Fenn George Manville

This Man's Wife

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Fenn G.

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Содержание

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Volume One – Chapter One.
The New Curate – Christie Bayle's Mistake

If that hat had occupied its proper place it would have been perched upon a stake to scare the sparrows away from the young peas, but the wretched weather-beaten structure was upon the old man's head, matching well with his coat, as he busied himself that pleasant morning dibbling in broccoli-plants with the pointed handle of an old spade.

The soft genial rain had fallen heavily during the night, thoroughly soaking the ground, which sent forth a delicious steaming incense quivering like visible transparent air in the morning sun. There had been a month's drought, and flower and fruit had languished; but on the previous evening dark clouds had gathered above the woods, swept over King's Castor, and, as Gemp said, "For twelve mortal hours the rain had poured down."

Old Gemp was wrong: it had not poured, but stolen softly from the kindly heavens, as if every fertilising drop had been wrapped in liquid silver velvet, and no flower was beaten flat, no thirsty vegetable soiled, but earth and plant had drunk and drunk during the long night to wake up refreshed; the soil was of a rich dark hue, in place of drab, and the birds were singing as if they meant to split their throats.

Dr Luttrell's garden was just far enough out of the town for the birds to sing. They came so far, and no farther. Once in a way, perhaps, some reckless young blackbird went right into the elder clump behind the mill, close up to the streets, and hunted snails from out of the hollow roots, and from the ivy that hung over the stone wall by the great water-tank in Thickens's garden; but that was an exception. Only one robin and the sparrows strayed so far in as that.

But with the doctor's garden it was different. There was the thick hawthorn hedge that separated it from the north road, a hedge kept carefully clipped, and with one tall stem every twelve yards that was never touched, but allowed to grow as it pleased, and to blossom every May and June into almond-scented snow, as it was blooming now. Then there was the great laurel hedge, fifteen feet high, on the north; the thick shrubbery about the red-bricked gabled house, and the dense ivy that covered it from the porch upwards and over Millicent's window, and then crawled right up the sides to the chimney stacks.

There were plenty of places for birds, and, as they were never disturbed, the doctor's was a haven where nests were made, eggs laid, and young hatched, to the terrible detriment of the doctor's fruit; but he only gave his handsome grey head a rub and laughed.

That delicious June morning as the line was stretched over the bed that had been so long prepared, and the plants that had been nursed in a frame were being planted, the foreshortening of the old man's figure was rather strange, so strange that as he came along the road looking over the hedge, and taking in long breaths of delicious scents, the Reverend Christie Bayle, the newly-appointed curate of St. Anthony's, paused to watch the planting.

He was tall, slight, and pale, looking extremely youthful in his black clerical attire; but it was the pallor of much hard study, not of ill-health, for as he had come down the road it was with a free elastic stride, and he carried his head as a man does who feels that he is young and full of hope, and thinks that this world is, after all, a very beautiful place.

But it was a delicious June morning.

True, but the Reverend Christie Bayle was just as light and elastic when he walked back to his lodgings, through the rain on the previous night, and without an umbrella. He had caught himself whistling, too, several times, and checked himself, thinking that, perhaps, he ought to cease; but somehow – it was very dark – he was thoroughly light-hearted, and he had the feeling that he had made a poor weak old woman more restful at heart during his chat with her by her bedside, and so he began whistling again.

He was not whistling now as he stopped short, looking over the hedge, watching the foreshortened figure coming down towards him, with a leg on either side of the line, the dibber in one hand, a bunch of broccoli-plants in the other. The earth was soft, and the old man's arm strong, while long practice had made him clever. He had no rule, only his eye and the line for guidance; but, as he came slowly down the row, he left behind him, at exactly two feet apart, the bright green tightly-set plants.

Whig! went the dibber: in went a plant; there was a quick poke or two, the soft earth was round the stem, and the old man went on till he reached the path, straightened himself, and began to softly rub the small of his back with the hand that held the tool.

"Good-morning," said the curate.

"Morning."

"Ladies at home?"

"No, they've gone up to the town shopping. Won't be long."

"Do you think they'd mind if I were to wait?"

"Mind? No. Come and have a look round."

"Peculiarity of the Lincolnshire folk, that they rarely say *sir* to their superiors," mused the Reverend Christie Bayle, as he entered the garden. "Perhaps they think we are not their superiors, and perhaps they are right; for what am I better than that old gardener?"

"Nice rain."

"Delicious! By Geo – I – ah, you have a beautiful garden here."

The old man gave him a droll look, and the curate's, face turned scarlet, for that old college expression had nearly slipped out.

"Yes, it's a nice bit of garden, and pretty fruitful considering. You won't mind my planting another row of these broccoli?"

"Not a bit. Pray go on, and I can talk to you. Seems too bad for me to be doing nothing, and you breaking your back."

"Oh, it won't break my back; *I'm* used to it. Well, how do you like King's Castor?"

"Very much. The place is old and quaint, and I like the country. The people are a little distant at present. They are not all so sociable as you are."

"Ah, they don't know you yet. There: that's done. Now I'm going to stick those peas."

He thrust the dibber into the earth, kicked the soil off his heavy boots, and came out on to the path rubbing his hands and looking at them.

"Shake hands with you another time."

"To be sure. Going to stick those peas, are you?"

"Yes. I've the sticks all ready."

The old man went to the top of the path, and into a nook where, already sharpened, were about a dozen bundles of clean-looking ground-birch sticks full of twigs for the pea tendrils to hold on by as they climbed.

The old fellow smiled genially, and there was something very pleasant in his clear blue eyes, florid face, and thick grey beard, which – a peculiarity in those days – he wore cut rather short, but innocent of razor.

"Shall I carry a bundle or two down?" said the curate.

"If you like."

The Reverend Christie Bayle did like, and he carried a couple of bundles down to where the peas were waiting their support. And then – they neither of them knew how it happened, only that a question arose as to whether it was better to put in pea-sticks perpendicular or diagonal, the old man being in favour of the upright, the curate of the slope – both began sticking a row, with the result that, before a quarter of a row was done, the curate had taken off his black coat, hung it upon the gnarled Ripston-pippin-tree, rolled up his shirt sleeves over a pair of white, muscular arms, and quite a race ensued.

Four rows had been stuck, and a barrow had been fetched and a couple of spades, for the digging and preparing of a patch for some turnips, when, spade in hand, the curate paused and wiped his forehead. “You seem to like gardening, parson.”

“I do,” was the reply. “I quite revel in the smell of the newly turned earth on a morning like this, only it makes me so terribly hungry.”

“Ah, yes, so it does me. Well, let’s dig this piece, and then you can have a mouthful of lunch with me.”

“Thank you, no; I’ll help you dig this piece, and then I must go. I’ll come in another time. I want to see more of the garden.”

There was about ten minutes’ steady digging, during which the curate showed that he was no mean hand with the spade, and then the old man paused for a moment to scrape the adherent soil from the broad blade.

“My master will be back soon,” he said; “and then there’ll be some lunch; and, oh! here they are.”

The Reverend Christie Bayle had been so intent upon lifting that great spadeful of black earth without crumbling, that he had not heard the approaching footsteps, and from behind the yew hedge that sheltered them from the flower-garden, two ladies and a tall, handsome-looking man suddenly appeared, awaking the curate to the fact that he was in his shirt sleeves, digging, with his hat on a gooseberry-bush, his coat in an apple-tree, and his well-blackened boots covered with soil.

He was already flushed with his exercise. He turned of a deeper red now, as he saw the pleasant-looking, elderly lady give her silvery-grey curls a shake, the younger lady gaze from one to the other as if astonished, and the tall, dark gentleman suppress a smile as he raised his eyebrows slightly, and seemed to be amused.

The curate thrust his spade into the ground, bowed hurriedly, took a long step and snatched his hat from the gooseberry-bush, and began to hastily roll down his sleeves.

“Oh, never mind them,” said his companion. “Adam was not ashamed of his arms. Here, my dears, this is our new curate, Mr Bayle, the first clergyman we’ve had who could use a spade. Mr Bayle – my wife, my daughter Millicent. Mr Hallam, from the bank.”

The Reverend Christie Bayle’s face was covered with dew, and he longed to beat a retreat from the presence of the pleasant-faced elderly lady; to make that retreat a rout, as he met the large, earnest grey eyes of “my daughter Millicent,” and saw as if through a mist that she was fair to see – how fair in his agitation he could not tell; and lastly, to rally and form a stubborn front, as he bowed to the handsome, supercilious man, well-dressed, perfectly at his ease, and evidently enjoying the parson’s confusion.

“We are very glad you have come to see us, Mr Bayle,” said the elderly lady, smiling, and shaking hands warmly. “Of course we knew you soon would. And so you’ve been helping Dr Luttrell.”

“The doctor!” thought the visitor with a mental groan; “and I took him for the gardener!”

Volume One – Chapter Two.
Some Introductions and a Little Music

The reception had been so simple and homely, that, once having secured his coat and donned it, the doctor's volunteer assistant felt more at his ease. His disposition to retreat passed off, and, in despite of all refusal, he was almost compelled to enter the house, Mrs Luttrell taking possession of him to chat rather volubly about King's Castor and the old vicar, while from time to time a few words passed with Millicent, at whom the visitor gazed almost in wonder.

She was so different from the provincial young lady he had set up in his own mind as a type. Calm, almost grave in its aspect, her face was remarkable for its sweet, self-contained look of intelligence, and the new curate had not been many minutes in her society before he was aware that he was conversing with a woman as highly cultivated as she was beautiful.

Her sweet, rich voice absolutely thrilled, while her quiet self-possession sent a pang through him, as he felt how young, how awkward, and wanting in confidence he must seem in her eyes, which met his with a frank, friendly look that was endorsed during conversation, as she easily and pleasantly helped him out of two or three verbal bogs into which he had floundered.

After a walk through the garden, they had entered the house, where Mrs Luttrell had turned suddenly upon her visitor, to confuse him again by her sudden appeal.

"Did you ever see such a straw hat as that, Mr Bayle?"

"Oh, it's an old favourite of papa's, Mr Bayle," interrupted Millicent, turning to smile at the elderly gentleman taking the dilapidated straw from his head to hang it upon one particular peg. "He would not enjoy the gardening so much without that."

The tall handsome man left at the end of a few minutes. Business was his excuse. He had met the ladies, and just walked down with them, he told the doctor.

"But you'll come in to-night, Mr Hallam? We shall expect you," said Mrs Luttrell warmly.

"Oh, of course!" said Millicent, as Mr Hallam, from the bank, involuntarily turned to her; and her manner was warm but not conscious.

"I shall be here," he said quietly; and after a quiet friendly leave-taking, Christie Bayle felt relieved, and as if he could be a little more at his ease.

It was not a success though, and when he in turn rose to go, thinking dolefully about his dirty boots as compared with the speckless Wellingtons of the other visitor, and after feeling something like a throb of pleasure at being warmly pressed to step in without ceremony that evening, he walked to his apartments in the main street, irritated and wroth with himself, and more dissatisfied than he had ever before felt in his life.

"I wish I had not come," he said to himself. "I'm too young, and what's worse, I *feel* so horribly young. That supercilious Mr Hallam was laughing at me; the old lady treated me as if I were a boy; and Miss Luttrell – "

He stopped thinking, for her tall graceful presence seemed before him, and he felt again the touch of her cool, soft, white hand.

"Yes; she talked to me as if I were a boy, whom she wanted to cure of being shy. I am a boy, and it's my own fault for not mixing more with men."

"Bah! What an idiot I was! I might have known it was not the gardener. He did not talk like a servant, but I blundered into the idea, and went on blindfold in my belief. What a ridiculous *débût* I made there, to be sure, where I wanted to make a good impression! How can I profess to teach people like that when they treat me as if I were a boy? I can never show my face there again."

He felt in despair, and his self-abasement grew more bitter as the day went on. It would be folly, he thought, to go to the doctor's that evening; but, as the time drew near, he altered his mind,

and at last, taking a small case from where it rested upon a bookshelf, he thrust it into his pocket and started, his teeth set, his nerves strung, and his whole being bent upon the determination to show these people that he was not the mere bashful boy they thought him.

It was a deliciously soft, warm evening, and as he left the town behind with its few dim oil lamps, the lights that twinkled through the trees from the doctor's drawing-room were like so many invitations to him to hurry his feet, and so full was his mind of one of the dwellers beneath the roof that, as he neared the gate, he was not surprised to hear Millicent's voice, sweet, clear, and ringing. It hastened his steps. He did not know why, but it was as if attracting – positively magnetic. The next moment there was the low, deep-toned rich utterance of a man's voice – a voice that he recognised at once as that of Mr Hallam, from the bank; and if this was magnetic, it was from the negative pole, for Christie Bayle stopped.

He went on again, angry, he knew not why, and the next minute was being introduced on the lawn to a thin, careworn, middle-aged man, and a tall, bony, aquiline lady, as Mr and Mrs Trampleasure, Mrs Luttrell's pleasant, sociable voice being drowned almost the next moment by that of the bony dame, who in tones resembling those emitted by a brazen instrument, said very slowly:

"How do you do? I saw you last Sunday. Don't you think it is getting too late to stop out on the grass?"

"Yes, yes," said Mrs Luttrell hastily, "the grass is growing damp. Milly, dear, take Mr Hallam into the drawing-room."

The pleasant flower-decked room, with its candles and old-fashioned oil lamp, seemed truly delightful to Christie Bayle, for the next hour. He was very young, and he was the new arrival in King's Castor, and consequently felt flattered by the many attentions he received. The doctor was friendly, and disposed to be jocose with allusions to gardening. Mr Trampleasure, thin and languid, made his advances, but his questions were puzzling, as they related to rates of exchange and other monetary matters, regarding which the curate's mind was a blank.

"Not a well-informed young man, my dear," said Mr Trampleasure to his wife; whereupon that lady looked at him, and Mr Trampleasure seemed to wither away, or rather to shrink into a corner, where Millicent, who looked slightly flushed, but very quiet and self-possessed, was turning over some music, every piece of which had a strip of ribbon sewn with many stitches all up its back.

"Not a well-informed young man, this new curate, Millicent," said Mr Trampleasure, trying to sow his discordant seed on more genial soil.

"Not well-informed, uncle?" said the daughter of the house, looking up wide-eyed and amused, "why, I thought him most interesting."

"Oh! dear me, no, my dear. Quite ignorant of the most everyday matters. I just asked him – "

"Are you going to give us some music, Miss Luttrell?" said a deep, rich voice behind them, and Millicent turned round smiling.

"I was looking out two of your songs, Mr Hallam. You will sing something?"

"If you wish it," he said quietly, and there was nothing impressive in his manner.

"Oh, we should all be glad. Mamma is so fond of your songs."

"I must make the regular stipulation," said Mr Hallam smiling. "Banking people are very exacting: they do nothing without being paid."

"You mean that I must sing as well," said Millicent.

"Oh, certainly. And," she added eagerly, "Mr Bayle is musical. I will ask him to sing."

"Yes, do," said Hallam, with a shade of eagerness in his voice. "He cannot refuse you."

She did not know why, but as Millicent Luttrell heard these words, something like regret at her proposal crossed her mind, and she glanced at where Bayle was seated, listening to Mrs Trampleasure, who was talking to him loudly – so loudly that her voice reached their ears.

"I should be very glad indeed, Mr Bayle, if, when you call upon us, you would look through Edgar and Edmund's Latin exercises. I'm quite sure that the head master at the grammar school does not pay the attention to the boys that he should."

To wait until Mrs Trampleasure came to the end of a conversational chapter, would have been to give up the singing, so Millicent sat down to the little old-fashioned square piano, running her hands skilfully over the keys, and bringing forth harmonious sounds. But they were the *aigue* wiry tones of the modern zither, and Christie Bayle bent forward as if attracted by the sweet face thrown up by the candles, and turned slightly towards Hallam, dark, handsome, and self-possessed, standing with one hand resting on the instrument.

"I don't like music!" said Mrs Trampleasure, in a very slightly subdued voice.

"Indeed!" said Bayle starting, for his thoughts were wandering, and an unpleasant, indefinable feeling was stealing over him.

"I think it a great waste of time," continued Mrs Trampleasure. "Do you like it, Mr Bayle?"

"Well, I must confess I am very fond of it," he replied.

"But you don't play anything," said the lady with quite a look of horror.

"I – I play the flute – a little," faltered the curate.

"Well," said Mrs Trampleasure austerely, "we learn a great many habits when we are young, Mr Bayle, that we leave off when we grow older. You are youngs Mr Bayle."

He looked up in her face as if she had wounded him, her words went so deeply home, and he replied softly:

"Yes, I'm afraid I am very young."

Just then the doctor came and laid his hand upon Mrs Trampleasure's lips.

"Silence! One tablespoonful to be taken directly. Hush, softly, not a word;" and he stood over his sister – with a warning index finger held up, while in a deep, thrilling baritone voice Mr Hallam from the bank sang "Treasures of the Deep."

A dead silence was preserved, and the sweet rich notes seemed to fill the room and float out where the dewy flowers were exhaling their odours on the soft night air. The words were poetical, the pianoforte accompaniment was skilfully played, and, though perhaps but slightly cultivated, the voice of the singer was modulated by that dramatic feeling which is given but to few, so that the expression was natural, and, without troubling the composer's marks, the song appealed to the feelings of the listeners, though in different ways.

"Bravo! bravo!" cried Mr Trampleasure, crossing to the singer.

"He has a very fine voice," said Dr Luttrell in a quiet, subdued way; and his handsome face wrinkled a little as he glanced towards the piano.

"Yes, yes, it's very beautiful," said Mrs Luttrell, fingering a bracelet round and round, "but I wish he wouldn't, dear; I declare it always makes me feel as if I wanted to cry. Ah! here's Sir Gordon."

Pleasant, sweet-faced Mrs Luttrell crossed the room to welcome a new arrival in the person of a remarkably well-preserved elderly gentleman, dressed with a care that told of his personal appearance being one of the important questions of his life. There was a suspicion of the curling tongs about his hair, which was of a glossy black that was not more natural in hue than that of his carefully-arranged full whiskers. There was a little black patch, too, beneath the nether lip that matched his eyebrows, which seemed more regular and dark than those of gentlemen as a rule at his time of life. The lines in his face were not deep, but they were many, and, in short, he looked, from the curl on the top of his head, down past his high black satin stock, well-padded coat, pinched waist, and carefully strapped down trousers over his painfully small patent leather boots, like one who had taken up the challenge of Time, and meant to fight him to the death.

"Good evening, Mrs Luttrell. Ah! how do, doctor? My dear Miss Luttrell, I've been seeing your fingers in the dark as I waited outside."

"Seeing my fingers, Sir Gordon?"

"Yes; an idea – a fancy of mine," said the newcomer, bending over the hand he took with courtly old-fashioned grace. "I heard the music, and the sounds brought the producers before my eyes. Hallam, my dear sir, you have a remarkably fine voice. I've known men, sir, at the London Concerts, draw large incomes on worse voices than that!"

"You flatter me, Sir Gordon."

"Not at all, sir," said the newcomer shortly. "*I* never stoop to flatter any one, not even a lady. Miss Luttrell, do I?"

"You never flattered me," said Millicent, smiling.

"Never. It is a form of insincerity I detest. My dear Mrs Luttrell, you should make your unworthy husband take that to heart."

"Why, I never flatter," said the doctor warmly.

"How dare you say so, sir, when you are always flattering your patients, and preaching peace when there is no peace? Ah, yes, I've heard of him," he said in an undertone. "Introduce me."

The formal introduction took place, and the last comer seated himself beside the new curate.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mr Bayle. Glad to see you here, too, sir. Charming family this; doctor and his wife people to make friends. Eh! singing again? Hah! Miss Luttrell. Have you heard her sing?"

"No, she has not sung since I have been here."

"Then prepare yourself for a treat, sir. I flatter myself I know what singing is. It is the singing of one of our *prima donnas* without the artificiality."

"I think I heard Sir Gordon say he did not flatter," said Bayle quietly.

"Thank you," said the old beau, looking round sharply; "but I shall not take the rebuke. You have not heard her sing. Oh, I see," he continued, raising his gold-rimmed eye-glass, "a duet."

There was again silence, as after the prelude Millicent's voice rose clear and thrilling in the opening of one of the simple old duets of the day; and as she sang with the effortless ease of one to whom song was a gift, Sir Gordon bent forward, swaying himself slightly to the music, but only to stop short and watch with gathering uneasiness in his expression, the rapt earnestness of Christie Bayle as he seemed to drink in like some intoxicating draught the notes that vibrated through the room. He drew a deep breath, and sat up rather stiffly as she ended, and Mr Hallam from the bank took up the second verse. If anything, his voice sounded richer and more full; and again the harmony was perfect when the two voices, soprano and baritone, blended, and rose and fell in impassioned strains, and then gradually died off in a soft, sweet, final chord, that the subdued notes of the piano, wiry though they were, failed to spoil.

"You are not fond of music?" said Sir Gordon, making Bayle, who had been still sitting back rather stiffly, and with his eyes closed, start, as he replied:

"Who? I? Oh, yes, I love it!" he replied hastily.

"Young! young!" said Sir Gordon to himself as he rose and crossed the room to congratulate Millicent on her performance – Hallam giving way as he approached – saying to himself: "I'm beginning to wish we had not engaged him, good a man as he is."

"Yes, I'm very fond of that duet," said Millicent. "Excuse me, Sir Gordon, here's Miss Heathery."

She crossed to the door to welcome a lady in a very tight evening dress of cream satin – tight, that is, in the body – and pinched in by a broad sash at the waist, but the sleeves were like two cream-coloured spheres, whose open mouths hung down as if trying to swallow the long crinkly gloves that the wearer kept drawing above her pointed elbows, and which then slipped down.

