping at the door, and on going he stared angrily at the two sturdy sailor-dressed pedlars, who were resting their packs on the low granite wall.

"Can we sell a bit o' bacco, or a pound o' tea, master?" said the man who had won over Liza to the purchase of his coloured silk.

"Bang!"

That was Uncle Luke's answer as the man spoke to him, and his fellow swept the interior of the cottage with one quick glance.

"Steal as soon as sell any day," grumbled Uncle Luke. "Tobacco and tea, indeed!"

Outside one of the men gave his companion a wink and a laugh, as he shouldered his pack, while the other chuckled and followed his example.

Meanwhile Uncle Luke had seated himself at his rough deal table, and written a long business letter to his lawyer in London.

This missive he read over twice, made an addition to the paragraph dealing most particularly with the mortgage on which he had been invited to lend, and then carefully folded the square post paper he used in old-fashioned letter shape, tucking one end into the other from objects of economy, so as to dispense with envelopes, but necessitating all the same the use of sealing-wax and a light.

However, it pleased him to think that he was saving, and he lit a very thin candle, took the stick of red wax from a drawer, a curious old-fashioned signet gold ring bearing the family crest, from a nail where it hung over the fireplace, and then sitting down as if to some very important piece of business, he burned his wax, laid on a liberal quantity, and then impressed the seal. This done, the ring was hung once more upon its nail, and the old man stood gazing at it and thinking. The next minute he took down the ring, and slipped it on one of his fingers, and worked it up and down, trying it on another finger, and then going back to the first.

"Used to fit too tightly," he said; "now one's fingers are little more than bone."

He held up the ring to the light, his white hand looking very thin and wasted, and the worn gold glistened and the old engraved blood-stone showed its design almost as clearly as when it was first cut.

"'Roy et Foy!'" muttered the old man, reading the motto beneath the crest. "Bit of vanity. Margaret asked where it was, last time I saw her. Let's see; I lost you twice, once when I wore you as I was fishing off the pier, and once on the black rock you slipped off my bony finger, and each time the sea washed you into a crack."

He smiled as he gazed at the ring, and there was a pleasant, handsome trace of what he had been as a young man in his refined features.

"Please the young dog – old family ring," he muttered. "Might sell it and make a pound. No, he may have it when I'm gone. Can't be so very long."

He hung the ring upon the nail once more, and spent the rest of the afternoon gazing out to sea, sometimes running over the past, but more often looking out for the glistening and flashing of the sea beneath where a flock of gulls were hovering over some shoal of fish.

It was quite evening when there was a staid, heavy step and the click of nailed boots, as the old fish-woman came toiling up the cliff path, her basket on her back, and the band which supported it across her brow.

"Any fish to sell, Master Vine?" she said in a sing-song tone. "I looked down the pier, but you weren't there."

"How could I be there when I'm up here, Poll Perrow?"

"Ah, to be sure; how could you?" said the old woman, trying to nod her head, but without performing the feat, on account of her basket. "Got any fish to sell?"

"No. Yes," said the old man.

"That's right. I want some to-night. Will you go and fetch it?"

"Yes. Stop there," said Uncle Luke sourly, as he saw a chance of making a few pence, and wondered whether he would get enough from his customer.

"Mind my sitting down inside, Master Luke Vine, sir? It's hot, and I'm tired; and it's a long way up here."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.