It is a disrespectful comparison, but it was impossible to look at Miss Heathery's face without thinking of a white rabbit. One of Nature's paradoxical mysteries, no doubt, for it was not very white, nor were her eyes pink, and the sausage-shaped, brown curls on either side of her forehead, backed by a great shovel-like, tortoise-shell comb, in no wise resembled ears; but still the fact remained,

and even Christie Bayle, on being introduced to the elderly bashful lady, thought of the rabbit, and actually blushed.

"You are just in time to sing, Miss Heathery," said Millicent.

Miss Heathery could not; but there was a good deal of pressing, during which the lady's eyes rolled round pleadingly from speaker to speaker, as if saying, "Press me a little more, and I will."

"You must sing, my dear," said Mrs Luttrell in a whisper. "Make haste, and then Millicent's going to ask Mr Bayle, and you must play the accompaniment." Miss Heathery said, "Oh, really!" and Sir Gordon completed the form by offering his arm, and leading the little lady to the piano, taking from her hands her reticule, made in pale blue satin to resemble a butterfly; after that her gloves.

Then, after a good deal of arrangement of large medical folios upon a chair to make Miss Heathery the proper height, she raised her shoulders, the left becoming a support to her head as she lifted her chin and gazed into one corner of the room.

Christie Bayle was a lover of natural history, and he said to himself, "How could I be so rude as to think she looked like a white rabbit? She is exactly like a bird."

It was only that a change that had come over the lady, who was now wonderfully bird-like, and, what was quite to the point, like a bird about to sing.

She sang.

It was a tippity-tippity little tinkling song, quite in accordance with the wiry, zither-like piano, all about "dewy twilight lingers," and harps "touched by fairy fingers," and appeals to some one to "meet me there, love," and so on.

The French say we are not a polite nation. We may not be as to some little bits of outer polish, but at heart we are, and never more so than at a social gathering, when some terrible execution has taken place under the name of music. It was so here, for, moved by the feeling that the poor little woman had done her best, and would have been deeply wounded had she not been asked to sing, all warmly thanked Miss Heathery; and directly after, Christie Bayle, with his ears still burning from the effects of the performance, found himself beside the fair singer, trying to talk of King's Castor and its surroundings.

"I would rather not ask him, mamma dear," said Millicent at the other side of the room.

"But you had better, my dear. I know he is musical, and he might feel slighted."

"Oh, yes, he's a good fellow, my dear; I like him," said the doctor bluffly. "Ask him."

With a curious shrinking sensation that seemed somehow vaguely connected with Mr Hallam from the bank, and his eagerness earlier in the evening, Millicent crossed to where Bayle was seated, and asked him if he would sing.

"Oh, no," he said hastily, "I have no voice!"

"But we hear that you are musical, Mr Bayle," said Millicent in her sweet, calm way.

"Oh, yes, I am. Yes, I am a little musical."

"Pray sing then," she said, now that she had taken the step, forgetting the diffident feeling; "we are very simple people here, and so glad to have a fresh recruit in our narrow ranks."

"Yes, pray sing, Mr Bayle; we should be so charmed."

"I – er – I really – "

"Oh, but do, Mr Bayle," said Miss Heathery again sweetly.

"I think you will oblige us, Mr Bayle," said Millicent smiling; and as their eyes met, if the request had been to perform the act of Marcus Curtius on foot, and with a reasonable chance of finding water at the bottom to break the fall, Christie Bayle would have taken the plunge.

"Have you anything I know?" he said despairingly.

"I know," cried Miss Heathery, with a sort of peck made in bird-like playfulness. "Mr Bayle can sing 'They bid me forget thee.'"

"Full many a shaft at random sent, hits," et cetera. This was a chance shot, and it struck home.

"I think – er – perhaps, I could sing that," stammered Bayle, and then in a fit of desperation – "I'll try."

"I have it among my music, Millicent dear. May I play the accompaniment?"

Miss Heathery meant to look winning, but she made Bayle shiver.

"If you will be so good, Miss Heathery;" and the piece being found and spread out, Christie Bayle, perspiring far more profusely than when he was using the doctor's spade, stood listening to the prelude, and then began to sing, wishing that the dead silence around had been broken up by a hurricane, or the loudest thunder that ever roared.

Truth to tell, it was a depressing performance of a melancholy song. Bayle's voice was not bad, but his extreme nervousness paralysed him, and the accompaniment would have driven the best vocalist frantic.

It was a dismal failure, and when, in the midst of a pleasant little chorus of "Thank you's" Christie Bayle left the piano, he felt as if he had disgraced himself for ever in the eyes of King's Castor, above all in those of this sweetly calm and beautiful woman who seemed like some Muse of classic days come back to life.

Every one smiled kindly, and Mrs Luttrell came over, called him "my dear" in her motherly way, and thanked him again.

"Only want practice and confidence, sir," said the doctor.

"Exactly," said Sir Gordon; "practise, sir, and you'll soon beat Hallam there."

Bayle felt as if he would give anything to be able to retreat; and just then he caught Mrs Trampleasure's eyes as she signalled him to come to her side.

"She told me she did not like music," he said to himself; and he was yielding to his fate, and going to have the cup of his misery filled to the brim when he caught Hallam's eye.

Hallam was by the chimney-piece, talking to Mr Trampleasure about bank matters; but that look seemed so full of triumphant contempt, that Bayle drew his breath as if in pain, and turned to reach the door.

"It was very kind of you to sing when I asked you, Mr Bayle," said that sweet low voice that thrilled him; and he turned hastily, seeing again Hallam's sneering look, or the glance that he so read.

"I cannot sing," he replied with boyish petulance. "It was absurd to attempt it. I have only made myself ridiculous."

"Pray do not say that," said Millicent kindly. "You give me pain. I feel as if it is my fault, and that I have spoiled your evening."

"I – I have had no practice," he faltered.

"But you love music. You have a good voice. You must come and try over a few songs and duets with me."

He looked at her half-wonderingly, and then moved by perhaps a youthful but natural desire to redeem himself, he said hastily:

"I can – play a little – the flute."

"But you have not brought it?"

"Yes," he said hastily. "Will you play an accompaniment? Anything, say one of Henry Bishop's songs or duets."

Millicent sighed, for she felt regret, but she concealed her chagrin, and said quietly, "Certainly, Mr Bayle;" and they walked together to the piano.

"Bravo!" cried Sir Gordon. "No one need be told that Mr Bayle is an Englishman."

There was a rather uncomfortable silence as, more and more feeling pity and sympathy for their visitor, Millicent began to turn over a volume of bound up music, while, with trembling hands, Bayle drew his quaint boxwood flute with its brass keys and ivory mounts from its case.

It was a wonderfully different instrument from one of those cocoa-wood or metal flutes of the present day, every hole of which is stopped not with the fingers but with keys. This was an old-

fashioned affair, in four pieces, which had to be moistened at the joints when they were stuck together, and all this business the Reverend Christie Bayle went through mechanically, for his eyes were fixed upon the music Millicent was turning over.

"Let's try that," he said suddenly, in a voice tremulous with eagerness, as she turned over leaf after leaf, hesitating at two or three songs – "Robin Adair," "Ye Banks and Braes," and another – easy melodies, such as a flute player could be expected to get through. But though she had given him plenty of time to choose either of these, he let her turn over, and went on wetting the flute joints, and screwing them up till she arrived at "I Know a Bank."

"But it is a duet," she said, smiling at him as an elder sister might have smiled at a brother she wished to encourage, and who had just made another mistake.

"Yes," he said hastily; "but I can take up first one voice and then the other, and when it comes to the duet part the piano will hide the want of the second voice."

"Or I can play it where necessary," said Millicent, who began to brighten up. Perhaps this was not going to be such a dismal failure after all.

"To be sure," he said: "if you will. There, I think that will do. Pray excuse me if I seem terribly nervous," he whispered.

"Oh! don't apologise, Mr Bayle. We are all friends here. I do not mind. I was thinking of you."

"Thank you," he said hastily. "You are very kind. Shall we begin?"

"Yes, I am ready," said Millicent, glancing involuntarily at Hallam, who was still conversing with Trampleasure, his face perfectly calm, but his eyes wearing a singular look of triumph.

"One moment. Would you mind sounding D?" Millicent obeyed, and Bayle blew a tremulous note upon the flute nearly a quarter of a tone too sharp.

This necessitated a certain amount of unscrewing and lengthening which made the drops glisten upon Bayle's forehead.

"Poor fellow!" thought Millicent, "how nervous he is! I wish he were not going to play."

"I think that will do," he said at last, after blowing one or two more tremulous notes. "Shall we begin?" Millicent nodded, giving him a smile of encouragement, and after whispering, "Don't mind me, I'll try and keep to your time," she ran over the prelude, and shivered as the flute took up the melody and began.

It has been said that the flute, of all instruments, most resembles the human voice, and to Millicent Luttrell it seemed to wail here piteously how it knew a bank whereon the wild thyme grew. Her hands were moist from sympathy for the flautist, and she was striving to play her best with the fullest chords so as to hide his weakness, when, as he went on, it seemed to her that Bayle was forgetting the presence of listeners and growing interested in the beautiful melody he played. The notes of the flute became, moment by moment, more rich and round; they were no longer spasmodic, beginning and ending clumsily, but were breathed forth softly, with a crescendo and diminuendo where necessary, and so full of feeling that the pianiste was encouraged. She, too, forgot the listeners, and yielding to her love of her art, played on. The slow, measured strains were succeeded by the florid runs; but she never wondered whether the flautist would succeed, for they were amongst them before she knew they were *so* near, with the flute seeming to trip deftly over the most difficult passages without the slightest hesitation, the audience thoroughly enjoying the novel performance, till the final chord was struck, and followed by a hearty round of applause.

"Oh! Mr Bayle," cried Millicent, looking up in his flushed face, "I am so glad."

Her brightened eyes told him the same tale, for he had thoroughly won her sympathy as well as the praise of all present; Mr Hallam from the bank being as ready as the rest to thank him for so "delicious a rendering of that charming duet."

The rest of that evening was strange and dreamlike to Christie Bayle. He played some more florid pieces of music by one Henry Bishop, and he took Millicent in to supper. Then, soon after, he walked home, Sir Gordon Bourne being his companion.

After that he sat for some hours thinking and wondering how it was that while some men of his years were manly and able to maintain their own, he was so boyish and easily upset.

"I'm afraid my old tutor's right," he said; "I want ballast."

Perhaps that was why, when he dropped to sleep and went sailing away into the sea of dreams, his voyage was so wild and strange. Every minute some gust of passion threatened to capsize his barque, but he sailed on with his dreams growing more wild, the sky around still more strange.

It was a restless night for Christie Bayle, B.A. But the scholar of Oriel College, Oxford, was thinking as he had never thought before.

Volume One – Chapter Three.
A Little Business of the Bank

"Would you be kind enough to cash this little cheque for me, Mr Thickens?"

The speaker was Miss Heathery, in the morning costume of a plum-coloured silk dress, with wide-spreading bonnet of the same material, ornamented with several large bows of broad satin ribbon, and an extremely dilapidated bird of paradise plume. She placed her reticule bag, also of plum-colour, but of satin – upon the broad mahogany counter of Dixons' Bank, Market Place, King's Castor, and tried to draw the bag open.

This, however, was not so easy. When it was open all you had to do was to pull the thick silk cord strings, and it closed up tightly, but there was no similar plan for opening a lady's reticule in the year 1818. It was then necessary to insert the forefingers of each hand, knuckle to knuckle, force them well down, and then draw, the result being an opening, out of which you could extract pocket-handkerchief, Preston salts, or purse. Thin fingers were very useful at such a time, and Miss Heathery's fingers were thin; but she wore gloves, and the gloves of that period, especially those sold in provincial towns, were not of the delicate second-skin nature worn by ladies now. The consequence was that hard-featured, iron-grey haired, closely-shaven Mr James Thickens, in his buff waistcoat and stiff white cravat, had to stand for some time, with a very large quill pen behind his right ear, waiting till Miss Heathery, who was growing very hot and red, exclaimed:

"That's it!" and drew open the bag.

But even then the cheque was not immediately forthcoming, for it had to be fished for. First there was Miss Heathery's pocket-handkerchief, delicately scented with otto of roses; then there was the pattern she was going to match at Crumple's, the draper's; then her large piece of orris root got in the way, and had to be shaken on one side with the knitting, and the ball of Berlin wool, when the purse was found in the far corner.

Purses, too, in those days were not of the "open sesame" kind popular now. The *porte-monnaie* was not born, and ladies knitted long silken hose, with a slit in the middle, placed ornamental slide-rings and tassels thereon, and even went so far sometimes as to make these old-fashioned purses of beads.

Miss Heathery's was of netted silk, however, orange and blue, and through the reticulations could be seen at one end the metallic twinkle of coins, at the other the subdued tint and cornerish distensions of folded paper.

"I'm afraid I'm keeping you, Mr Thickens," said the lady in a sweet, bird-like chirp, as she drew one slide, and tried to coax the folded cheque along the hose, though it refused to be coaxed, and obstinately stuck its elbows out at every opening of the net.

Mr Thickens said, "Not at all," and passed his tongue over his dry lips, and moved his long fingers as if he were a kind of human actinia, and these were his tentacles, involuntarily trying to get at the cheque.

"That's it!" said Miss Heathery again with a satisfied sigh, and she handed the paper across the counter.

James Thickens drew down a pair of very strongly-framed, round-eyed, silver-mounted spectacles from where they had been resting close to his brushed up "Brutus," and unfolded and smoothed out the slip of paper, spreading it on the counter, and bending over it so much that his glasses would have fallen off but for the fact that a piece of black silk shoe-string formed a band behind.

"Two thirteen six," said Mr Thickens, looking up at the lady.

"Yes; two pounds thirteen shillings and sixpence," she replied, in token of assent. And while she was speaking, Mr Thickens took the big quill pen from behind his ear, and stood with his head on one side in an attitude of attention till the word "sixpence" was uttered, when the pen was darted into a great shining leaden inkstand and out again, like a peck from a heron's bill, and without damaging the finely-cut point. A peculiar cancelling mark was made upon the cheque, which was carried to a railed-in desk. A great book was opened with a bang, and an entry made, the cheque dropped into a drawer, and then, in sharp, business-like tones, Mr Thickens asked the question he had been asking for the last twenty years.

"How will you have it?"

Miss Heathery chirped out her wishes, and Mr Thickens counted out two sovereigns twice over, rattled them into a bright copper shovel, and cleverly threw them before the customer's hand. A half-sovereign was treated similarly, but retained with the left hand till half-a-crown and a shilling were ready, then all these coins were thrust over together, without the copper shovel, and the transaction would have been ended, only that Miss Heathery said sweetly: "Would you mind, Mr Thickens, giving me some smaller change?"

Mr Thickens bowed, and, taking back the half-crown, changed it for two shillings and sixpence, all bearing the round, bucolic countenance of King George the Third, upon which Miss Heathery beamed as she slipped the coins in the blue and orange purse.

"I hope Mr Hallam is quite well, Mr Thickens."

"Quite well, ma'am."

"And the gold and silver fish?"

"Quite well, ma'am," said Mr Thickens, a little more austerely.

"I always think it so curiously droll, Mr Thickens, your keeping gold and silver fish," simpered Miss Heathery. "It always seems as if the pretty things had something to do with the bank, and that their scales – "

"Would some day turn into sixpences and half-sovereigns, eh, ma'am?" said the bank clerk sharply. "Yes – exactly, Mr Thickens."

"Ah, well, ma'am, it's a very pretty idea, but that's all. It isn't solid."

"Exactly, Mr Thickens. My compliments to Mr Hallam. Good-day."

"If that woman goes on making that joke about my fish many more times, I shall kill her!" said James Thickens, giving his head a vicious rub. "An old idiot! I wish she'd keep her money at home. I believe she passes her time in writing cheques, getting 'em changed, and paying the money in again, as an excuse for something to do, and for the sake of calling here. *I'm* not such an ass as to think it's to see me; and as to Hallam – well, who knows? Perhaps she means Sir Gordon. There's no telling where a woman may hang up her heart."

James Thickens returned to his desk after a glance down the main street, which looked as solemn and quiet as if there were no inhabitants in the place; so still was it, that no explanation was needed for the presence of a good deal of fine grass cropping up between the paving-stones. The houses looked clean and bright in the clear sunshine, which made the wonderfully twisted and floral-looking iron support of the "George" sign sparkle where the green paint was touched up with gold. The shadows were clearly cut and dark, and the flowers in the "George" window almost glittered, so bright were their colours. An elderly lady came across the market place, in a red shawl and carrying a pair of pattens in one hand, a dead-leaf tinted gingham umbrella in the other, though it had not rained for a month and the sky was without a cloud.

That red shawl seemed, as it moved, to give light and animation for a few minutes to the place; but as it disappeared round the corner by the "George," the place was all sunshine and shadow once more. The uninhabited look came back, and James Thickens pushed up his spectacles and began to write, his pen scratching and wheezing over the thick hand-made paper till a tremendous nose-blowing and a quick step were heard, and the clerk said "Gemp."

The next minute there was, the sharp tap of a stick on the step, continued on the floor, and the owner of that name entered with his coat tightly buttoned across his chest.

He was a keen-looking man of sixty, with rather obstinate features, and above all, an obstinate beard, which seemed as if it refused to be shaved, remaining in stiff, grey, wiry patches in corners and on prominences, as well as down in little ravines cut deeply in his face. His eyes, which were dark and sharp, twinkled and looked inquisitive, while, in addition, there was a restless wandering irregularity in their movements as if in turn each was trying to make out what its fellow was doing on the other side of that big bony nose.

"Morning, Mr Thickens, sir, morning," in a coffee-grinding tone of voice; "I want to see the chief."

"Mr Hallam? Yes; I'll see if he's at liberty, Mr Gemp."

"Do, Mr Thickens, sir, do; but one moment," he continued, leaning over and taking the clerk by the coat. "Don't you think I slight you, Mr Thickens; not a bit, sir, not a bit. But when a man has a valuable deposit to make, eh? – you see? – it isn't a matter of trusting this man or that; he sees the chief."

Mr Gemp drew himself up, slapped the bulgy left breast of his buttoned-up coat, nodded sagely, and blew his nose with a snort like a blast on a cow-horn, using a great blue cotton handkerchief with white spots.

Mr James Thickens passed through a glass door, covered on the inner side with dark green muslin, and returned directly to usher the visitor into the presence of Robert Hallam, the business manager of Dixons' Bank.

The room was neatly furnished, half office half parlour, and, but for a pair of crossed cutlasses over the chimney-piece, a bell-mouthed brass blunderbuss, and a pair of rusty flint-lock pistols, the place might have been the ordinary sitting-room of a man of quiet habits. There was another object though in one corner, which took from the latter aspect, this being the door of the cupboard which, instead of being ordinary painted panel, was of strong iron, a couple of inches thick.

"Morning, Mr Hallam, sir."

"Good-morning, Mr Gemp."

The manager rose from his seat at the baize-covered table to shake hands and point to a chair, and then, resuming his own, he crossed his legs and smiled blandly as he waited to hear his visitor's business.

Mr Gemp's first act was to spread his blue handkerchief over his knees, and then begin to stare about the room, after carefully hooking himself with his thick oak stick which he passed over his neck and held with both hands as if he felt himself to be rather an errant kind of sheep who needed the restraint of the crook.

"Loaded?" he said suddenly, after letting his eyes rest upon the fire-arms.

"Oh, yes, Mr Gemp, they are all loaded," replied the manager smiling. "But I suppose I need not get them down; you are not going to make an attack?"

"Me? attack? eh? Oh, you're joking. That's a good one. Ha! ha! ha!"

Mr Gemp's laugh was not pleasant on account of dental defects. It was rather boisterous too, and his neck shook itself free of the crook; but he hooked himself again, grew composed, and nodded once more in the direction of the chimney.

"Them swords sharp?"

"As razors, Mr Gemp."

"Are they now? Well, that's a blessing. Fire-proof, I suppose?" he added, nodding towards the safe.

"Fire-proof, burglar-proof, bank-proof, Mr Gemp," said the manager smiling. "Dixons' neglect nothing for the safety of their customers."

"No, they don't, do they?" said Mr Gemp, holding on very tightly to the stick, keeping himself down as it were and safe as well.

"No, sir, they neglect nothing."

"I say," said Mr Gemp, leaning forward, after a glance over his shoulder towards the bank counter, and Mr Thickens's back, dimly seen through the muslin, "does the new parson bank here?"

The manager smiled, and looked very hard at the bulge in his visitor's breast pocket, a look which involuntarily made the old man change the position of his hooked stick by bringing it down across his breast as if to protect the contents.

"Now, my dear Mr Gemp, you do not expect an answer to that question. Do you suppose I have ever told anybody that you have been here three times to ask me whether Dixons' would advance you a hundred pounds at five per cent?"

"On good security, eh?" interposed the old man sharply; "only on good security."

"Exactly, my dear sir. Why, you don't suppose we make advances without?"

"No, of course not, eh? Not to anybody, eh, Mr Hallam?" said the old man eagerly. "You could not oblige me now with a hundred, say at seven and a half? I'm a safe man, you know. Say at seven and a half per cent, on my note of hand. You wouldn't, would you?"

"No, Mr Gemp, nor yet at ten per cent. Dixons' are not usurers, sir. I can let you have a hundred, sir, any time you like, upon good security, deeds or the like, but not without."

"Ha! you are particular. Good way of doing business, sir. Hey, but I like you to be strict."

"It is the only safe way of conducting business, Mr Gemp."

"I say, though – oh, you are close! – close as a cash-box, Mr Hallam, sir; but what do you think of the new parson?"

"Quiet, pleasant, gentlemanly young man, Mr Gemp."

"Yes, yes," cried the visitor, hurting himself by using his crook quite violently, and getting it back round his neck; "but a mere boy, sir, a mere boy. He's driven me away. I'm not going to church to hear him while there's a chapel. I want to know what the bishop was a thinking about."

"Ah? but he's a scholar and a gentleman, Mr Gemp," said the manager, blandly.

"Tchuck! so was the young doctor who set up and only lasted a year. If you were ill, sir, you wouldn't have gone to he; you'd have gone to Dr Luttrell. If I've got vallerable deeds to deposit, I don't go to some young clever-shakes who sets up in business, and calls himself a banker: I come to Dixons'."

"And so you have some valuable deeds you want us to take care of for you, Mr Gemp," said the manager sharply.

"Eh! I didn't say so, did I?"

"Yes; and you want a hundred pounds. Shall I look at the deeds?"

Mr Gemp brought his oaken crook down over his breast, and his quick, shifty eyes turned from the manager to the lethal weapons over the chimney, then to the safe, then to the bank, and Mr Thickens's back.

"I say," he said at last, "arn't you scared about being robbed?"

"Robbed! oh, dear no. Come, Mr Gemp. I must bring you to the point. Let me look at the deeds you have in your pocket; perhaps there will be no need to send them to our solicitor. A hundred pounds, didn't you say?"

The old man hesitated, and looked about suspiciously for a few moments before meeting the manager's eyes. Then he succumbed before the firm, keen, searching look.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I said a hundred pounds, but I don't want no hundred pounds. I want you – "

He paused for a few moments with his hands at his breast, as if to take a long breath, and then, as if by a tremendous wrench, he mastered his fear and suspicion.

"I want you to take care of these for me."

He tore open his breast and brought out quickly a couple of dirty yellow parchments and some slips of paper, roughly bound in a little leather folio.

The manager stretched his hand across the table and took hold of the parchments; but the old man held on by one corner for a few moments till Hallam raised his eyebrows and smiled, when the visitor uttered a deep sigh, and thrust parchments and little folio hastily from him.

"Lock 'em up in yonder iron safe," he said hoarsely, taking up his blue handkerchief to wipe his brow. "It's open now, but you'll keep it locked, won't you?"

"The deeds will be safe, Mr Gemp," said the manager coolly throwing open the parchment. "Ah! I see, the conveyances to a row of certain messuages."

"Yes, sir; row of houses, Gemp's Terrace, all my own, sir; not a penny on 'em."

"And these? Ah, I see, bank-warrants. Quite right, my dear sir, they will be safe. And you do not need an advance?"

"Tchuck! what should I want with an advance? There's a good fifteen hundred pound there – all my own. Now you give me a writing, saying you've got 'em to hold for me, and that will do."

The manager smiled as he wrote out the document, while Mr Gemp, who seemed as much relieved as if he had been eased of an aching tooth, rose to make a closer inspection of the loaded pistols and the bell-mouthed brass blunderbuss, all of which he tapped gently in turn with the hook of his stick.

"There you are, Mr Gemp," said the manager smiling. "Now you can go home and feel at rest, for your deeds and warrants will be secure."

"Yes, sir, to be sure; that's the way," said the old man, hastily reading the memorandum, and then placing it in a very old leather pocket-book; "but if you wouldn't mind, sir, Mr Hallam, sir, I should like to see you lock them all in yonder."

"Well, then, you shall," said the manager good-humouredly and taking up the packets he tied them together with some green ferret, swung open the heavy door, which creaked upon its pivots, stepped inside, turned a key with a rattle, and opened a large iron chest, into which he threw the deeds, shut the lid with a clang, locked it ostentatiously, took out the key, backed out, and then closed and locked the great door of the safe.

"There, Mr Gemp; I think you'll find they are secure now."

"Safe! safe as the bank!" said the old man with an admiring smile as, with a sigh of relief, he picked up his old rough beaver hat from the floor, stuck it on rather sidewise, and with a short "good-morning," stamped out, tapping the floor as he went.

"Good-morning, Mr Thickens, sir," he said, pausing at the outer door to look back over his shoulder at the clerk. "I've done my bit o' business with the manager. It's all right."

"Good-morning, Mr Gemp," said Thickens quietly; and then to himself, as the tap of the stick was heard going down the street, "An important old idiot!"

Several little pieces of business were transacted, and then, according to routine, the manager came behind the counter to relieve his lieutenant, who put on his hat and went to his dinner.

During his absence the manager took his place at his subordinate's desk, and was very busy making a few calculations, after divers references to a copy of yesterday's *Times*, which came regularly by coach.

These calculations made him thoughtful, and he was in the middle of one when his face changed, and turned of a strange waxen hue, but he recovered himself directly.

"Might have expected it," he said softly; and he went on writing as some one entered the bank.

The visitor was a thin, dejected-looking youth of about two-and-twenty, shabbily dressed in clothes that did not fit him. His face was of a sickly pallor, as if he had just risen from an invalid couch, an idea strengthened by the extremely shortly-cut hair, whose deficiency was made the more manifest by his wearing a hat a full size too large. This was drawn down closely over his forehead, his pressed-out ears acting as brackets to keep it from going lower still.

He was a tamed-down, feeble-looking being, but the spirit was not all gone, for as he came down the street, with the genial friendliness of all dogs towards one who seems to be a stranger and down in the world, Miss Heathery's fat, ill-conditioned terrier, that she pampered under the belief that it was a dog of good breed, being in an evil temper consequent upon not having been taken for a walk by its mistress, rushed out baying, barking, and snapping at the stranger's heels.

"Get out, will you?" he shouted; but the dog barked the more, and the stranger looked as if about to run. In fact he did run a few yards, but, as the dog followed, he caught up a flower-pot from a handy window-sill – every one had flower-pots at King's Castor – and hurled it at the dog.

There was a yell, a crash, and explosion as if of a shell; Miss Heathery's dog fled, and, without waiting to encounter the owner of the flower-pot, the stranger hurried round the corner, and after an inquiry or two, made for the bank.

"Vicious little beast! Wish I'd killed it," he grumbled, giving the hat a hoist behind which necessitated another in front, and then the equilibrium adjusting at the sides. "Wonder people keep dogs," he continued. "A nuisance. Wish I was a dog – somebody's dog, and well fed. Lead a regular dog's life, and get none of the bones. Perhaps I shall, though, now."

The young man looked anything but a bank customer, but he did not hesitate. Merely stopping to give his coat a drag down, and then, tilting his hat slightly, he entered with a swagger, and walked up to the broad counter. Upon this he rested a gloveless hand, an act which seemed to give a little more steadiness to his weak frame.

"Rob," he said.

The manager raised his head with an affected start.

"Oh, you don't know me, eh?" said the visitor. "Well, I s'pose I am a bit changed."

"Know you? You wish to see me?" said Hallam coolly.

"Yes, Mr Robert Hallam; I've come down from London on purpose. I couldn't come before," he added meaningly, "but now I want to have a talk with you."

"Stephen Crellock! Why, you are changed."

"Yes, as aforesaid."

"Well, sir. What is it you want with me?" said the manager coldly.

"What do I want with you, eh? Oh, come, that's rich! You're a lucky one, you are. I go to prison, and you get made manager down here. Ah! you see I know all about it."

"I do not understand you, sir."

"Then I'll tell you, my fine fellow. Some men never get found out, some do; that's the difference between us two. I've gone to the wall – inside it," he added, with a sickly grin. "You've got to be quite the gentleman. But they'll find you out some day."

"Well, sir, what is this to lead up to?" said Hallam.

"Oh, I say though, Rob Hallam, this is too rich. Manager here, and going, they say, to marry the prettiest girl in the place." Hallam started in spite of his self-command. "And I suppose I shall be asked to the wedding, shan't I?"

"Will you be so good as to explain what is the object of this visit?" said Hallam coldly.

"Why, can't you see? I've come to the bank because I want some money. There, you need not look like that, my lad. It's my turn now, and you've got to put things a bit straight for me after what I suffered sooner than speak."

"Do you mean you have come here to insult me and make me send for a constable?" cried Hallam.

"Yes, if you like," said the young man, leaning forward, and gazing full in the manager's face; "send for one if you like. But you don't like, Robert Hallam. There, I'm a man of few words. I've suffered a deal just through being true to my mate, and now you've got to make it up to me."

"You scoun – "

"Sh! That'll do. Just please yourself, my fine fellow; only, if you don't play fair towards the man who let things go against him without a word, I shall just go round the town and say – "

"Silence, you scoundrel!" cried Hallam fiercely; and he caught his unpleasant visitor by the arm.

Just then James Thickens entered, as quietly as a shadow, taking everything in at a glance, but without evincing any surprise.

"Think yourself lucky, sir," continued Hallam aloud, "that I do not have you locked up. Mr Thickens, see this man off the premises."

Then, in a whisper that his visitor alone could hear, and with a meaning look:

"Be quiet and go. Come to my rooms to-night."

Volume One – Chapter Four.
Drawing a Dog's Teeth

"I think that's all, Mr Hallam, sir," said Mrs Pinet, looking plump, smiling, and contented, as she ran her eyes over the tea-table in the bank manager's comfortably-furnished room – "tea-pot, cream, salt, pepper, butter, bread," – she ran on below her breath in rapid enumeration, "why, bless my heart, I didn't bring the sauce!"

"Yes, that's all, Mrs Pinet," said the manager in his gravely-polite manner.

"But, begging your pardon, it is not, sir; I forgot the sauce."

"Oh! never mind that to-night."

"If you'll excuse me, sir, I would rather," said plump, pleasant-faced Mrs Pinet, who supplemented a small income by letting apartments; and before she could be checked she hurried out, to return at the end of a few minutes, bearing a small round bottle.

"And King of Oude," said the little woman. "Shall I take the cover, sir?"

"If you please, Mrs Pinet?"

"Which it's a pleasure to wait upon such a thorough gentleman," said Mrs Pinet to herself as she trotted back to her own region, leaving Hallam gazing down at the homely, pleasant meal.

He threw himself into a chair, poured out a cup of the tea, cooled it by the addition of some water from a bottle on a stand, and drank it hastily. Then, sitting back, he seemed to be thinking deeply, and finally drew up to the table, but turned from the food in disgust.

"Pah!" he ejaculated; but returned to his chair, pulled the loaf in half, and then cut off two thick slices, hacked the meat from the bones of two hot steaming chops and took a pat of the butter to lay upon one of the slices of bread. This done, his eye wandered round the room for a moment or two, and he rose and hastily caught up a newspaper, rolled the bread and meat therein, and placed the packet on a shelf before pouring out a portion of the tea through the window and then giving the slop-basin and cup the appearance of having been used. This done, he sat back in his chair to think, and remained so for quite half-an-hour, when Mrs Pinet came with an announcement for which he was quite prepared.

"A strange man, sir," said the landlady, looking troubled and smoothing down her apron, "a strange young man, sir. I'm afraid, sir – "

"Afraid, Mrs Pinet?"

"I mean, sir, I'm afraid he's a tramp, sir; but he said you told him to come."

"I'm afraid, too, that he is a tramp, Mrs Pinet, poor fellow! But it's quite right, I did tell him to come. You can show him in."

"In – in here, sir?"

"Yes, Mrs Pinet. He has been unfortunate, poor fellow! and has come to ask for help."

Mrs Pinet sighed, mentally declared that Mr Hallam was a true gentleman, and introduced shabby, broken-down and dejected Stephen Crellock.

Hallam did not move nor raise his eyes, while the visitor gave a quick, furtive look round at all in the room, and Mrs Pinet's departing footsteps sounded quite loud. Then a door was heard to close, and Hallam turned fiercely upon his visitor.

"Now, you scoundrel – you miserable gaol-bird, what do you mean by coming to me?"

"Mean by coming? I mean you to do things right. If you'd had your dues you'd have been where I was; only you played monkey and made me cat."

"What?"

"And I had my paws burned while you got the chestnuts."

"You scoundrel!" cried Hallam, rushing to the fireplace and ringing sharply, "I'll have the constable and put a stop to this."

"No, no, no, don't, don't, Rob. I'll do anything you like; I won't say anything," gasped the visitor piteously, "only: don't send for the constable."

"Indeed but I will," cried Hallam fiercely, as he walked to the door: but his visitor made quite a leap, fell at his feet, and clung to his legs.

"No, no, don't, don't," he cried hoarsely, and Hallam shook him off, opened the door, and called out:

"Never mind, now; I'll ring in a few minutes."

He closed the door and stood scowling at his visitor.

"I did not think you'd be so hard on a poor fellow when he was down, Hallam," he whimpered, "I didn't, 'pon my honour."

"Your honour, you dog, you gaol-bird," cried Hallam in a low, angry voice. "How dare you come down and insult me!"

"I – thought you'd help me, that you'd lend your old friend a hand now you're so well off, while I am in a state like this."

"And did you come in the right way, you dog, bullying and threatening me, thinking to frighten me, just as if you could find a soul to take any notice of a word such a blackguard as you would say? But there, I've no time to waste; I've done wrong in bringing you here. Go and tell everybody in the town what you please, how I was in the same bank with you in London and you were given into custody for embezzlement, and at your trial received for sentence two years' imprisonment."

"Yes, when if I had been a coward and spoken out – "

Hallam made a move towards him, when the poor, weak, broken-down wretch cowered lower.

"Don't, Rob; don't, old man," he cried piteously. "I'll never say a word. I'll never open my lips. You know I wouldn't be such a coward, bad as I am. But you will help a fellow, won't you?"

"Help you? What, have you come to me for blackmail? Why should I help you?"

"Because we were old friends, Hallam. Because I always looked up to you, and did what you told me; and you don't know what it has been, Rob, you don't indeed! I used to be a strong fellow, but this two years have brought me down till I'm as thin and weak as you see me. I'm like a great girl; least thing makes me cry and sob, so that I feel ashamed of myself!"

"Ashamed? You?" cried Hallam scornfully.

"Yes, I do, 'pon my word, Rob. But you will help me, won't you?"

"No. Go to the constable's place, and they'll give you an order for the workhouse. Be off, and if you ever dare to come asking for me again, I'll send for the officer at once."

"But – but you will give me a shilling or two, Hallam," said the miserable wretch. "I'm half-starved."

"You deserve to be quite starved! Now go."

"But, Hallam, won't you believe me, old fellow? I want to be honest now – to do the right thing."

"Go and do it, then," said Hallam contemptuously. "Be off."

"But give me a chance, old fellow; just one."

"I tell you I'll do nothing for you," cried Hallam fiercely. "On the strength of your having been once respectable, if you had come to me humbly I'd have helped you, but you came down here to try and frighten me with your noise and bullying. You thought that if you came to the bank you would be able to dictate all your own terms; but you have failed, Stephen Crellock: so now go."

"But, Rob, old fellow, I was so – so hard up. You don't know."

"Are you going before I send for the constable?"

"Yes, yes, I'm going," said the miserable wretch, gathering himself up. "I'm sorry I came to you, Hallam. I thought you would have helped a poor wretch, down as I am."

"And you found out your mistake. A man in my position does not know a gaol-bird."

There was a flash from the sunken eyes, and a quick gesture, but the flash died out, and the gesture seemed to be cut in half. Two years' hard labour in one of His Majesty's gaols had pretty well broken the weak fellow's spirit. He stepped to the door, glanced round the comfortable room, uttered a low moan, and was half out, when Hallam uttered sharply the one word "Stop!"

His visitor paused, and looked eagerly round upon him.

"Look here, Stephen Crellock," he said, "I don't like to see a man like you go to the dogs without giving him a chance. There, come back and close the door!"

The poor wretch came back hurriedly, and made a snatch at Hallam's hand, which was withdrawn.

"No, no, wait till you've proved yourself an honest man," he said.

Crellock's eyes flashed again, but, as before, the flash died out at once, and he stood humbly before his old fellow clerk.

Hallam remained silent for a few moments, and then as if he had made up his mind, he said: "I ought to hand you over to the constable, that is, if I did my duty as manager of Dixons' Bank, and a good member of society; but I can't forget that you were once a smart, gentlemanly-looking young fellow, who slipped and fell."

Crellock stood bent and humbled, staring at him in silence.

"I'm going to let heart get the better of discipline," continued Hallam, "and to-night I'm going to give you five guineas to get back to London and make a fresh start; and till that fresh start is made, and you can do without it, I'm going to give you a pound a week, if asked for by letter humbly, and in a proper spirit."

"Rob!"

"There, there; no words. I don't want thanks. I know I'm doing wrong, and I hope my weakness will not prove my punishment."

"It shan't, Rob; it shan't," faltered the poor shivering wretch, who had hard work to keep back his tears.

"There are four guineas, there's a half, and there are ten shillings in silver. Now go to some decent inn – here is some food for present use – get a bed, and to-morrow morning catch the coach, and get back to London to seek work."

Hallam handed him the parcel he had made.

"I will, Rob; I will, Mr Hallam, sir, and may – "

"There, that will do," said Hallam, interrupting him. "Prove all your gratitude by making yourself independent as soon as you can. There, you see you have not frightened me into bribing you to be silent."

"No, no, sir. Oh, no, I see that!" said the poor wretch dolefully. "I'm very grateful, I am, indeed, and I will try."

"Go, then, and try," said Hallam shortly. "Stop a moment."

He rang his bell, and Mrs Pinet entered promptly, glancing curiously at the visitor, and then back at her lodger, who paused to give her ample time to take in the scene.

"Mrs Pinet," he said at last, and in the coolest and most matter-of-fact way, "this poor fellow wants a lodging for the night at some respectable place, where they will not be hard upon his pocket."

"Well, sir, then he couldn't do better than go to Mrs Deene's, sir. A very respectable woman, whose husband – "

"Yes, to be sure, Mrs Pinet," said Hallam abruptly; "then you'll show him where it is. Good-night, Stephen; don't waste your money, and I hope you will succeed."

"Good-night, sir, good-night," and the dejected-looking object, thoroughly cowed by the treatment he had received, followed Hallam's landlady to the outer door, where a short colloquy could be heard, and then there was a shuffling step passing the window, and the door closed.

"I always expected it," said Hallam to himself, as he stood gazing straight before him; "but I've drawn his teeth; he won't bite – he dare not. I think I can manage Master Stephen – I always could." He stood thinking for a few minutes, and then said softly: "Well, what are ten or twenty pounds, or forty, if it comes to that! Yes," he added deliberately, "I have done quite rightly, I am sure."

Undoubtedly, as far as his worldly wisdom lay, for it did not take long for the news to run round the town that a very shabby-looking fellow had been to the bank, evidently with burglarious intentions, but that the new manager had seized and held him, while James Thickens placed the big brass blunderbuss to his head, and then turned it round and knocked him down. This was Mr Gemp's version; but it was rather spoiled by Mrs Pinet when she was questioned, and told her story of Mr Hallam's generous behaviour to this poor young man:

"One whom he had known in better days, my dear; and now he has quite set him up."

Volume One – Chapter Five.
A Little Bit of News

Time glided very rapidly by at King's Castor, for there were few things to check his progress. People came to the market and did their business, and went away. Most of them had something to do at Dixons' Bank, for it was the pivot upon which the affairs of King's Castor and the neighbourhood turned. It was the centre from which radiated the commerce of the place. Pivot or axle, there it was, with a patent box full of the oil that makes matters run easily, and so trade and finance round King's Castor seemed like some large wheel, that turned gently and easily on.

Dixons' had a great deal to do with everybody, but Dixons' was safe, and Dixons' was sure. On every side you heard how that Dixons' had taken this or that man by the hand, with the best of results. Stammers borrowed money at five per cent, when he put out that new front. Morris bought his house with Dixons' money, and they held the deeds, so that Morris was a man of importance – one of the privileged who paid no rent. He paid interest on so many hundred pounds to Dixons' half-yearly, but that was interest, not rent.

Old Thomas Dixon seldom came to the bank now, though he was supposed to hold the reins of government, which he declined to hand over to his junior partners, Sir Gordon Bourne and Mr Andrew Trampleasure. It was his wish that a practised manager should be engaged from London, and hence the arrival of Mr Robert Hallam, who wore a much talked-of watch, that was by accident shown to Gemp, who learned what a repeater was, and read on the inside how that it was a testimonial from Barrow, Fladgate, and Range for faithful services performed.

Barrow, Fladgate, and Range were the Lombard Street bankers, who acted as Dixons' agents; and the news of that watch spread, and its possession was as a talisman to Robert Hallam.

Sir Gordon did not exactly take offence, for he rarely took offence at anything; but he felt slighted about the engagement of Hallam, and visited the place very little, handing over his duties to Trampleasure, who dwelt at the bank, had his private room, did all the talking to the farmers who came in, and did nothing more; but everything went smoothly and well. The new manager was the pattern of gentlemanly consideration – even to defaulters; and the main thing discussed after two years' residence in King's Castor was, whom would he marry?

There were plenty of wealthy farmers' daughters in the neighbourhood; several of the tradespeople were rich in money and had marriageable girls; but to all and several Mr Hallam of the bank displayed the same politeness, and at the end of two years there was quite a feeling of satisfaction among the younger ladies of King's Castor at the general impression, and that was, that the much-talked-of settler in their midst was not a marrying man.

The reason is simple – he could only have married one, and not all. Many were vain enough to think that the good fortune would have come to them. But now, so to speak, Mr Hallam of the bank had grown rather stale, and the interest was centred upon the new curate.

The gossips were not long in settling his fate.

"I know," said Gemp to a great many people; "gardening, eh? He! he! he! hi! hi! hi! You wouldn't have thought it in a parson? But, there, he's very young!"

"Yes, he is very young, Mr Gemp," said Mrs Pinet one morning to that worthy, who quite occupied the ground that would have been covered by a local journal. For, having retired years back from business, he had – not being a reading man – nothing whatever to do but stand at his door and see what went on. "Yes, he is very young, Mr Gemp," said Mrs Pinet. "But poor young man, I suppose he can't help it."

"Help it, no! Just the age, too, when a fellow's always thinking about love. We know better at our time of life, eh?"

Mrs Pinet, who was one of those plump and rosy ladies with nice elastic flesh, which springs up again wherever time has made a crease, so that it does not show, bridled a little, and became very much interested in her row of geraniums in the parlour window, every one of which had lately been made more ornamental by a coat of red lead over its pot. For Mrs Pinet did not yet know better. She had known better five years before, when Gemp had asked her to wed; but at the time present she was wondering whether, if Mr Thickens at the bank, where her little store of money lay, should fail, after all, to make her an offer, it was possible that Mr Robert Hallam might think it very nice to have some one to go on always taking so much care of his linen as she did, and seeing that his breakfast bacon was always nicely broiled, his coffee clear, and his dinners exactly as he liked to have them. Certainly he was a good deal younger than she was; but she did not see why the wife should not be the elder sometimes, as well as the husband.

Hence it was that Gemp's words jarred.

"Seems rum, don't it?" continued Gemp. "I went by the other day, and there he was with his coat off, helping Luttrell, wheeling barrows, and I've seen him weeding before now."

"Well, I'm sure it's very kind of him," said Mrs Pinet quickly. She could not speak tartly; her physique and constitution forbade.

"Oh, yes, it's very kind of him indeed; but he'd better be attending to his work."

"I'm sure he works very hard in the place."

"Oh, yes. Of course he does; but, don't you see?"

"See? No! See what?"

"He – he – he! And you women pretend to be so sharp about these things. What does he go there gardening for?"

"Why, goodness gracious me, Mr Gemp, you don't think – "

"Think? Why, I'm sure of it. I see a deal of what's going on, Mrs Pinet. I never look for it, but it comes. Why, he's always there. He helps Luttrell when he's at home; and old mother Luttrell talks to him about her jam. That's his artfulness; he isn't too young for that. Gets the old girl on his side."

"But do you really think – Why, she's never had a sweetheart yet."

"That we know of, Mrs P.," said Gemp, with a meaning look.

"She never has had," said Mrs Pinet emphatically, "or we should have known. Well, she's very handsome, and very nice, and I hope they'll be very happy. But do you really think it's true?"

"True? Why, he's always there of an evening, tootling on the flute and singing."

"Oh, but that's nothing; Mr Hallam goes there too, and has some music."

"Ay, but Hallam don't go out with her picking flowers, and botalising. I've often seen 'em come home together with arms full o' rubbish; and one day, what do you think?"

"Really, Mr Gemp!"

"I dropped upon 'em down in a ditch, and when they saw me coming, they pretended that they were finding little snail-shells."

"Snail-shells?"

"Yes, ma'am, and he pulls out a little magnifying-glass for her to look through. It may be a religious way of courting, but I say it's disgusting."

"Really, Mr Gemp!" said Mrs Pinet, bridling.

"Ay, it is, ma'am. I like things open and above board – a young man giving a young woman his arm, and taking her out for a walk reg'lar, and not going out in the lanes, and keeping about a yard apart."

"But do they, Mr Gemp?"

"Yes, just to make people think there's nothing going on. But there, ma'am, I must be off. You mustn't keep me. I can't stop talking here."

"Well, really, Mr Gemp!" said his hearer, bridling again, and resenting the idea that she had detained him.

"Yes, I must go indeed. I say, though, seen any more of that chap?"

"Chap? – what chap, Mr Gemp?"

"Come now, you know what I mean. That shack: that ragged, shabby fellow – him as come to see Mr Hallam the other day?"

"Oh, the poor fellow that Mr Hallam helped?"

"To be sure – him. Been here again?" said Gemp, making a rasping noise with a rough finger on his beard.

"No, Mr Gemp."

"No! Well, I suppose not. I haven't seen him myself. Mornin'; can't stop talking here."

Mr Gemp concluded his gossips invariably in this mode, as if he resented being kept from business, which consisted in going to tell his tale again.

Mrs Pinet was left to pick a few withering leaves from her geraniums, a floricultural act which she performed rather mechanically, for her mind was a good deal occupied by Gemp's disclosure.

"They'd make a very nice pair, that they would," she said thoughtfully; "and how would it be managed, I wonder? He couldn't marry himself, of course, and – oh, Mr Thickens, how you did make me jump!"

"Jump! Didn't see you jump, Mrs Pinet," said the clerk, smiling sadly, as if he thought Mrs Pinet's banking account was lower than it should be.

"Well, bless the man, you know what I mean. Stealing up so quietly, like a robber or thief in the night."

"Oh! Not come to steal, but to beg."

"Beg, Mr Thickens? What, a subscription for something?"

"No. I was coming by. Mr Hallam wants the book on his shelf, 'Brown's Investor.'"

"Oh, I see. Come in, Mr Thickens!" she exclaimed warmly. "I'll get the book."

"Won't come in, thank you."

"Now do, Mr Thickens, and have a glass of wine and a bit of cake."

The quiet, dry-looking clerk shook his head and smiled.

"Plenty of gossips in the town, Mrs Pinet, without my joining the ranks."

"Now that's unkind, Mr Thickens. I only wanted to ask you if you thought it true that Mr Bayle is going to marry Miss Millicent Luttrell; Mr Gemp says he is."

"Divide what Gemp says by five, subtract half, and the remainder may be correct, ma'am."

"Then it isn't true?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

"Oh, what a tiresome, close old bank-safe of a man you are, Mr Thickens! Just like your cupboard in the bank."

"Where I want to be, Mrs Pinet, if you will get me the book."

"Oh, well, come inside, and I'll get it for you directly. But it isn't neighbourly when I wanted to ask you about fifty pounds I wish to put away."

He followed her quickly into the parlour occupied by the manager, and then glanced sharply round.

"Have you consulted him – Mr Hallam?" he said sharply.

"No, of course not. I have always taken your advice so far, Mr Thickens. I don't talk about my bit of money to all my friends."

"Quite right," he said – "quite right. Fifty pounds, did you say?"

"Yes; and I'd better bring it to Dixons', hadn't I?" James Thickens began to work at his smoothly-shaven face, pinching his cheeks with his long white fingers and thumb, and drawing them down to his chin, as if he wished to pare that off to a point – an unnecessary procedure, as it was already very sharp.

"I can't do better, can I?"

The bank clerk looked sharply round the room again, his eyes lighting on the desk, books, and various ornaments, with which the manager had surrounded himself.

"I don't know," he said at last.

"But I don't like keeping the money in the house, Mr Thickens. I always wake up about three, and fancy that thieves are breaking in."

"Give it to me, then, and I'll put it safely for you somewhere."

"In the bank, Mr Thickens?"

"I don't know yet," he said. "Give me the book. Thank you. I'll talk to you about the money another time;" and, placing the volume under his arm, he glanced once more sharply round the room, and then went off very thoughtful and strange of aspect – veritably looking, as Mrs Pinet said, as close as the safe up at Dixons' Bank.

Volume One – Chapter Six.
Sir Gordon is Troubled with Doubts

First love is like furze; it is very beautiful and golden, but about and under that rich yellow there are thorns many and sharp. It catches fire, too, quickly, and burns up with a tremendous deal of crackling, and the heat is great but not always lasting.

Christie Bayle did not take this simile to heart, but a looker-on might have done so, especially such a looker-on as Robert Hallam, who visited at the doctor's just as of old – before the arrival of the new curate, whose many calls did not seem to trouble him in the least.

All the same, though, he was man of the world enough to see the bent of Christie Bayle's thoughts, and how quickly and strongly his love had caught and burned. For treating Gemp's statements as James Thickens suggested, and dividing them by five, the half-quotient was quite sufficiently heavy to show that if the curate did not marry Millicent Luttrell, it would be no fault of his.

He was, as his critics said, very young. Twenty-four numbered his years, and his educational capabilities were on a par therewith; but in matters worldly and of the heart twenty would better have represented his age.

He had come down here fresh from his studious life, to find the place full of difficulties, till that evening when he found in Millicent a coadjutor, and one who seemed to take delight in helping and advising him. Then the old Midland town had suddenly become to him a paradise, and a strange eagerness seemed to pervade him.

How was he to attack such and such an evil in one of the low quarters?

He would call in at the doctor's, and mention the matter to Miss Luttrell.

It was to find her enthusiastic, but at the same time full of shrewd common-sense, and clever suggestions which he followed out, and the way became smooth.

His means were good, for just before leaving college the death of an aunt had placed him in possession of a competency; hence he wished to be charitable, and Millicent advised him as to the best channels into which he could direct his molten gold.

Then there were the Sundays when, after getting easily and well through the service, he ascended the pulpit to commence his carefully elaborated sermon, the first sentences of which were hard, faltering, and dry, till his eyes fell upon one sweet, grave face in the middle of the aisle, watching him intently, and its effect was strange. For as their eyes met, Christie Bayle's spirit seemed to awaken: he ceased to read the sermon. Words, sentences, and whole paragraphs were crowding in his brain eager to be spoken, and as they were spoken it was with a fire and eloquence that deeply stirred his hearers; while when, perhaps, at the very last, his eyes fell once more upon Millicent's calm, sweet face, he would see that it was slightly flushed and her eyes were suffused.

He did not know it; but her influence stirred him in everything he did, and when he called, there was no mistaking the bright, eager look of pleasure, the friendly warmth, and the words that were almost reproachful if he had allowed three or four days to pass.

Work? No man could have worked harder or with a greater display of zeal. She would be pleased, he felt, to see how he had made changes in several matters that were foul with neglect. And it was no outer whitewashing of that which was unclean within. Christie Bayle was very young, and he had suddenly grown enthusiastic; so that when he commenced some work he never paused until it was either well in train or was done.

"You're just the man we wanted here," said Doctor Luttrell. "Why, Bayle, you have wakened me up. I tried all sorts of reformations years ago, but I had not your enthusiasm, and I soon wearied and jogged on in the old way. I shall have to begin now, old as I am, and see what I can do."

"But it is shameful, papa, what opposition Mr Bayle meets with in the town," cried Millicent warmly.

"Yes, my dear, it is. There's a great deal of opposition to everything that is for people's good."

Millicent was willing enough to help, for there was something delightfully fresh and pleasant in her association with Christie Bayle.

"He's working too hard, my dear," the doctor said. "He wants change. He's a good fellow. You and your mother must coax him here more, and get him out." Bayle wanted no coaxing, for he came willingly enough to work hard with the doctor in the garden; to inspect Mrs Luttrell's jams, and see how she soaked the paper in brandy before she tied them down; to go for walks with Millicent, or, on wet days, read German with her, or practise some instrumental or vocal duet.

How pleasantly, how happily those days glided by! Mr Hallam from the bank came just as often as of old, and once or twice seemed disposed to speak slightingly of the curate, but he saw so grave and appealing a look in Millicent's eyes that he hastened, in his quiet, gentlemanly way, to efface the slight.

Sir Gordon Bourne, as was his custom, when not at the Hall or away with his yacht, came frequently to the doctor's evenings, heavy with the smartest of sayings and the newest of stories from town. Gravely civil to the bank manager, a little distant to the new curate, and then, by degrees, as the months rolled by, talking to him, inviting him to dinner, placing his purse at his disposal for deserving cases of poverty, and at last becoming his fast friend.

"An uncommonly good fellow, doctor, uncommonly. Very young – yes, very young. Egad, Sir, I envy him sometimes, that I do."

"I'm glad you like him, Sir Gordon," cried Millicent, one day.

"Are you, my dear, are you?" he said, half sadly. "Well, why shouldn't I? The man's sincere. He goes about his work without fuss or pretence. He does not consider it his duty to be always preaching at you and pulling a long face; but seems to me to be doing a wonderful deal of good in a quiet way. Do you know – "

He paused, and looked from the doctor to Mrs Luttrell, and then at Millicent, half laughingly.

"Do we know what?"

"Well, I'll confess. I've played chess with him, and we've had a rubber at whist here, and he never touched upon sacred subjects since I've known him, and it has had a curious effect upon me."

"A curious effect?" said Millicent wonderingly.

"Yes, egad, it's a fact; he makes me feel as if I ought to go and hear him preach, and if you'll take me next Sunday, Miss Millicent, I will."

Millicent laughingly agreed; and Sir Gordon kept his word, going to the doctor's on Sunday morning, and walking with the ladies to church.

It is worthy of remark though, that he talked a good deal to himself as he went home, weary and uncomfortable from wearing tight boots, and bracing up.

"It won't do," he said. "I'm old enough to know better, and if I can see into such matters more clearly than I could twenty years ago, Bayle's in love with her. Well, a good thing too, for I'm afraid Hallam is taken too, and – no, that would not do. I've nothing whatever against the fellow; a gentleman in his manners, the very perfection of a manager, but somehow I should not like to see her his wife."

"Why?" he said after a pause.

He shook his head.

"I can't answer that question," he muttered; and he was as far off from the answer when six months had passed.

Volume One – Chapter Seven.
A Terrible Mistake

"Going out for a drive?"

"Yes, Mr Bayle; and it was of no use my speaking. No end of things to see to; but the doctor would have me come with him."

"I think the doctor was quite right, Mrs Luttrell."

"There you are. You see, my dear? What did I tell you? Plants must have air, mustn't they, Bayle?"

"Certainly."

"I wish you would not talk like that, my dear. I am not a plant."

"But you want air," cried the doctor, giving his whip a flick, and making his sturdy cob jump.

"Oh! do be careful, my dear," cried Mrs Luttrell nervously as she snatched at the whip.

"Oh, yes, I'll be careful. I say, Bayle, I wish you would look in as you go by; I forgot to open the cucumber-frame, and the sun's coming out strong. Just lift it about three inches."

"I will," said the curate; and the doctor drove on to see a patient half-a-dozen miles away.

"Well, you often tell me I'm a very foolish woman, my dear," said Mrs Luttrell, buttoning and unbuttoning the chaise-apron with uneasy fingers, "but I should not have done such a thing as that."

"Thing as what?" cried the doctor.

"As to send a gentleman on to our house where Milly's all alone. It doesn't seem prudent."

"What, not to ask a friend to look in and lift the cucumber-light?"

"But, with Milly all alone; and I never leave her without feeling that something is going to happen."

"Pish! fudge! stuff!" cried the doctor. "I never did see such a woman as you are. I declare you think of nothing but courting. You ought to be ashamed of yourself at your time of life."

"Now, you ought not to speak like that, my dear. It's very wrong of you, for it's not true. Of course I feel anxious about Millicent, as every prudent woman should."

"Anxious! What is there to be anxious about? Such nonsense! Do you think Bayle is a wolf in sheep's clothing?"

"No, of course I don't. Mr Bayle is a most amiable, likeable young man, and I feel quite surprised how I've taken to him. I thought it quite shocking at first when he came, he seemed so young; but I like him now very much indeed."

"And yet you would not trust him to go to the house when we were away. For shame, old lady! for shame!"

"I do wish you would not talk to me like that, my dear. I never know whether you are in earnest or joking."

"Now, if it had been Hallam, you might have spoken. – Ah! Betsy, what are you shying at? – Keep that apron fastened, will you? What are you going to do?"

"I was only unfastening it ready – in case I had to jump out," faltered Mrs Luttrell.

"Jump out! Why, mother! There, you are growing into quite a nervous old woman. You stop indoors too much."

"But is there any danger, my dear?"

"Danger! Why, look for yourself. The mare saw a wheelbarrow, and she was frightened. Don't be so silly."

"Well, I'll try not," said Mrs Luttrell, smoothing down the cloth fold over the leather apron, but looking rather flushed and excited as the cob trotted rapidly over the road. "You were saying, dear, something about Mr Hallam."

"Yes. What of him?"

"Of course we should not have sent him to the house when Milly was alone."

"Humph! I suppose not. I say, old lady, you're not planning match-making to hook that good-looking cash-box, are you?"

"What, Mr Hallam, dear? Oh, don't talk like that."

"Humph!" ejaculated the doctor, making the whiplash whistle about the cob's ears; "you are not very fond of him, then?"

"Well, no, dear, I can't say I am. He's very gentlemanly, and handsome, and particular, but somehow – "

"Ah!" said the doctor, with a dry chuckle, "that's it – 'somehow.' That's the place where I stick. No, old lady, he won't do. I was a bit afraid at first; but he seems to keep just the same: makes no advances. He wouldn't do."

"Oh, dear me, no!" cried Mrs Luttrell, with quite a shudder.

"Why not?" said the doctor sharply; "don't you like him?"

"Perhaps it would not be just to say so," said Mrs Luttrell nervously, "but I'm glad Milly does not seem to take to him."

"So am I. Curate would be far better, eh?"

"And you charge me with match-making, my dear! It is too bad."

"Ah! well, perhaps it is; but don't you think – eh?"

"No," said Mrs Luttrell, "I do not. Millicent is very friendly to Mr Bayle, and looks upon him as a pleasant youth who has similar tastes to her own. And certainly he is very nice and natural."

"And yet you object to his going to see the girl when we are out! There, get along, Betsy; we shall never be there."

The whip whistled round the cob's head and the chaise turned down a pleasant woody lane, just as Christie Bayle lifted the latch and entered the doctor's garden.

It was very beautiful there in the bright morning sunshine; the velvet turf so green and smooth, and the beds vying one with the other in brightness. There was no one in the garden, and all seemed strangely still at the house, with its open windows and flower-decked porch.

Bayle had been requested to look in and execute a commission for the doctor, but all the same he felt guilty: and though he directed an eager glance or two at the open windows, he turned, with his heart throbbing heavily, to the end of the closely-clipped yew hedge, and passed round into the kitchen-garden, and then up one walk and down another, to the sunny-sheltered top, where the doctor grew his cucumbers, and broke down with his melons every year.

There was a delicious scent from the cuttings of the lawn, which were piled round the frame, fermenting and giving out heat: and as the curate reached the glass lights, there was the interior hung with great dewdrops, which began to coalesce and run off as he raised the ends of the lights and looked in.

Puff! quite a wave of heated air, fragrant with the young growth of the plants, all looking richly green and healthy, and with the golden, starry blossoms peeping here and there.

Quite at home, Christie Bayle thrust in his arm and took out a little block of wood cut like an old-fashioned gun-carriage or a set of steps, and with this he propped up one light, so that the heat might escape and the temperature fall.

This done he moved to the next, and thrust down the light, for he had seen from the other side a glistening, irregular, iridescent streak, which told of the track of an enemy, and this enemy had to be found.

That light uttered a loud plaintive squeak as it was thrust down, a sound peculiar to the lights of cucumber-frames; and, leaning over the edge, Bayle began to peer about among the broad prickly leaves.

Yes, there was the enemy's trail, and he must be found, for it would have been cruel to the doctor to have left such a devouring creature there.

In and out among the trailing stems, and over the soft black earth, through which the delicate roots were peeping, were the dry glistening marks, just as if someone had dipped a brush in a paint formed of pearl shells dissolved in oil, and tried to imitate the veins in a block of marble.

Yes; in and out – there it went, showing how busy the creature had been during the night, and the task was to find where it had gone to rest and sleep for the day, ready to come forth refreshed for another mischievous nocturnal prowl.

"Now where can that fellow have hidden himself?" said the follower of the trail, peering about and taking off his hat and standing it on the next light. "One of those great grey fellows, I'll be bound. Ah, to be sure! Come out, sir."

The tale-telling trail ended where a seed-pan stood containing some young Brussels sprouts which had attained a goodly size, and upon these the enemy had supped heartily, crawling down afterwards to sleep off the effects beneath the pan.

It was rather difficult to reach that pan, for the edge of the frame was waist-high; but it had to be done, and the slug raked out with a bit of stick.

That was it! No, it was not; the hunter could not quite reach, and had to wriggle himself a little more over and then try.

The search was earnest and successful, the depredator dying an ignominious death, crushed with a piece of potsherd against the seed-pan, and then being buried at once beneath the soil, but to a looker-on the effect was grotesque.

There was a looker-on here, advancing slowly along the path with a bunch of flowers in one hand, a pair of scissors in the other. In fact, that peculiar squeak given by the frame had attracted Millicent's attention, at a time when she believed every one to be away.

As she approached, she became conscious of the hind quarters of a man clothed in that dark mixture that used to be popularly known as "pepper-and-salt," standing up out of one of the cucumber-frames, and executing movements as if he were practising diving in a dry bath. Suddenly the legs subsided and sank down. Next they rose again, and kicked about, the rest of the man still remaining hidden in the frame, and then at last there was a rapid retrograde motion, and Christie Bayle emerged, hot, dishevelled, but triumphant for a moment, then scarlet with confusion and annoyance as he hastily caught up his hat, clapped it on, but hurriedly took it off and bowed.

"Miss Luttrell!" he exclaimed.

"Mr Bayle!" she cried, forbearing to smile as she saw his confusion. "I heard the noise and wondered what it could be."

"I – I met your father," he said, hastily adjusting the light; "he asked me to open the frames. A tiresome slug – "

"It was very kind of you," she said, holding out her hand and pressing his in her frank, warm grasp, and full of eagerness to set him at his ease. "Papa will be so pleased that you have caught one of his enemies."

"Thank you," he said uneasily; "it is very kind of you." – "I'm the most unlucky wretch under the sun, always making myself ridiculous before her," he added to himself.

"Kind of me? No, of you, to come and take all that trouble." – "Poor fellow!" she thought, "he fancies that I am going to laugh at him." – "I've been so busy, Mr Bayle: I've copied out the whole of that duet. When are you coming in to try it over?"

"Do you wish me to try it with you?" he said rather coldly.

"Why, of course. There are no end of pretty little passages solo for the flute. We must have a good long practice together before we play in public."

"You're very kind and patient with me," he said, as he gazed at the sweet calm face by his side.

"Nonsense," she cried. "I'm cutting a few flowers for Miss Heathery; she is the most grateful recipient of a present of this kind that I know."

They were walking back towards the house as she spoke, and from time to time Millicent stopped to snip off some flower, or to ask her companion to reach one that grew on high.

In a few minutes she had set him quite at his ease and they were talking quietly about their life, their neighbours, about his endeavours to improve the place; and yet all the time there seemed to him to be an undercurrent in his life, flowing beneath that surface talk. The garden was seen through a medium that tinted everything with joy; the air he breathed was perfumed and intoxicating; the few bird-notes that came from time to time sounded more sweetly than he had ever heard them before; and, hardly able to realise it himself, life – existence, seemed one sweetly calm, and yet paradoxically troubled delight.

His heart was beating fast, and there was a strange sense of oppression as he loosed the reins of his imagination for a moment; but the next, as he turned to gaze at the innocent, happy, unruffled face, so healthful and sweet, with the limpid grey eyes ready to meet his own so frankly, the calm came, and he felt that he could ask no greater joy than to live that peaceful life for ever at her side.

It would be hard to tell how it happened. They strolled about the garden till Millicent laughingly said that it would be like trespassing on her father's *carte blanche* to cut more flowers, and then they went through the open French window into the drawing-room, where he sat near her, as if intoxicated by the sweetness of her voice, while she talked to him in unrestrained freedom of her happy, contented life, and bade him not to think he need be ceremonious there.

Yes, it would be hard to tell how it happened. There was one grand stillness without, as if the ardent sunshine had drunk up all sound but the dull, heavy throb of his heart, and the music of that sweet voice which now lulled him to a sense of delicious repose, now made every nerve and vein tingle with a joy he had never before known.

It had been a mystery to him in his student life. Books had been his world, and ambition to win a scholarly fame his care. Now it had by degrees dawned upon him that there was another, a greater love than that, transcending it so that all that had gone before seemed pitiful and small. He had met her, her voice would be part of his life from henceforth, and at last – how it came about he could not have told – he was standing at her side, holding her hands firmly in his own, and saying in low and eager tones that trembled with emotion:

"Millicent, I love you – my love – my love!"

For a few moments Millicent Luttrell stood motionless, gazing wonderingly at her companion as he bent down over her hands and pressed his lips upon them.

Then, snatching them away, her soft creamy face turned to scarlet with indignation, but only for this to fade as she met his eyes, and read there the earnest look he gave her, and his act from that moment ceased to be the insult she thought at first.

"Miss Luttrell!" he said.

"Hush! don't speak to me," she cried.

He took a step forward, but she waved him back, and for a few moments sobbed passionately, struggling hard the while to master her emotion.

"Have I offended you?" he panted. "Dear Millicent, listen to me. What have I done?"

"Hush!" she cried. "It is all a terrible mistake. What have *I* done?"

There was a pause, and the deep silence seemed to be filled now with strange noises. There was a painful throbbing of the heart, a singing in the ears, and life was all changed as Millicent at last mastered her emotion, and her voice seemed to come to the listener softened and full of pity as if spoken by one upon some far-off shore, so calm, so grave and slow, so impassionately the words fell upon his ear.

Such simple words, and yet to him like the death-knell of all his hope in life.

Volume One – Chapter Eight.
Crossed in Love

"Oh, Mr Bayle, I am so sorry!"

He looked piteously in the handsome pale young face before him, his heart sinking, and a feeling of misery, such as he had never before known, chilling him so that he strove in vain to speak.

The words were not cruel, they were not marked with scorn or contempt. There was no coquetry – no hope. They were spoken in a voice full of gentle sympathy, and there was tender pity in every tone, and yet they chilled him to the heart.

"Oh, Mr Bayle, I am so sorry!"

It needed no look to endorse those words, and yet it was there, beaming upon him from those sweet, frank eyes that had filled again with tears which she did not passionately dash aside, but which brimmed and softly dropped upon the hands she clasped across her breast.

He saw plainly enough that it had all been a dream, his dream of love and joy; that he had been too young to read a woman's heart aright, and that he had taken her little frank kindnesses as responses to his love; and he needed no explanations, for the tones in which she uttered those words crushed him, till as he stood before her in those painful moments, he realised that the deathblow to all his hopes had come.

He sank back in his chair as she stood before him, gazing up at her in so boyish and piteous a manner that she spoke again.

"Indeed, indeed, Mr Bayle, I thought our intimacy so pleasant, I was so happy with you."

"Then I may hope," he cried passionately. "Millicent, dear Millicent, all my life has been spent in study; I have read so little, I never thought of love till I saw you, but it has grown upon me till I can think only of you – your words, the tones of your voice, your face, all are with me always, with me now. Millicent, dear Millicent, it is a man's first true love, and you could give me hope."

"Oh, hush! hush!" she said gently, as she held out her hand to him, which he seized and covered with his kisses, till she withdrew it firmly, and shook her head. "I am more pained than I can say," she said softly. "I tell you I never thought of such a thing as this."

"But you will," he said, "Millicent, my love!"

"Mr Bayle," she said, with some attempt at firmness, "if I have ever by my thoughtlessness made you think I cared for you, otherwise than as a very great friend, forgive me."

"A friend!" he cried bitterly.

"Yes, as a friend. Is friendship so slight a thing that you speak of it like that?"

"Yes," he cried; "at a time like this, when I ask for bread and you give me a stone."

"Oh, hush!" she said again softly; and there was a sad smile through her tears. "I should be cruel if I did not speak to you plainly and firmly. Mr Bayle, what you ask is impossible."

"You despise me," he cried passionately, "because I am so boyish – so young."

"No," she said gently, as she laid her hand upon his shoulder. "Let me speak to you as an elder sister might."

"A sister!" he cried angrily.

"Yes, as a sister," replied Millicent gently. "Christie Bayle, it was those very things in you that attracted me first. I never had a brother; but you, with your frank and free-hearted youthfulness, your genuine freshness of nature, seemed so brotherly, that my life for the past few months has been brighter than ever. Our reading, our painting, our music – Oh, why did you dash all these happy times away?"

"Because I am not a boy," he cried angrily; "because I am a man – a man who loves you. Millicent, will you not give me hope?"

There was a pause, during which she stood gazing right over his head as he still sat there with outstretched hands, which he at last dropped with a gesture of despair.

"No," she said at last; "I cannot give you hope. It is impossible."

"Then you love some one else," he cried with boyish anger. "Oh, it is cruel. You led me on to love you, and now, in your coquettish triumph, you throw me aside for some other plaything of the hour."

Millicent's brow contracted, and a half-angry look came into her eyes.

"This talk to me of brotherly feeling and of being a sister, is it to mock me? It is as I thought," he cried passionately, "as I have heard, with you handsome women; you who delight in giving pain, in trifling with a weak, foolish fellow's heart, so that you may bring him to your feet."

"Christie – "

"No," he raged, as he started to his feet, "don't speak to me like that. I will not be led on again. Enjoy your triumph, but let it be made bitter by the knowledge that you have wrecked my life."

"Oh, hush! hush! hush!" she said softly. "You are not yourself, Christie Bayle, or you would not speak to me like this. You know that you are charging me with that which is not true. How can you be so cruel?"

"Cruel? It is you," he cried passionately. "But, there, it is all over. I shall leave here at once. I wish I had never seen the town."

"Christie," she said gently, "listen to me. Be yourself and go home, and think over all this. I cannot give you what you ask. Come, be wise and manly over this disappointment. Go away for a week, and then come back to me, and let our pleasant old friendship be resumed. You give me pain, indeed you do, by this outburst. It is so unlike you."

"Unlike me? Yes, you have nearly driven me mad."

"No, no. No, no," she said tenderly. "Be calm. Indeed and indeed, I have felt as warm and affectionate to you of late as a sister could feel for a brother. I have felt so pleased to see how you were winning your way here amongst the people; and when I have heard a light or contemptuous utterance about you, it has made me angry and ready to speak in your defence."

"Yes, I know," he cried; "and it is this that taught me that you must care for me – must love me."

"Cannot a woman esteem and be attached to a youth without loving him?"

"Youth! There! You treat me as if I were a boy," he cried angrily. "Can I help seeming so young?"

"No," she said, taking his hand, "But you are in heart and ways very, very young, Christie Bayle. Am I to tell you again that it was this brought about our intimacy, for I found you so fresh in your young manliness, so different to the gentlemen I have been accustomed to? Come: forget all this. Let us be friends."

"Friends? No, it is impossible," he cried bitterly. "I know I am boyish and weak, and that is why you hold me in such contempt."

"Contempt? Oh, no!"

"But, some day," he pleaded, "I'll wait – any time – "

"No, no, no," she said flushing, "it is impossible."

"Then," he raged as he started up, "I am right. You love some one else. Who is it? I will know."

"Mr Bayle!"

There was a calm queenly dignity in her look and words that checked his rage; and she saw it as he sank into the nearest chair, his face bent down upon his hands, and his shoulders heaving with the emotion that escaped now and then in a hoarse sob.

"Poor boy!" she said to herself as the indignation he had roused gave way to pity.

"Christie Bayle," she said aloud, as she approached him once more, and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Don't touch me," he cried hoarsely as he sprang up; and she started back, half frightened at his wild, haggard face. "*I* might have known," he panted. "Heaven forgive you! Good-bye – good-bye for ever!" Before Millicent could speak he had reached the door, and the next minute she heard his hurried steps as he went down the street.

Volume One – Chapter Nine.
The Scales Fall from Sir Gordon's Eyes

Millicent stood listening till the steps had died away, and then sat down at the writing-table.

"Poor boy!" she said softly, as she passed her hand over her eyes, "I am so sorry."

She laid down the pen, and ran over her conduct – all that she had said and done since her first meeting with the curate; but ended by shaking her head, and declaring to herself that she could find nothing in her behaviour to call for blame.

"No," she said, rising from the table, after writing a few lines which she tore up, "I must not write to him; the wound must be left to time."

A double knock announced a visitor, and directly after Thisbe King, the maid, ushered in Sir Gordon, who, in addition to his customary dress, wore – what was very unusual for him – a flower in his button-hole, which, with a great show of ceremony, he detached, and presented to Millicent before taking his seat.

As a rule he was full of chatty conversation, but, to Millicent's surprise, he remained perfectly silent, gazing straight before him through the window.

"Is anything the matter, Sir Gordon?" said Millicent at last. "Papa is out, but he will not be long." These words roused him, and he smiled at her gravely.

"No, my dear Miss Luttrell," he said, "nothing is wrong; but at my time of life, when a man has anything particular to say, he weighs it well – he brings a good deal of thought to bear. I was trying to do this now."

"But mamma is out too," said Millicent.

"Yes, I know," he replied, "and therefore I came on to speak to you."

"Sir Gordon!"

"My dear Miss Luttrell – there, I have known you so long that I may call you my dear child – I think you believe in me?"

"Believe in you, Sir Gordon?"

"Yes, that I have the instincts, I hope, of a gentleman; that I am your father's very good friend; and that I reverence his child."

"Oh yes, Sir Gordon," said Millicent, placing her hand in his, as he extended it towards her.

"That is well, then," he said; and there was another pause, during which he gazed thoughtfully at the hand he held for a few moments, and then raised it to his lips and allowed it afterwards to glide away.

Millicent flushed slightly, for, in spite of herself, the thought of her visitor's object began to dawn upon her, though she refused to believe it at first.

"Let me see," he said at last, "time slides away so fast. You must be three-and-twenty now."

"I thought a lady's age was a secret, Sir Gordon," said Millicent smiling.

"To weak, vain women, yes, my child; but your mind is too clear and candid for such subterfuges as that. Twenty-three! Compared with that, I am quite an old man."

Millicent's colour began to deepen, but she made a brave effort to be calm, mastered her emotion, and sat listening to the strange wooing that had commenced.

"I am going to speak very plainly," her visitor said, gazing wistfully in her eyes, "and to tell you, Millicent, that for the past five years I have been your humble suitor."

"Sir Gordon!"

"Hush! hush! On the strength of our old friendship hear me out, my child. I will not say a word that shall wilfully give you pain; I only ask for a hearing."

Millicent sank back in her chair, clasped her hands, and let them rest in her lap, for she was too agitated to speak. The events of an hour or two before had unhinged her.

"For five years I have been nursing this idea in my breast," he continued, "one day determining to speak, and then telling myself that I was weak and foolish, that the thing was impossible; and then, as you know, I have gone away for months together in my yacht. I will tell you what I have said to myself: 'You are getting well on in life; she is young and beautiful. The match would not be right. Some day she will form an attachment for some man suited to her. Take your pleasure in seeing the woman you love happier than you could ever make her.'"

This was a revelation to Millicent, whose lips parted, and whose troubled eyes were fixed upon the speaker.

"The years went on, my child," continued Sir Gordon, "and I kept fancying that the man had come, and that the test of my love for you was to be tried. I was willing to suffer – for your sake – to see you happy; and though I was ready to offer you wealth, title, and the tender affection of an elderly man, I put it aside, striving to do my duty."

"Sir Gordon, I never knew of all this."

"Knew!" he said, with a smile, "no: I never let you know. Well, my child, not to distress you too much, I have waited; and, as you knew, I have seen your admirers flitting about you, one by one, all these years; and I confess it, with a sense of delight I dare not dwell upon, I have found that not one of these butterflies has succeeded in winning our little flower. She has always been heart-whole and – There, I dare not say all I would. At last, with a pang that I felt that I must suffer, I saw, as I believed, that the right man had come, in the person of our friend, Christie Bayle. It has been agony to me, though I have hidden it beneath a calm face, I hope, and I have fought on as I saw your intimacy increase. For, I said to myself, it is right. He is well-to-do; he is young and handsome; he is true and manly; he is all that her lover should be; and, with a sigh, I have sat down telling myself that I was content, and, to prove myself, I have made him my friend. Millicent Luttrell, he is a true-hearted, noble fellow, and he loves you."

Millicent half rose, but sank back in her chair, and her face grew calm once more.

"I am no spy upon your actions or upon those of Christie Bayle, my child; but I know that he has been to you this morning; that he has asked you to be his wife, and that you have refused him."

"Has Mr Bayle been so wanting in delicacy," said Millicent, with a flush of anger, "that he has told you this?"

"No, no. Pray do not think thus of him. He is too noble – too manly a fellow to be guilty of such a weakness. There are things, though, which a man cannot conceal from a jealous lover's eyes, and this was one."

"Jealous – lover!" faltered Millicent.

"Yes," he said; "old as I am, my child, I must declare myself as your lover. This last rejection has given me hopes that may be wild – hopes which prompted me to speak as I do now."

"Sir Gordon!" cried Millicent, rising from her seat; but he followed her example and took her hand.

"You will listen to me, my child, patiently," he said in low earnest tones; "I must speak now. I know the difference in our ages; no one better; but if the devotion of my life, the constant effort to make you happy can bring the reward I ask, you shall not repent it. I know that some women would be tempted by the title and by my wealth, but I will not even think it of you. I know, too, that some would, in their coquetry, rejoice in bringing such a one as I to their feet, and then laugh at him for his pains. I fear nothing of the kind from you, Millicent, for I know your sweet, candid nature. But tell me first, do you love Christie Bayle?"

"As a sister might love a younger brother, who seemed to need her guiding hand," said Millicent calmly. "Ah!"

It was a long sigh full of relief; and then taking her hand once more, Sir Gordon said softly:

"Millicent, my child, will you be my wife?"

The look of pain and sorrow in her eyes gave him his answer before her lips parted to speak, and he dropped the hand and stood there with the carefully-got-up look of youthfulness or early manhood seeming to fade from him. In a few minutes he appeared to have aged twenty years; his brow grew full of lines, his eyes seemed sunken, and there was a hollowness of cheek that had been absent before.

He stretched out his hand to the table, and slowly sat down, bending forward till his arms rested upon his knees and his hands hung down nerveless between.

"You need not speak, child," he said sadly. "It has all been one of my mistakes. I see! I see!"

"Sir Gordon, indeed, indeed I do feel honoured!"

"No, no! hush, hush!" he said gently. "It is only natural. It was very weak and foolish of me to ask you; but when this love blinds a man, he says and does foolish things that he repents when his eyes are open. Mine are open now – yes," he said, with a sad smile, "wide open; I can see it all. But," he added quickly as he rose, "you are not angry with me, my dear?"

"Angry? Sir Gordon!"

"No: you are not," he said, taking her hand and patting it softly. "Is it not strange that I could see you so clearly and well, and yet be so blind to myself? Ah, well, it is over now. I suppose no man is perfect, but in my conceit I did not think I could have been so weak. If I had not seen Bayle this morning and realised what had taken place, I should not have let my vanity get the better of me as I did."

"All this is very, very painful to me, Sir Gordon."

"Yes, yes, of course," he said quickly. "Come, then, this is our little secret, my child. You will keep it – the secret of my mistake? I do love you very much, but you have taught me what it is. I am getting old and not so keen of wits as I was once upon a time. I thought it was man's love for woman; but you are right, my dear, it is the love that a tender father might bear his child."

He took her unresistingly in his arms, and kissed her forehead reverently before turning away, to walk to the window and stand gazing out blindly, till a firm step with loudly creaking boots was heard approaching, when Sir Gordon slowly drew away back into the room.

Then the gate clanged, the bell rang, and a change came over Sir Gordon as Millicent ran to the drawing-room door.

"Not at home, Thisbe, to any one," she said hastily. "I am particularly engaged."

She closed the door quietly, and came back into the room to stand there, now flushed, now pale.

Sir Gordon took her hand softly, and raised it to his lips.

"Thank you, my child," he said tenderly. "It was very kind and thoughtful of you. I could not bear for any one else to see me in my weakness."

He was smiling sadly in her face, when he noticed her agitation, and at that moment the deep rich tones of Hallam's voice were heard speaking to Thisbe.

The words were inaudible, but there was no mistaking the tones, and at that moment it was as if the last scale of Sir Gordon's love blindness had fallen away, and he let fall Millicent's hand with a half-frightened look.

"Millicent, my child!" he cried in a sharp whisper. "No, no! Tell me it isn't that!"

She raised her eyes to his, looking pale, and shrinking from him as if guilty of some sin, and he flushed with anger as he caught her by the wrist.

"I give up – I have given up – every hope," he said, hoarsely, "but I cannot kill my love, even if it be an old man's, and your happiness would be mine. Tell me, then – I have a right to know – tell me, Millicent, my child, it is not that?"

Millicent's shrinking aspect passed away, and a warm flush flooded her cheeks as she drew herself up proudly and looked him bravely in the eyes.

"It is true, then?" he said huskily.

Millicent did not answer with her lips; but there was a proud assent in her clear eyes as she met her questioner's unflinchingly, while the deep-toned murmur ceased, the firm step was heard upon the gravel, and the door closed.

"Then it is so?" he said in a voice that was almost inaudible. "Hallam! Hallam! How true that they say love is blind! Oh, my child, my child!"

His last words were spoken beneath his breath, and he stood there, old and crushed by the fair woman in the full pride of her youth and beauty, both listening to the retiring step as Hallam went down the road.

No words could have told so plainly as her eyes the secret of Millicent Luttrell's heart.

Volume One – Chapter Ten.
Thisbe Gives Her Experience

Thisbe King was huffy; and when Thisbe King was huffy, she was hard.

When Thisbe was huffy, and in consequence hard, it was because, as she expressed it, “Things is awkward;” and when things were like that, Thisbe went and made the beds.

Of course the beds did not always want making; but more than once after an encounter with Mrs Luttrell upon some domestic question, where it was all mild reproof on one side, acerbity on the other, Thisbe had been known to go up to the best bedroom, drag a couple of chairs forward, and relieve her mind by pulling the bed to pieces, snatching quilt and blankets and sheets off over the chairs, and engaging in a furious fight with pillows, bolster, and feather bed, hitting, punching, and turning, till she was hot; and then, having thoroughly conquered the soft, inanimate objects and her own temper at the same time, the bed was smoothly re-made, and Thisbe sighed.

“I shall have to part with Thisbe,” Mrs Luttrell often used to say to husband and daughter; but matters went no farther: perhaps she knew in her heart that Thisbe would not go.

The beds had all been made, and there had been no encounter with Mrs Luttrell about any domestic matter relating to spreading a cloth in the drawing-room before the grate was blackleaded, or using up one loaf in the kitchen before a second was cut. In fact, Thisbe had been all smiles that morning, and had uttered a few croaks in the kitchen, which she did occasionally under the impression that she was singing; but all at once she had rushed upstairs like the wind in winter when the front door was opened, and to carry out the simile, she had dashed back a bedroom door, and closed it with a bang.

This done, she had made a bed furiously – so furiously that the feathers flew from a weak corner, and had to be picked up and tucked in again. After this, red-faced and somewhat refreshed, Thisbe pulled a housewife out of a tremendous pocket like a saddle-bag, threaded a needle, and sewed up the failing spot.

“It’s dreadful, that’s what it is!” she muttered at last, “and I’m going to speak my mind.”

She did not speak her mind then, but went down to her work, and worked with her ears twitching like those of some animal on the *qui vive* for danger; and when Thisbe twitched her ears there was a corresponding action in the muscles about the corners of her mouth, which added to the animal look, for it suggested that she might be disposed to bite.

Some little time afterwards she walked into the drawing-room, looking at its occupant in a soured way.

“Letter for you, Miss Milly,” she said.

“A note for me, Thisbe?” And Millicent took the missive which Thisbe held with her apron to keep it clean.

“Mr Bayle give it me hissen.”

Millicent’s face grew troubled, and Thisbe frowned, and left the room shaking her head.

The note was brief, and the tears stood in Millicent’s eyes as she read it twice.

“*Pity me. Forgive me. I was mad.*”

“Poor boy!” she said softly as she refolded it and placed it in her desk, to stand there, thoughtful and with her brow wrinkled.

She was in the bay-window, and after standing there a few minutes, her face changed; the troubled look passed away as a steady, regular step was heard on the gravel path beyond the hedge. There was the faint creaking noise, too, at every step of the hard tight boots, and as their wearer passed, Millicent looked up and returned the salute: for a glossy hat was raised, and he who bowed passed on, leaving her with her colour slightly heightened and an eager look in her eyes.

"Any answer, miss?"

Millicent turned quickly, to see that Thisbe had returned.

"Answer?"

"Yes, miss. The note."

"Is Mr Bayle waiting?"

"No, miss; but I thought you might want to send him one, and I'm going out and could leave it on the way."

"No, Thisbe, there is no answer."

"Are you sure, miss?"

"Sure, Thisbe? Of course."

Thisbe stood pulling the hem of her apron and making it snap.

"Oh! I would send him a line, miss. I like Mr Bayle. For such a young man, the way he can preach is wonderful. But, Miss Milly," she cried with a sudden, passionate outburst, "please, don't – don't do that!"

"What do you mean, Thisbe?"

"I can't abear it, miss. It frightens and worries me."

"Thisbe!"

"I can't help it, miss. I'm a woman too, and seven years older than you are. Don't, please don't, take any notice of me. There, don't look cross at me, miss. I must speak when I see things going wrong."

"What do you mean?" cried Millicent, crimsoning. "I mean I used to lead you about when you was a little thing and keep you out o' the puddles when the road was clatty, and though you never take hold o' my hand now, I must speak when you're going wrong."

"Thisbe, this is a liberty!"

"I can't help it, Miss Milly; I see him coming by in his creaking boots, and taking off his hat, and walking by here, when he has no business, and people talking about it all over the town."

"And in this house. Thisbe, you are forgetting your place."

"Oh, no, I'm not, miss. I'm thinking about you and Mr Hallam, miss. I know."

"Thisbe, mamma and I have treated you more as a friend than a servant; but – "

"That's it, miss; and I shouldn't be a friend if I was to stand by and see you walk raight into trouble without a word."

"Thisbe!"

"I don't care, Miss Milly, I will speak. Don't have nowt to do wi' him; he's too handsome; never you have nowt to do wi' a handsome man."

Millicent's ordinarily placid face assumed a look foreign to it – a look of anger and firmness combined; but she compressed her lips, as if to keep back words she would rather not utter, and then smiled once more.

"Ah, you may laugh, Miss Milly; but it's nothing to laugh at. And there's Mr Bayle, too. You're having letters from he."

Millicent's face changed again; but she mastered her annoyance, and, laying her hand upon Thisbe's shoulder, said with a smile:

"I don't want to be angry with you, Thisbe, but you have grown into a terribly prejudiced woman."

"Enough to make me, seeing what I do, Miss Milly."

"Come, come, you must not talk like this."

"Ah, now you're beginning to coax again, as you always did when you wanted your own way; but it's of no use, my dear, I don't like him, and I never shall. I'd rather you'd marry old Sir Gordon; he is nice, though he do dye his hair. I don't like him and there's an end of it."

"Nonsense, Thisbe!"

"No, it isn't nonsense. I don't like him, and I never shall."

"But why? Have you any good reason?"

"Yes," said Thisbe with a snort.

"What is it?"

"I told you before. He's so horrid handsome."

"Why, you dear, prejudiced, silly old thing!" cried Millicent, whose eyes were sparkling, and cheeks flushed.

"I don't care if I am. I don't like handsome men: they're good for nowt."

"Why, Thisbe!"

"I don't care, they arn't; my soldier fellow was that handsome it made you feel wicked, you were so puffed out with pride."

"And so you were in love once, Thisbe?"

"Why, of course I was. Think I'm made o' stone, miss? Enough to make any poor girl be in love when a handsome fellow like that, with moustache-i-ohs, and shiny eyes, and larnseer uniform making him look like a blue robin redbreast, came and talked as he did to a silly young goose such as I was then. I couldn't help it. Why, the way his clothes fitted him was enough to win any girl's heart – him with such a beautiful figure too! He looked as if he couldn't be got out of 'em wi'out unpicking."

"Think of our Thisbe falling in love with a soldier!" cried Millicent, laughing, for there was a wild feeling of joy in her heart that was intoxicating, and made her eyes flash with excitement.

"Ah, it's very funny, isn't it?" said Thisbe, with a vicious shake of her apron. "But it's true. Handsome as handsome he was, and talked so good that he set me thinking always about how nice I must be. Stuffed me out wi' pride, and what did he do then?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Thisbe."

"Borrered three pun seven and sixpence of my savings, and took my watch, as I bought at Horncastle fair, to be reggilated, and next time I see my gentleman he was walking out wi' Dixon's cook. Handsome is as handsome does, Miss Milly, so you take warning by me."

"There, I will not be cross with you, Thisbe," said Millicent, smiling. "I know you mean well."

"And you'll send an answer to Mr Bayle, miss?"

"There is no answer required, Thisbe," said Millicent gravely.

"And Mr Hallam, miss?"

"Thisbe," said Millicent gravely, "I want you always to be our old faithful friend as well as servant, but – "

She held up a warning finger, and was silent. Thisbe's lips parted to say a few angry words; but she flounced round, and made the door speak for her in a sharp bang, after which she rushed upstairs with the intent of having a furious encounter with a bed; but she changed her mind, and on reaching her own room, sat down, put her apron to her eyes, and had what she called "a good cry."

"Poor Miss Milly!" she sobbed at last; "she's just about as blind as I was, and she'll only find it out when it's too late."

Volume One – Chapter Eleven.
Another Evening at the Doctor's

"But – but I don't like it, my dear," said Mrs Luttrell, wiping her eyes, and looking up at the doctor, as he stood rubbing his hands softly, to get rid of the harshness produced by freshly-dug earth used for potting.

"Neither do I," said the doctor calmly.

"But why should she choose him of all men?" sighed Mrs Luttrell. "I never thought Millicent the girl to be taken by a man only for his handsome face. I was not when I was young!"

"Which is saying that I was precious ugly, eh?"

"Indeed you were the handsomest man in Castor!" cried Mrs Luttrell proudly; "but you were the cleverest too, and – dear, dear! – what a little while ago it seems!"

"Gently, gently, old lady!" said the doctor, tenderly kissing the wrinkled forehead that was raised towards him. "Well, heaven's blessing be upon her, my dear, and may her love be as evergreen as ours."

Mrs Luttrell rose and laid her head upon his shoulder, and stood there, with a happy, peaceful look upon her pleasant face, although it was still wet with tears.

"That's what I'm afraid of," she sighed; "and it would be so sad."

"Ah, wife!" said the doctor, walking slowly up and down the room, with his arm about Mrs Luttrell's waist, "it's one of Nature's mysteries. We can't rule these things. Look at Milly. Some girls begin love-making at seventeen, ah, and before! and here she went calmly on to four-and-twenty untouched, and finding her pleasure in her books and music, and home-life."

"As good and affectionate a girl as ever breathed!" cried Mrs Luttrell.

"Yes, my dear; and then comes the man, and he has but to hold up his finger and say 'Come,' and it is done."

"But she might have had Sir Gordon, and he is rich, and then she would have been Lady Bourne!"

"He was too old, my dear, too old. She looked upon him like a child would look up to her father."

"Well, then, Mr Bayle, the best of men, I'm sure; and he is well off too."

"Too young, old lady, too young. I've watched them together hundreds of times. Milly always petted and patronised him, and treated him as if he were a younger brother, of whom she was very fond."

"Heigho! Oh dear me!" sighed Mrs Luttrell. "But I don't like him – this Mr Hallam. I never thought when Millicent was a baby that she would ever enter into an engagement like this. Can't we break it off?"

The doctor shook his head. "I don't like it, mother. Hallam is the last man I should have chosen for her; but we must make the best of it. He has won her; and she is not a child, but a calm, thoughtful woman."

"Yes, that's the worst of it," sighed Mrs Luttrell; "she is so thoughtful and calm and dignified, that I never can look upon her now as my little girl. I always seem to be talking to a superior woman, whose judgment I must respect. But this is very sad!"

"There, there! we must not treat it like that, old lady. Perhaps we have grown to be old and prejudiced. I own I have."

"Oh, no, no, my dear!"

"Yes, but I have. As soon as this seemed to be a certainty I began to try and find a hole in the fellow's coat."

"In Mr Hallam's coat, love? Oh, you wouldn't find that."

"No," said the doctor dryly, as he smiled down in the gentle old face, "not one. There, there! you must let it go! Now then, old lady, you must smile and look happy, here's Milly coming down."

Mrs Luttrell shook her head, and her wistful look seemed to say that she would never feel happy again; but as Millicent entered, in plain white satin, cut in the high-waisted, tight fashion of the period, and with a necklet of pearls for her only ornament, a look of pride and pleasure came into the mother's face, and she darted a glance at her husband, which he caught and interpreted, "I will think only of her."

"Oh, Milly!" she cried, "that necklace! what lovely pearls!"

"Robert's present, dear. I was to wear them to-night. Are they not lovely?"

"Almost as lovely as their setting," said the doctor to himself, as he kissed his child tenderly. "Why, Milly," he said aloud, "you look as happy as a bird!"

She laid her cheek upon his breast, and remained silent for a few moments, with half-closed eyes. Then, raising her head, she kissed him lovingly.

"I am, father dear," she said in a low voice, full of the calm and peaceful joy that filled her breast. "I am, father, I am, mother – so happy!" She paused, and then, laughing gently, added: "So happy I feel ready to cry."

It was to be a quiet evening, to which a few friends were invited; but it was understood as being an open acknowledgment of Millicent's engagement to Robert Hallam, and in this spirit the visitors came.

Miss Heathery generally arrived last at the social gatherings. It gave her entry more importance, and, at her time of life, she could not afford to dispense with adventitious aids. But there was the scent of matrimony in this little party, and she was dressed an hour too soon, and arrived first in the well-lit drawing-room.

"My darling!" she whispered, as she kissed Millicent.

That was all; but her voice and look were full of pity for the victim chosen for the next sacrifice, and she turned away towards the piano to get out her handkerchief, and drop a parting tear.

It was a big tear, one of so real and emotional a character that it brimmed over, fell on her cheekbone, and hopped into her reticule just as she was drawing open the top, and was lost in the depths within.

There was as much sorrow for herself as emotion on Millicent Luttrell's behalf. Had not Millicent robbed her of the chance of an offer? Mr Hallam might never have proposed: but still he might.

Suddenly her heart throbbed, for the next guest arrived also unusually early, and as Thisbe held open the door for him to pass, hope told again her flattering tale to the tune that Sir Gordon might have known that she, Miss Heathery, was coming early, and had followed.

The hopeful feeling did not die at once, but it received a shock as Sir Gordon entered, looking very bright and young, to shake hands warmly with the doctor and Mrs Luttrell, to bow to Miss Heathery, and then turn to Millicent, who, in spite of her natural firmness, was a good deal agitated. She had nerved herself for these meetings, and striven to keep down their importance; but now the night had arrived, she was fain to confess that hers was a difficult task, to meet two rejected lovers, and bear herself easily before them with the husband of her choice. First there was Sir Gordon, from whom she was prepared for reproachful looks, and perhaps others marked by disappointment; while from Christie Bayle – ah, how would he behave towards her? He was so young that she trembled lest he should make himself ridiculous in his loving despair.

And now here was the first shock to be sustained, so, forcing herself to be calm, she advanced with extended hand.

"Oh," whispered Sir Gordon, in tones that only reached Millicent's ear, "too bad – too bad. Supplanted twice. But there, I accept my fate." As he spoke he drew Millicent towards him, and kissed her forehead with tender reverence. "An old man's kiss, my dear, to the child of his very dear

friends. God bless you! May you be very happy with the man of your choice. May I?" He dropped her hand to draw from his breast a string of large single pearls, so regular and perfect a match that they must have cost a goodly sum. For answer Millicent turned pale as she bent towards him and he clasped the string about her neck. "There," he said smiling, "I should have made a different choice if I had known."

Millicent would have spoken, but her voice failed, and to add to her agony at that moment, Bayle came in, looking, as she saw at a glance, pale and somehow changed.

"He will do or say something absurd," she said to herself as she bit her lip, and strove for composure. Then the blood seemed to rush to her heart and a pang shot through her as she realised more than if he had said a thousand things, how deeply her refusal had influenced his life.

Only four months since that day, when she had told him that they could be true friends, she speaking as an elder sister to one she looked upon as a boy. And now she felt ready to ask herself, who was this calm, grave man, who took her hand without hesitation, so perfectly at ease in his gentlemanly courtesy, and who had so thoroughly fallen into the place she had bidden him take?

"I see," he said with a smile, "I shall not be out of order, my dear Miss Luttrell. Will you accept this little offering too?"

He was holding a brilliant diamond ring in his hand.

For answer Millicent drew her long glove from her soft, white hand, and he took it gravely, and, in the presence of all, slipped on the ring, bending over it afterwards to kiss that hand, with the chivalrous delicacy of some courtier of a bygone school, then, raising his eyes to hers, he said softly, "Millicent Luttrell, our friendship must never fail."

Before she could say a word of thanks he had turned to speak to Mrs Luttrell, giving way to Sir Gordon Bourne, who began chatting to her pleasantly, while her eyes followed Christie Bayle's easy gestures, as she wondered the while at the change in his manner, unable to realise the agony of soul that he had suffered in this his first great battle with self before he had obtained the mastery, wounded and changed, stepping at once, as it were, from boyhood to the position of a thoughtful man.

Hallam soon arrived, smiling and agreeable, and it was piteous to see Mrs Luttrell's efforts to be very warm and friendly to him.

Millicent noticed it, and also that her father was quiet towards his son-in-law elect. She watched, too, the meeting between Hallam and Bayle, the former being as nearly offensive as his gentlemanly manner would allow; the latter warm, grave, and friendly.

"Has Bayle been unwell?" said Hallam the first time he was alone with Millicent.

"*I* have not heard," she replied, glancing at the curate, and wondering more and more, as the evening went on, at the change.

Among others, the Trampleasures arrived, and to Miss Heathery's grief, Mrs Trampleasure pretty well monopolised Bayle's remarks, or else made him listen to her own.

"And what do you think of this engagement, Mr Bayle?" she said, in so audible a voice that he was afraid it would be overheard.

"They make a very handsome couple," he replied.

"Ah, yes, handsome enough, I dare say; but good looks will not fill mouths. I wonder L. has allowed it. Mr Hallam is all very well, but he is, I may say, our servant, and if we, who are above him, find so much trouble to make both ends meet, I don't know what he'll do."

"But Mr Hallam has a very good salary, I presume?"

"I tell T. it is too much, and old Mr Dixon and Sir Gordon might have taken a hundred off, and let us draw it. I don't approve of the match at all."

"Indeed, Mrs Trampleasure," said Bayle, who felt hurt at hearing her speak like this.

"Yes; I'm Millicent's aunt, and I think I ought to have been consulted more – but there! it is of no use to speak to my brother; and as to Millicent – she always did just as she liked with her mother! Poor Kitty is very weak!"

"I always find Mrs Luttrell very sweet and motherly."

"Not so motherly as I am, Mr Bayle," said the lady bluntly. "Ah, it's a great stress on a woman – a large family – especially when the father takes things so coolly. I shouldn't speak to every one like this, you know, but one can talk to one's clergyman. Do you like Mr Hallam?"

"I find him very gentlemanly."

"Ah, yes, he's very gentlemanly. Well, I'm sure I hope they'll be happy; but there's always something in married life, and you do well to keep out of it; but, of course, you are so young yet."

"Yes," he said, with a grave, old-looking smile, "I am so young yet."

"You don't know what a family is, Mr Bayle. There's always something; when it isn't measles it's scarlatina, and when it isn't scarlatina it's boots and shoes."

"Oh, but children are a deal of comfort, Sophia," said the doctor, coming up after whispering to Mrs Luttrell that his sister looked grumpy.

"Some children may be, Joseph – mine are not," sighed Mrs Trampleasure, and the doctor went back to his wife. "Ah, Mr Bayle, if I were to tell you one-half of the troubles I've been through I should harass you."

"Kitty," said the doctor, "I want everything to go well to-night. Try and coax Sophia away, she's forcing her doldrums on Mr Bayle."

"But how am I to get her away, dear? You know what she is."

"Try to persuade her to taste the brandy cherries, or we shall be having her in tears. I'll come and help you." They walked back to where Mrs Trampleasure was still talking away hard in a querulous voice.

"Ah! you've come back, Joseph," she said, cutting short her remarks to the curate to return to her complaint to her brother. "I was saying that some children are a pleasure; but it did not seem as if you could listen to me."

"My dear Sophia, I'll listen to you all night, but Kitty wants you to give your opinion about some brandy cherries."

"My opinion?" said the lady loudly. "I have no opinion. I never taste such luxuries."

Millicent could not help hearing a portion of her aunt's querulous remarks, and, out of sheer pity for one of the recipients, she turned to her Uncle Trampleasure, who always kept on the other side of the room.

"Uncle, dear," she said, "aunt is murmuring so. Do try and stop it."

"Stop it, my dear?" he said smiling sadly. "Ah, if you knew your aunt as well as I do you would never check her murmurs; they carry off her ill-temper. No, no, my dear, it would be dangerous to stop it. I always let it go on."

There was no need to check Mrs Trampleasure after all. Mr Bayle threw himself into the breach, and made her forget her own troubles by consulting her about some changes that he proposed making in the parish.

That changed the course of her thoughts, and in the intervals of the music, and often during the progress of some song, she alluded to different matters that had given her annoyance ever since she had been a girl.

It was not an agreeable duty, that of keeping Mrs Trampleasure amused, but Millicent rewarded him with a grateful smile, and Bayle was content.

There was a pleasant little supper that was announced unpleasantly just as Miss Heathery had consented to sing again, and was telling the assembly in a bird-like voice how gaily the troubadour touched his guita-h-ah, as he was hastening home from the wah.

"Supper's ready," said a loud, harsh voice, which cut like an arrow right through Miss Heathery's best note.

"Now you shouldn't, Thisbe," said Mrs Luttrell in tones of mild reproach; but the reproof was not heard, for the door was sharply closed.

"It is only our Thisbe's way, Mr Bayle," whispered Mrs Luttrell; "please don't notice it. Excellent servant, but so soon put out."

She nodded confidentially, and then stole out on tiptoe, so as not to interrupt Miss Heathery, who went on – "singing from Palestine hither I come," to the end.

Then words of reproof and sharp retort could be heard outside; and after a while poor Mrs Luttrell came back looking very red, to lean over the curate from behind the sofa, brooding over him as if he were a favourite chicken.

"I don't like finding fault with the servants, Mr Bayle. Did you hear me?"

"I could not help hearing," he said smiling.

"She does provoke me so," continued Mrs Luttrell in a soft clucking way, that quite accorded with her brooding. "I know I shall have to discharge her."

"She does not like a little extra trouble, perhaps. Company."

"Oh, no; it's not that," said Mrs Luttrell. "She'll work night and day for one if she's in a good temper; but, the fact is, Mr Bayle, she does not like this engagement, and quite hates Mr Hallam."

Bayle drew his breath hard, but he turned a grave, smiling face to his hostess.

"That's the reason, I'm sure, why she is so awkward to-night, my dear – I beg pardon, I mean Mr Bayle," said the old lady colouring as ingenuously as a girl, "but she pretends it is about the potatoes."

"Potatoes?" said Bayle, who was eager to divert her thoughts.

"Yes. You see the doctor is so proud of his potatoes, and I was going to please him by having some roasted for supper and brought up in a napkin, but Thisbe took offence directly, and said that cold chicken and hot potatoes would be ridiculous, and she has been in a huff ever since."

Just then the door opened and the person in question entered, to come straight to Mrs Luttrell, who began to tremble and look at the curate for help.

"There's something gone wrong," she whispered.

"Can I speak to you, please, mum?" said Thisbe, glaring at her severely.

"Well, I don't know, Thisbe, I – "

"Let me go out and speak to Thisbe, mamma dear," said Millicent, who had crossed the room, divining what was wrong.

"Oh, if you would, my dear," said Mrs Luttrell eagerly; and Thisbe was compelled to retreat, her young mistress following her out of the room.

"That's very good of her, Mr Bayle," said Mrs Luttrell, with a satisfied sigh. "Millicent can always manage Thisbe. She has such a calm, dignified way with her. Do you know she is the only one who can manage her Aunt Trampleasure when she begins to murmur. Ah, I don't know what I shall do when she has gone."

"You will have the satisfaction of knowing that she is happy with the man she loves."

"I don't know, Mr Bayle, I – Oh dear me, I ought to be ashamed of myself for speaking like this. Hush! here she is."

In effect Millicent came back into the room to where her mother was sitting.

"Only a little domestic difficulty, Mr Bayle. Mamma, dear, it is all smoothed away, and Thisbe is very penitent."

"And she will bring up the roast potatoes in the napkin, my dear?"

"Yes," cried Millicent, laughing merrily, "she has retracted all her opposition, and we are to have two dishes of papa's best."

"In napkins, my dear?" cried Mrs Luttrell eagerly; "both in napkins?"

"Yes, mamma, in the whitest napkins she can find." She glanced at Christie Bayle's grave countenance, and felt her heart smite her for being so happy and joyous in his presence.

"Don't think us childish, Mr Bayle," she said gently. "It is to please my father."

He rose and stood by her side for a moment or two.

"Childish?" he said in a low voice, "as if I could think such a thing of you."

Millicent smiled her thanks, and crossed the room to where Hallam was watching her. The next minute supper was again announced – simple, old-fashioned supper – and Millicent went out on Hallam's arm.

"You are going to take me in, Mr Bayle? Well, I'm sure I'd rather," said Mrs Luttrell, "and I can then see, my dear, that you have a good supper. There, I'm saying 'my dear' to you again."

"It is because I seem so young, Mrs Luttrell," replied Bayle gravely.

"Oh no, my dear," said Mrs Luttrell innocently; "it was because you seemed to come among us so like a son, and took to the doctor's way with his garden, and were so nice with Millicent. I used to think that perhaps you two might – Oh, dear me," she cried, checking herself suddenly, "what a tongue I have got! Pray don't take any notice of what I say."

There was no change in Christie Bayle's countenance, for the smile hid the pang he suffered as he took in the pleasant garrulous old lady to supper; but that night he paced his room till daybreak, fighting a bitter fight, and asking for strength to bear the agony of his heart.

Volume One – Chapter Twelve.
James Thickens is Mysterious

"I think, previous to taking this step, Sir Gordon, I may ask if you and Mr Dixon are quite satisfied? I believe the books show a state of prosperity."

"That does us credit, Mr Hallam," said Sir Gordon quietly. "Yes, Mr Dixon bids me say that he is perfectly satisfied – eh, Mr Trampleasure?"

"Quite, Sir Gordon – more than satisfied," replied Mr Trampleasure, who was standing with his hands beneath his coat-tails, balancing himself on toe and heel, and bowing as he spoke with an air that he believed to be very impressive.

"Then, before we close this little meeting, I suppose it only remains for me to ask you if you have any questions to ask of the firm, any demands to make?" Hallam rose from behind the table covered with books and balance-sheets in the manager's room of the bank, placed his hand in his breast, and in a quiet, dignified way, replied:

"Questions to ask, Sir Gordon – demands to make? No; only to repeat my former question. Are you satisfied?"

"*I* did reply to that," said Sir Gordon, who looked brown and sunburned, consequent upon six weeks' yachting in the Mediterranean; "but have you no other question or demand to make previous to your marriage?"

"Excuse me," said Mr Trampleasure, "excuse me. I want to say one word. Hem! hem! – I er – I er – "

"What is it, Trampleasure?" said Sir Gordon.

"It is in regard to a question I believe Mr Hallam is about to put to the firm. I may say that Mrs Trampleasure drew my attention to the matter, consequent upon a rumour in the town in connection with Mr Hallam's marriage."

Hallam raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"Have they settled the date?" he said pleasantly.

"No, sir, not that I am aware of; but Mrs Trampleasure has been given to understand that Mr Hallam, upon his marriage, will wish, and is about to send in a request for the apartments connected with this bank that I have always occupied. It would be a great inconvenience to Mrs Trampleasure with our family – I mean to me – to have to move."

"My dear Sir Gordon," said Hallam, interrupting, "allow me to set Mr Trampleasure at rest. I have taken the little Manor House, and have given orders for the furniture."

"There, Trampleasure," said Sir Gordon. "Don't take any notice of gossips for the future."

"Hem! I will not; but Mr Gemp is so well-informed generally."

"That he is naturally wrong sometimes," said Sir Gordon. "By-the-way, are they ever going to put that man under the pump? Now, Mr Hallam, have you anything more to ask?"

"Certainly not, Sir Gordon," replied the manager stiffly. "I understand your allusion, of course; but I have only to say that I look upon my engagement here as a commercial piece of business to be strictly adhered to, and that I know of nothing more degrading to a man than making every change in his life an excuse for asking an increase of salary."

"And you do not wish to take a holiday trip on the occasion of your wedding?"

"No, Sir Gordon."

"But the lady?"

"Miss Luttrell knows that she is about to marry a business man, Sir Gordon, and accepts her fate," said Hallam with a smile.

"Of course you can take a month. I'm sure Trampleasure and Thickens would manage everything in your absence."

"Excuse me, Sir Gordon, I have no doubt whatever that everything would run like a repeater-watch in my absence; but, with the responsibility of manager of this bank, I could not feel comfortable to run away just in our busiest time. Later on I may take a trip."

"Just as you like, Hallam, just as you like. Then that is all we have to do?"

"Everything, Sir Gordon. Yes, Mr Thickens, I will come;" for the clerk had tapped at the door and summoned him into the bank.

"Dig for you, Trampleasure, about the salary, eh?" said Sir Gordon, as soon as they were alone.

"And in very bad taste, too," said Trampleasure stiffly.

"Ah, well, he's a good manager," said Sir Gordon. "How I hate figures! They'll be buzzing in my head for a week."

He rose and walked to the glass to begin arranging his cravat and shirt-collar, buttoning the bottom of his coat, and pulling down his buff vest, so that it could be well seen. Then adjusting his hat at a correct gentlemanly angle, and tapping the tassels of his Hessian boots to make them swing free, he bade Trampleasure good-morning and sauntered down the street, twirling his cane with all the grace of an old beau.

"I don't like that man," he said to himself, "and I never did; but his management of the bank is superb. Only one shaky loan this last six months, and he thinks we shall clear ourselves, if we wait before we sell. Bah! I'm afraid I'm as great a humbug as the rest of the world. If he had not won little Millicent, I should have thought him a very fine fellow, I dare say."

He strolled on towards the doctor's, thinking as he went.

"No, I don't think I should have liked him," he mused. "He's gentlemanly and polished; but too gentlemanly and polished. It is like a mask and suit that to my mind do not fit. Then, hang it! how did he manage to win that girl?"

"Cleverness. That calm air of superiority; that bold deference, and his good looks. I've seen it all; he has let her go on talking in her clever way – and she is clever; and then when he has thought she has gone on long enough, he has checked her with a touch of the tiller, and thrown all the wind out of her sails, leaving her swinging on the ocean of conjecture. Just what she would like; made to feel that, clever as she is, he could be her master when and where he pleased. Yes, that is it, and I suppose I hate him for it. No, no. It would not have been right, even if I could have won. I would not be prejudiced against him more than I can help; but I'm afraid we shall never be any closer than we are."

That afternoon Mr Hallam of the bank was exceedingly busy; so was James Thickens, at the counter, now giving, now receiving and cancelling and booking cheques or greasy notes, some of which were almost too much worn to be deciphered.

The time went on, and it was the hour for closing the doors. Thickens had had to go in and out of the manager's room several times, and Hallam was always busy writing letters. He looked up, and answered questions, or gave instructions, and then went on again, while each time, when James Thickens came out, he looked more uneasy. That is to say, to any one who thoroughly understood James Thickens, he would have looked uneasy. To a stranger he would only have seemed peculiar, for involuntarily at such times he had a habit of moving his scalp very slowly, drawing his hair down over his forehead, while his eyebrows rose up to meet it. Then, with mechanical regularity, they separated again; and all the while his eyes were fixed, and seemed to be gazing at something that was not there.

"You need not wait, Thickens," said Hallam, opening his door at length. "I want to finish a few letters."

The clerk rose and left the place after his customary walk round with keys, and the transferring of certain moneys to the safe; and, as soon as he was gone, Hallam locked his door communicating with the house, and began to busy himself in the safe, examining docketed securities, ticking them off, arranging and rearranging, hour after hour.

And during those hours James Thickens seemed to be prosecuting a love affair, for, instead of going home to his tea and gold-fish, he walked down the market place for some distance, turned sharp back, knocked at a door, and was admitted. Then old Gemp, who had been sweeping his narrow horizon, put on his hat, and walked across to Mrs Pinet, who was as usual watering her geraniums, and hunting for withered leaves that did not exist.

"Two weddings, Mrs P.!" he said with a leer.

"Lor', Mr Gemp, what do you mean?" she exclaimed.

"Two weddings, ma'am. Your Mr Hallam first, and Thickens directly after. No more bachelors at the bank, ma'am."

"Why, you don't mean to say that Mr Thickens – oh, dear me!"

"But I do mean to say it, ma'am. He's dropped in at Miss Heathery's as coolly as can be; and has hung his hat up behind the door."

"You don't say so!"

"Oh yes, I do. It's her doing. Going there four or five times a week to cash cheques, and he has grown reckless. Let's wait till he comes out."

"Perhaps, then," said Mrs Pinet primly, "people may begin saying things about me."

"There'll be no one to say it," said Gemp innocently. "Let's see how long he stops. I can't very well from my place."

"I couldn't think of such a thing," said Mrs Pinet, grandly. "Mr Hallam will be in directly, too. No, Mr Gemp, I'm no watcher of my neighbours' affairs;" and she went indoors.

"Very well, madam. *Ve-ry* well," said Gemp. "We shall see;" and he walked back home to stand in his doorway for three hours before he saw Thickens come from where he had ensconced himself behind Miss Heathery's curtain with his eyes fixed upon the bank.

At the end of those three hours Mr Hallam passed, looking very thoughtful, and five minutes later James Thickens went home to his gold-fish and tea.

"Took care Hallam didn't see him," chuckled Gemp, rubbing his hands. "Oh, the artfulness of these people! Thinks he has as good a right to marry as Hallam himself. Well, why not? Make him more staid and solid, better able to take care of the deeds and securities, and pounds, shillings, and pence, and – hullo! – hello! – hello! What's the meaning of this!"

This was the appearance of a couple coming from the direction of the doctor's house, and the couple were Miss Heathery, who had been spending a few hours with Millicent – in other words, seeing her preparations for the wedding – and Sir Gordon Bourne, who was going in her direction and walked home with her.

"Why, Thickens didn't see her after all!"

No: James Thickens had not seen her, and Miss Heathery had not seen James Thickens.

"Who?" she cried, as soon as Sir Gordon had ceremoniously bidden her "Good-night," raising his curly brimmed hat, and putting it back.

"Mr Thickens, ma'am," cried the little maid eagerly; "and when I told him you was out, he said, might he wait, and I showed him in the parlour."

"And he's there now?" whispered Miss Heathery, who began tremblingly to take off the very old pair of gloves she kept for evening wear, the others being safe in her reticule.

"No, ma'am, please he has been gone these ten minutes."

"But what did he say?" cried Miss Heathery querulously.

"Said he wanted to see you particular, ma'am."

"Oh dear me; oh dear me!" sighed Miss Heathery. "Was ever anything so unfortunate? How could I tell that he would come when I was out?"

Volume One – Chapter Thirteen.
Mr Hallam has a Visitor

Mysteries were painful to old Gemp. If any one had propounded a riddle, and gone away without supplying the answer, he would have been terribly aggrieved.

He was still frowning, and trying to get over the mystery of why James Thickens should be at Miss Heathery's when that lady was out, and his ideas were turning in the direction of the little maid, when a wholesome stimulus was given to his thoughts by the arrival of the London coach, the alighting of whose passengers he had hardly once missed seeing for years.

Hurrying up to the front of the "George," he was just in time to see a dashing-looking young fellow, who had just alighted from the box-seat, stretching his legs, and beating his boots with a cane. He had been giving orders for his little valise to be carried into the house, and was staring about him in the half-light, when he became aware of the fact that old Gemp was watching him curiously.

He involuntarily turned away; but seeming to master himself, he turned back, and said sharply, "Where does Mr Hallam live?"

"Mr Hallam!" cried Gemp eagerly; "bank's closed hours ago."

"I didn't ask for the bank. Where is Mr Hallam's private residence?"

"Well," said Gemp, rubbing his hands and laughing unpleasantly, "that's it – the 'Little Manor' as he calls it; but it's a big place, isn't it?"

"Oh, he lives there, does he?" said the visitor, glancing curiously at the ivy-covered house across the way.

"Not yet," said Gemp. "That's where he is going to live when – "

"He's married. I know. Now then, old Solomon, if you can answer a plain question, where does he live now?"

"Mrs Pinet's house, yonder on the left, where the porch stands out, and the flower-pots are in the window."

"Humph! hasn't moved, then. Let's see," muttered the visitor, "that's where I took the flower-pot to throw at the dog. No: that's the house."

"Can I – ?" began Gemp insidiously.

"No, thankye. Good evening," said the visitor. "You can tell 'em I've come. Ta ta! Gossipping old fool!" he added to himself, as he walked quickly down the street; while, after staring after him for a few minutes, Gemp turned sharply on his heel, and made for Gorringe's – Mr Gorringe being the principal tailor.

Mr Gorringe's day's work was done, consequently his legs were uncrossed, and he was seated in a Christian-like manner – that is to say, in a chair just inside his door, smoking his evening pipe, but still in his shirtsleeves, and with an inch tape gracefully hanging over his neck and shoulders.

"I say, neighbour," cried Gemp eagerly, "you bank with Dixons'."

Mr Gorringe's pipe fell from his hand, and broke into a dozen pieces upon the floor.

"Is – is anything wrong?" he gasped; "and it's past banking hours."

"Yah! get out!" cried old Gemp, showing his yellow teeth. "You're always thinking about your few pence in the bank. Why, I bank there, and you don't see me going into fits. Yah! what a coward you are!"

"Then – then, there's nothing wrong?"

"Wrong? No."

"Hah!" ejaculated the tailor. "Mary, bring me another pipe."

"I only come in a friendly way," cried Gemp, "to put you on your guard."

"Then there is something wrong," cried the tailor, aghast.

"No, no, no. I want to give you a hint about Hallam."

"Hallam!"

"Ay! Has he ordered his wedding-suit of you?"

"No."

"Thought not," said Gemp, rubbing his hands. "I should be down upon him if I were you. Threaten to withdraw my account, man. Dandy chap down from London to-night to take his orders."

"No!"

"Yes. By the coach. Saw he was a tailor in a moment. Wouldn't stand it if I were you."

Mrs Pinet, who came to the door with a candle, in answer to a sharp rap with the visitor's cane, held up her candle above her head, and stared at him for a moment. Then a smile dimpled her pleasant, plump face.

"Why, bless me, sir! how you have changed!" she said.

"You know me again, then?" he said nodding familiarly.

"That I do, sir, and I am glad. You're the young gentleman Mr Hallam helped just about a year ago."

"Yes, that's me. Is he at home?"

"Yes, sir. Will you come this way?"

Mrs Pinet drew back to allow the visitor to enter, closed the door, set down her candle, and then tapped softly on the panel at her right.

"Here's that gentleman to see you, sir," she said, in response to the quick "Come in."

"Gentleman to see me? Oh, it's you," said Hallam, rising from his seat to stand very upright and stern-looking, with one hand in his breast.

"Yes, I've come down again," said the visitor slowly, so as to give Mrs Pinet time to get outside the door; and then, by mutual consent, they waited until her step had pattered over the carefully-reddened old bricks, and a door at the back closed.

Meanwhile Hallam's eyes ran rapidly over his visitor's garb, and he seemed satisfied, though he smiled a little at the extravagance of the attire.

"Why have you come down?" he said at last. "Because I didn't want to write. Because I thought you'd like to know how things were going. Because I wanted to see how you were getting on. Because I thought you'd be glad to see me."

"Because you wanted more money. Because you thought you could put on the screw. Because you thought you could frighten me. Pish! I could extend your list of reasons indefinitely, Stephen Crellock, my lad," said Hallam, in a quiet tone of voice that was the more telling from the anger it evidently concealed.

"What a one you are, Robby, old fellow! Just as you used to be when we were at – "

"Let the past rest," said Hallam in a whisper. "It will be better for both."

"Oh-h-h-h!" said his visitor, in a peculiar way. "Don't talk like that, Rob, old chap. It sounds like making plans, and a tall, handsome man in disguise waylaying a well-dressed gentleman from town, shooting him with pistols, carrying the body in the dead of the night to the bank, doubling it up in an iron chest, pouring in a lot of lime, and then shutting the lid, sealing it up, and locking it in the far corner of the bank cellar, as if it was somebody's plate. That's the game, eh?"

"I should like to," said Hallam coolly.

"Ha – ha – ha – ha!" laughed his visitor, sitting down; "but I'm not afraid, Rob, or I should not have put my head in the lion's den. That's not the sort of thing you would do, because you always were so gentlemanly, and had such a tender conscience. See how grieved you were when I got into trouble, and you escaped."

"Will you – "

"Will I what? Speak like that before any one else? Will I threaten you with telling tales, if you don't give me money to keep my mouth shut? Will I be a sneak?" cried Crellock, speaking quite as fiercely as Hallam, and rising to his feet, and looking, in spite of his ultra costume, a fine manly fellow.

"Well, yes, you cowardly cur; have you come down to do this now?" said Hallam menacingly.

"Pish!" said the other contemptuously as he let himself sink back slowly into his chair. "Don't try and bully, Rob. It did when I came down, weak and half-starved and miserable, after two years' imprisonment; but it won't do now. I don't look hard up, do I?"

"No; because you've spent my money on your wretched dress."

"I only spent your money when I couldn't make any for myself. I haven't had a penny of you lately; and as to being a coward and a cur, Rob, when I stood in the dock, and you were brought as a witness against me, and I could have got off half my punishment by speaking the truth, was I a sneak then, or did I stand, firm?"

There was a pause.

"Answer me; did I stand firm then?" cried Crellock.

"You did stand firm, and I have been grateful," said Hallam, in a milder tone. "Look here, Stephen, why should we quarrel?"

"Ah, that's better, man," said Crellock, laughing. "You were so terribly fierce with me last time, and I was brought down to a door-mat. Anybody might have wiped his shoes on me. I'm better now."

"And you've come down to try and bully me," said Hallam fiercely.

His visitor sat back, looking at him hard, without speaking for a few minutes, and then he said quietly:

"I give it up."

"Give what up – the attempt?"

"I couldn't give that up, because I was not going to attempt anything," said Crellock, smiling; "I mean give it up about you. What is it in you, Rob Hallam, that made so many fellows like you, and give way to you in everything? I don't know. But there, never mind that. Won't you shake hands?"

"Tell me first why you have come down here. Do you want money?"

"No."

"Then why did you come down?"

Crellock's face softened a little, and it was not an ill-looking countenance as he sat there, softly tapping the arm of the chair. At last he spoke.

"I never had many friends," he said huskily. "Father and mother went when I was a little one, and Uncle Richard gave me my education, telling me brutally that I was an encumbrance. I always had to stop at school through the holidays, and when I was old enough he put me, as you know, in the bank, and told me he had done his duty by me, and I must now look to myself."

"Yes, I know," said Hallam, coldly.

"Then I got to know you, Rob, and you seemed always to be everything a man ought to be – handsome, and clever at every game, the best writer, the best at figures. Then, after office hours, you could sing and play, and tell the best story. There, Rob, you know I always got to feel towards you as if I was your dog. There was nothing I wouldn't have done for you. Then came those – "

"Hush!"

"Well, I'm not going to say anything dangerous. You know how I behaved. I did think you would have made it a bit easier for me, when it was found out; but when you turned against me like the rest, I said to myself that it was all right, that it was no good for two to bear it when one could take the lot, and if you had turned against me it was only because it was what you called good policy, and it would be all right again when I came out I thought you'd stick to me, Rob."

"How could I, a man in a good position, know a – "

"Felon – a convicted thief? There, say it, old fellow, if you like. I don't mind; I got pretty well hardened down yonder. No: of course you couldn't, and I know I was a fool to come down as I did

before, such a shack-bag as I was. Out of temper, too, and savage to see you looking so well; but I know it was foolish. It was enough to make you turn on me. But I'm different now: I've got on a bit."

"What are you doing?" said Hallam sharply.

"Oh, never mind," said the other, laughing. "I've opened an office, and I'm doing pretty well, and I thought I'd come down and see you again, Rob, old fellow, and – You'll shake hands?"

"Is this a bit of maudlin sentiment, Stephen Crellock, or are you playing some deep game?"

Hallam's visitor rose again and stood before him with his hand outstretched.

"Deep game!" he said softly. "Rob, old fellow, do you think a man can be all a blackguard, without one good spot in him? Ah, well, just as you like," he continued, dropping his hand heavily; "I was a fool to come; I always have been a fool. I was cat, Rob, and you were monkey, and I got my paws most preciously burned. But I didn't come down to grumble. There; good-night!"

"Where are you going?"

"Back to the 'George' and to-morrow I shall go up to the gold-paved streets. There, you need not be afraid, man. If I didn't tell tales when I was in the dock, I shan't now. I thought, after all, that you were my friend."

"And so I am, Steve!" cried Hallam, after a few moments' hesitation, and he held out his hand. "We'll be as good friends again as ever, and you shall not suffer this time."

Crellock stifled a sob as he caught the extended hand, to wring it with all his force; then, turning away, he laid his arms upon the chimney-piece, his head dropped upon them, and for a few minutes he cried like a child.

Hallam stood fuming and gazing down upon him, with an ugly look of contempt distorting his handsome features. Then taking a step forward, he laid his hand upon his visitor's shoulder.

"Come, come!" he said softly. "Don't go on like that." Crellock rose quickly, and dashed the tears from his eyes, with a piteous attempt at a laugh.

"That's me all over, Rob," he said. "Did you ever see such a weak fool? I was bad enough before I had that two years' low fever; I'm worse now, for it was spirit-breaking work."

"Soft wax, to mould to any shape," said Hallam to himself. Then aloud: "I don't see anything to be ashamed of in a little natural emotion. There, sit down, and let's have a chat."

Crellock caught his hand and gripped it hard. "Thank ye, Hallam," he said huskily, "thank ye; I shan't forget this. I told you I'd always felt as if I was your dog. I feel so more than ever now."

"They're sitting a long time," said Mrs Pinet, as she raked out the kitchen fire to the very last red-hot cinder. "Mr Hallam seemed quite pleased with him; he's altered so for the better. He said I needn't sit up, and so I will go to bed."

Mrs Pinet sought her room, and about twelve heard the door close on the stranger, between whom and Hallam a good deal of eager conversation had passed in a low tone.

"You see I'm trusting you," said Hallam as they parted.

"You know you can," was the reply. "And now, look here, if anything goes wrong – "

"I tell you, if you do as I have arranged, nothing can go wrong. I want an agent in London, whom I can implicitly trust, and I am going to trust you. Once more, your task is to do exactly what I tell you."

"But if anything goes wrong, I can't write to you."

"Nothing can go wrong, I tell you."

"Yes," said Crellock to himself, "you told me that once before." Then aloud:

"Well, we will say nothing can go wrong, for I shall do exactly what you have said; but if anything should, I shall come down, and if you see me – look out."

Volume One – Chapter Fourteen.
Like Gathering Clouds

There is one very pleasant element in country-town life, and that is the breadth of the feeling known as neighbourly. It is often veined by scandal, disfigured by petty curiosity, but a genial feeling, like a solid stratum underlies it all, and makes it firm. Mrs White gets into difficulties, and her furniture is sold by auction; but the neighbours flock to the sale, and the love of bargains is so overridden that the old things often fetch as much as new. Mrs Black's family are ill, and every one around takes a real and helpful interest. Mrs Scarlet's husband dies, and a fancy fair is held on her behalf. Then how every one collects at the marriage: how all follow at the death! It must be something very bad indeed that has been committed if, after the customary unpleasant and censorious remarks about walking blindfold into such a slough, Green is not drawn out by helping hands – in fact, there is a kind of clannishness in a country-town, disfigured by the gossips, but very true and earnest all the same.

Consequently as soon as the day was fixed for Millicent Luttrell's wedding, presents came pouring in from old patients and young friends. A meeting was held at the Corn Exchange, at which Sir Gordon Bourne was to take the chair, but at which he did not put in an appearance, and the Reverend Christie Bayle took his place, while resolutions were moved and carried that a testimonial should be presented to our eminent fellow-townsman, Robert Hallam, Esq, on the occasion of his marriage with the daughter of our esteemed and talented neighbour, Dr Luttrell.

The service of plate was presented at a dinner, where speeches were made, to which Mr Hallam, of the bank, responded fluently, gracefully, and to the point.

Here, too, Christie Bayle took the chair, and had the task of presenting the silver, after reading the inscription aloud, amidst abundant cheers; and as he passed the glittering present to the recipient, their eyes met.

As their eyes met there was a pleasant smile upon Hallam's lip, and a thought in his heart that he alone could have interpreted, while Bayle's could have been read by any one skilled in the human countenance, as he breathed a hope that Millicent Luttrell might be made a happy wife.

The whole town was in a ferment – not a particular state of affairs for King's Castor – in fact, the people of that town in His Majesty's dominions were always waiting for a chance to effervesce and alter the prevailing stagnation for a time. Hence it was that the town band practised up a new tune; the grass was mowed in the churchyard, and some of the weeds cleared out from the gravel path. Miss Heathery went to the expense of a new bonnet and silk dress, and indulged in a passionate burst of weeping in the secrecy of her own room, because she was not asked to act as bridesmaid; and though Gorringe did not obtain any order from the bridegroom, he was favoured by Mr James Thickens to make him a blue dress-coat with triple-gilt buttons – a coat so blue, and whose buttons were such dazzling disks of metal, that it was not until it had been in the tailor's window, finished, and "on show" for three days, that James Thickens awakened to the fact that it was his, and paid a nocturnal visit to Gorringe to beg him to send it home.

"But you don't want it till the day, Mr Thickens," said the tailor, "and that coat's bringing me orders."

"But I shall never dare to wear it, Gorringe – everybody will know it."

"Of course they will, sir!" said the tailor proudly, and glancing towards his window with that half-smile an artist wears when his successful picture is on view, "that's a coat such as is not seen in Castor every day. Look at the collar! There's two days' hard stitching in that collar, sir!"

"I have looked at the collar," said Thickens hastily, "and I must have it home."

Gorringe gave way, and the coat went home; but he felt, as he said to his wife, as if he had been robbed, for that coat would have won the hearts of half the farmers round.

At the doctor's cottage Mrs Luttrell was in one constant whirl of excitement, with four clever seamstresses at work, for at King's Castor a bride's *trousseau* was called by a much simpler name, and provided throughout at home, along with the house-linen, which in those days meant linen of the finest and coolest, and it was absolutely necessary that every article that could be stitched should be stitched with rows of the finest stitches, carefully put in.

"You're about worrying yourself into a fever, my dear," said the doctor smiling, "and I can't afford such patients as you. Where can I have this bunch of radish-seed hung up to dry? Give it to Thisbe to hang in the kitchen."

"Now, my dear Joseph, how can you be so unreasonable!" cried Mrs Luttrell, half whimpering. "Radish-seed at a time like this! Thisbe is re-covering the pots of jam."

"What jam? What for?"

"For Millicent. You don't suppose I'm going to let her begin housekeeping without a pot of jam in the storeroom!"

"Thank goodness I've only one child!" said the doctor with a half-amused, half-vexed countenance.

"Why, papa, you always said you wished we had had a boy."

"Ah, I did not know that I should have to suffer all this when the wedding time came."

"Now, if you would only go into your garden, and see to your patients, my love, everything would go right!" cried Mrs Luttrell; "but you are so impatient! Look at Millicent, how quiet and calm she is!"

The doctor had looked at Millicent as she stole out to him in the garden – often now, as if moved by a desire to be as much with him as she could before the great step of her life was taken.

There was a quiet look of satisfaction in her eyes that told of her content, and the happy peace that reigned within her breast.

The doctor understood her, as she came to him when at work, questioning him about the blossoms of this rose, and the success of that creeper, and taking endless interest in all he did; and when she was summoned away to try something on, or to select some pattern, she smiled and said that she would soon be back.

"Ah!" he said with a sigh, "she is trying to break it off gently!" and his work ceased until he heard her step, when he became very busy and cheerful again, as they both played at hiding from one another the separation that was to come.

"Poor papa!" thought Millicent, "he will miss me when I am gone!"

"If that fellow does not behave well to her," said the doctor to himself, "and I do happen to be called in to him, I shall – well, I suppose it would not be right to do that." As for Mrs Luttrell, she was too busy to think much till she went to bed, and then the doctor complained.

"I must have some rest, my dear!" he said plaintively, "and I don't say that you will – but if you do have a bad face-ache from sleeping on a pillow soaked with tears, don't come to me to prescribe."

It was very near the time, and all was gliding on peacefully towards the wedding-day. Hallam came regularly every evening; and, after a good deal of struggling, Mrs Luttrell contrived to call him "my dear," while, by a similar effort of mind, the doctor habituated himself, from saying, "Mr Hallam" and "Hallam," to the familiar "Robert," though in secret both agreed that it did not seem natural, and did not come easily, and never would be Rob or Bob.

One soft, calm evening, as the moon was rising from behind the fine old church, and Millicent and Hallam lingered still in the garden among the shrubs, where they could see the shaded lamp shining down on Mrs Luttrell's white curls and pleasant, intent face, as she busily stitched away at a piece of linen for the new house, while the doctor was reading an account of some new plants brought home by Sir Joseph Banks, Millicent had become very silent.

Hallam was holding her tenderly to his side, and looking down at the sweet, calm face, lit by the rising moon, his own in shadow; and after watching her rapt aspect for a time, he said, in his deep, musical voice:

"How silent and absorbed! You are not regretting what is so soon to be?"

"Regretting!" she cried, starting; and, looking up in his face, she laid her hands upon his breast. "Don't speak to me like that, Robert dear. You know me better. As if I could regret!"

"Then you are quite happy?"

"Happy? Too happy; and yet so sad!" she murmured softly. "It seems as if life were too full of joy, as if I could not bear so much happiness, when it is at the cost of others, and I am giving them pain."

"Don't speak like that, my own!" he said tenderly. "It is natural that a woman should leave father and mother to cling unto her husband."

"Yes, yes: I know," she sighed; "but the pain is given. They will miss me so much. You are smiling, dear; but this is not conceit. I am their only child, and we have been all in all to each other."

"But you are not going far," he said tenderly.

"No, not far; and yet it is away from them," sighed Millicent, turning her head to gaze sadly at the pleasant picture seen through the open window. "Not far: but it is from home."

"But to home," he whispered – "to your home, our home, the home of the husband who loves you with all his heart. Ah, Millicent, I have been so poor a wooer, I have failed to say the winning, flattering things so pleasant to a woman's ear. I have felt half dumb before you, as if my pleasure was too great for words; and quick and strong as I am with my fellows, I have only been an awkward lover at the best."

She laid her soft white hand upon his lips, and gave him a half-reproachful look.

"And yet," she said, smiling, "how much stronger your silent wooing has been than any words that could have been said! Did I ever seem like one who wanted flattering words and admiration? Robert, you do not know me yet."

"No," he whispered passionately, "not yet, and never shall, for I find something more in you to love each time we meet, Millicent – my own – my wife!"

She yielded to his embrace, and they remained silent for a time.

At last he spoke.

"But you seemed sad and disappointed to-night. Have I grieved you in any way – have I given you pain?"

"Oh, no," she said, looking gravely in his face, "and you never could. Robert," she continued dreamily as she clung to him, "I can see our life mapped out in the future till it fades away. There are pains and sorrows, the thorns that strew the wayside of all; but I have always your strong, guiding arm to help and protect – always your brave, loving words, to sustain me when my spirit will be low, and together, hand in hand, we tread that path, patient, hopeful, loving to the end."

"My own!" he whispered.

"I have no fear," she continued; "my love was not given hastily, like that of some quickly dazzled girl; my love was slow to awaken; but when I felt that it was being sought by one whom I could reverence as well as love, I gave it freely – all I had."

"And you are content?"

"I should be truly happy, but for the pain I must give others."

"Only a pang, dear love; that will pass away in the feeling that their child is truly happy in her choice. There, there, the moonlight and the solemn look of the night have made you sad. Let us talk more cheerfully. Come, you must have something to ask of me?"

"No; you have told me everything," she said gravely. "I wish they could have been here to give their blessing on our love."

"Their blessing?" he said half-wonderingly.

"Your mother – your father, Robert," she whispered reverently as she bent her head.

"Hush!" he said, and for a few moments they were silent. "But come," he cried, as if trying to give their conversation a more cheerful turn, "you must have something more to ask of me. I mean for our house."

"No," she said; "it is everything I could wish."

"No," he said proudly, "it is too humble for my queen. If I were rich, you should have the fairest jewels, costly retinues – a palace."

"Give me your love, and I have all I need," she cried, laughing, as she clung to him.

"Then you must be very rich," he said. "But is there nothing? Come, you are a free agent now. In another week you will be my own – my property, my slave, bound to me by a ring. Come, use your liberty while you can."

"Well, then, yes," she said; "I will make a demand or two."

"That's right; I am the slave yet, and obey. What is the first wish?"

"I like Sir Gordon, dear; he has always been so good and kind to me. Ask him to come."

"Too late. He left the town by coach this evening. From a hint he dropped to Thickens about his letters, I think he has gone to Hull, and is going on to Spain."

"Oh!"

It was an ejaculation full of pain and sorrow.

"I am grieved," she said softly, and the news brought up that day when he had made her the offer of his hand.

Hallam watched her mobile face and its changes as she gazed straight before her, towards where the moon was beginning to flood the leaden roof of the old church, the crenulated wall, and the crockets on the tall spire standing out black and clear against the sky.

His face was still in the shadow.

"There is another request," she said at last, and her voice was very low as she spoke. "Robert, will you ask Mr Bayle to marry us? I would rather it was he."

"Bayle!" he exclaimed, starting, and the word jerked from his lips, as if he had suddenly lost control of himself. "No, it is impossible!"

"Impossible?" she said wonderingly.

"This man has caused me more suffering than I could tell you. If you knew the jealous misery – No, no, I don't mean that," he said quickly as he caught her to his breast.

"Oh, Robert!" she cried.

"No, no: don't notice me," he said hastily. "It was long ago. He loved you, and I was not sure of you then. Yes, darling, I will ask him, if you wish it. That folly is all dead now."

"Robert," she said, after a thoughtful pause, "do you wish me to give up that request?"

"Give up? No, I should be ready to insist upon it if you did. There, that is all past. It was the one boyish folly of my love, one of which I am heartily ashamed."

"I think he wants to be your friend as well as mine," she said, "and I should have liked it; but – "

"Your will is my law, Millicent! He shall marry us."

"But, Robert – "

"If you oppose me now in this, I shall think you have not forgiven the folly to which I have confessed. I can hardly forgive myself that meanness. You will not add to my pain."

"Add to your pain?" she said, laying her hand once more upon his breast. "Robert, you do not know me yet."

And so it was that Christie Bayle joined the hand of the woman he had loved to that of the man who had told her she would in future be his very own – his property, his slave.

Pretty well all Castor was present, and at the highest pitch of excitement, for a handsomer pair, they said, had never stood in the old chancel to be made one.

And they were made one. The register was signed, and then, in the midst of a murmuring buzz and rustle of garments that filled the great building like the gathering of a storm, Robert Hallam and his fair young wife moved down the aisle, towards where a man was waiting to give the signal to the ringers to begin; and the crowd had filled every corner near the door, and almost blocked the path. The sun shone out brilliantly, and the buzz and rustle grew more and more like the gathering of that storm, which burst at last as the young couple reached the porch, in a thundering cheer.

Millicent looked flushed, and there was a red spot in Hallam's cheeks as he walked out, proud and defiant, towards where the yellow chaise from the "George," with four post-horses, was waiting.

The coach had just come in, and the passengers were standing gazing at the novel scene.

Again the storm burst in a tremendous cheer as Hallam handed his young wife into the chaise, and then there seemed to be another nearing storm, sending its harbinger in a fashion which made firm, self-contained Robert Hallam turn pale, as a hand was laid upon his arm.

"He said that if anything did go wrong, he should come back," flashed through his brain.

Stephen Crellock was bending forward to whisper a few words in his ear.

Volume Two – Chapter One.
The Thorny Way – Millicent Hallam's Home

"How dare you! Be off! Go to your mistress. Don't pester me, woman."

"Didn't know it were pestering you, sir, to ask for my rights. Two years doo, and it's time it was paid."

"Ask your mistress, I tell you. Here, Julia."

A dark-haired, thoughtful-looking child of about six years old loosened her grasp of Thisbe King's dress, and crossed the room slowly towards where Robert Hallam sat, newspaper in hand, by his half-finished breakfast.

"Here, Julia!" was uttered with no unkindly intent; but the call was like a command – an imperious command, such as would be given to a dog.

The child was nearly close to him when he gave the paper a sharp rustle, and she sprang back.

"Pish!" he exclaimed, laughing unpleasantly, "what a silly little girl you are! Did you think I was going to strike you?"

"N-no, papa," said the child nervously.

"Then why did you flinch away? Are you afraid of me?"

The child looked at him intently for a few moments, and then said softly:

"I don't know."

"Here, Thisbe," said Hallam, frowning, "I'll see to that. You can go now. Leave Miss Julia here."

"Mayn't I go with Thisbe, papa?" said the child eagerly.

"No; stay with me. I want to talk to you. Come here."

The child's countenance fell, and she sidled towards Hallam, looking wistfully the while at Thisbe, who left the room reluctantly and closed the door.

As soon as they were alone Hallam threw down the paper, and drew the child upon his knee, stroking her beautiful, long, dark hair, and held his face towards her.

"Well," he said sharply, "haven't you a kiss for papa?"

The child kissed him on both cheeks quickly, and then sat still and watched him.

"That's better," he said smiling. "Little girls always get rewards when they are good. Now I shall buy you a new doll for that."

The child's eyes brightened.

"Have you got plenty of money, papa?" she said quickly.

"Well, I don't know about plenty," he said with a curious laugh, as he glanced round the handsomely-furnished room, "but enough for that."

"Will you give me some?"

"Money is not good for little girls," said Hallam, smiling.

"But *I'm* not little now," said the child quietly. "Mamma says I'm quite a companion to her, and she doesn't know what she would do without me."

"Indeed!" said Hallam sarcastically. "Well, suppose I give you some money, what shall you buy – a doll?"

She shook her head. "I've got five dolls now," she said, counting on her little pink fingers, "mamma, papa, Thisbe, and me, and Mr Bayle."

Hallam ground out an ejaculation, making the child start from him in alarm.

"Sit still, little one," he said hastily. "Why, what's the matter? Here, what would you do with the money?"

"Give it to mamma to pay Thisbe. Mamma was crying about wanting some money yesterday for grand-mamma."

"Did your grandmother come and ask mamma for money yesterday?"

"Yes; she said grandpapa was so ill and worried that she did not know what to do."

Hallam rose from his seat, setting down the child, and began walking quickly about the room, while the girl, after watching him for a few moments in silence, began to edge her way slowly towards the door, as if to escape.

She had nearly reached it when Hallam noticed her, and, catching her by the wrist, led her back to his chair, and reseated himself.

"Look here, Julia," he said sharply, "I will not have you behave like this. Does your mother teach you to keep away from me because I seem so cross?" he added with a laugh that was not pleasant.

"No," said the child, shaking her head; "she said I was to be very fond of you, because you were my dear papa."

"Well, and are you?"

"Yes," said the child, nodding, "I think so;" and she looked wistfully in his face.

"That's right; and now be a good girl, and you shall have a pony to ride, and everything you like to ask for."

"And money to give to poor mamma?"

"Silence!" cried Hallam harshly, and the child shrank away, and covered her face with her hands. "Don't do that! Take down your hands. What have you to cry for now?"

The child dropped her hands in a frightened manner, and looked at him with her large dark eyes, that seemed to be watching for a blow, her face twitching slightly, but there were no tears.

"Any one would think I was a regular brute to the child," he muttered, scowling at her involuntarily, and then sitting very thoughtful and quiet, holding her on his knee, while he thrust back the breakfast things, and tapped the table. At last, turning to her with a smile, "Have a cup of coffee, Julie?" he said.

She shook her head. "I had my breakfast with mamma ever so long since."

He frowned again, looking uneasily at the child, and resuming the tapping upon the table with his thin, white fingers.

The window looking out on the market place was before them, quiet, sunny, and with only two people visible, Mrs Pinet, watering her row of flowers with a jug, and the half of old Gemp, as he leaned out of his doorway, and looked in turn up the street and down.

All at once a firm, quick step was heard, and the child leaped from her father's knee.

"Here's Mr Bayle! Here's Mr Bayle!" she cried, clapping her hands, and, bounding to the window, she sprang upon a chair, to press her face sidewise to the pane, to watch for him who came, and then to begin tapping on the glass, and kissing her hands as Christie Bayle, a firm, broad-shouldered man, nodded and smiled, and went by.

Julia leaped from the chair to run out of the room, leaving Robert Hallam clutching the edge of the table, with his brow wrinkled, and an angry frown upon his countenance, as he ground his teeth together, and listened to the opening of the front door, and the mingling of the curate's frank, deep voice with the silvery prattle of his child.

"Ha, little one!" And then there was the sound of kisses, as Hallam heard the rustle of what seemed, through the closed door, to be Christie Bayle taking the child by the waist and lifting her up to throw her arms about his neck.

"You're late!" she cried; and the very tone of her voice seemed changed, as she spoke eagerly.

"No, no, five minutes early; and I must go up the town first now."

"Oh!" cried the child.

"I shall not be long. How is mamma?"

"Mamma isn't well," said the child. "She has been crying so."

"Hush! hush! my darling!" said Bayle softly. "You should not whisper secrets."

"Is that a secret, Mr Bayle?"

"Yes; mamma's secret, and my Julia must be mamma's well-trusted little girl."

"Please, Mr Bayle, I'm so sorry, and I won't do so any more. Are you cross with me?"

"My darling!" he cried passionately, "as if any one could be cross with you! There, get your books ready, and I'll soon be back."

"No, no, not this morning, Mr Bayle; not books. Take me for a walk, and teach me about the flowers."

"After lessons, then. There, run away."

Hallam rose from his chair, with his lips drawn slightly from his teeth, as he heard Bayle's retiring steps. Then the front door was banged loudly; he heard his child clap her hands, and then the quick fall of her feet as she skipped across the hall, and bounded up the stairs.

He took a few strides up and down the room, but stopped short as the door opened again, and, handsomer than ever, but with a graver, more womanly beauty, heightened by a pensive, troubled look in her eyes and about the corners of her mouth, Millicent Hallam glided in.

Her face lit up with a smile as she crossed to Hallam, and laid her white hand upon his arm.

"Don't think me unkind for going away, dear," she said softly. "Have you quite done?"

"Yes," he said shortly. "There, don't stop me; I'm late."

"Are you going to the bank, dear?"

"Of course I am. Where do you suppose I'm going?"

"I only thought, dear, that – "

"Then don't *only think* for the sake of saying foolish things."

She laid her other hand upon his arm, and smiled in his face.

"Don't let these money matters trouble you so, Robert," she said. "What does it matter whether we are rich or poor?"

"Oh, not in the least!" he cried sarcastically. "You don't want any money, of course?"

"I do, dear, terribly," she said sadly. "I have been asked a great deal lately for payments of bills; and if you could let me have some this morning – "

"Then I cannot; it's impossible. There, wait a few days and the crisis will be over, and you can clear off."

"And you will not speculate again, dear?" she said eagerly.

"Oh, no, of course not," he rejoined, with the touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"We should be so much happier, dear, on your salary. I would make it plenty for us; and then, Robert, you would be so much more at peace."

"How can I be at peace?" he cried savagely, "when, just as I am harassed with monetary cares – which you cannot understand – I find my home, instead of a place of rest, a place of torment?"

"Robert!" she said, in a tone of tender reproach.

"People here I don't want to see; servants pestering me for money, when I have given you ample for our household expenses; and my own child set against me, ready to shrink from me, and look upon me as some domestic ogre!"

"Robert, dear, pray do not talk like this."

"I am driven to it," he cried fiercely; "the child detests me!"

"Oh no, no, no," she whispered, placing her arm round his neck.

"And rushes to that fellow Bayle as if she had been taught to look upon him as everybody."

"Nay, nay," she said softly; and there was a tender smile upon her lip, a look of loving pity in her eye. "Julie likes Mr Bayle, for he pets her, and plays with her as if he were her companion."

"And I am shunned."

"Oh, no, dear, you frighten poor Julie sometimes when you are in one of your stern, thoughtful moods."

"My stern, thoughtful moods! Pshaw!"

"Yes," she said tenderly; "your stern, thoughtful moods. The child cannot understand them as I do, dear husband. She thinks of sunshine and play. How can she read the depth of the father's love – of the man who is so foolishly ambitious to win fortune for his child? Robert – husband – my own, would it not be better to set all these strivings for wealth aside, and go back to the simple, peaceful days again?"

"You do not understand these things," he said harshly. "There, let me go. I ought to have been at the bank an hour ago, but I could not get a wink of sleep all the early part of the night."

"I know, dear. It was three o'clock when you went to sleep."

"How did you know?"

"The clock struck when you dropped off, dear. I did not speak for fear of waking you."

She did not add that she, too, had been kept awake about money matters, and wondering whether her husband would consent to live in a more simple style in a smaller house.

"There, good-bye," he said, kissing her. "It is all coming right. Don't talk to your father or mother about my affairs."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.