

Fenn George Manville

Eli's Children: The Chronicles of an Unhappy Family



George Fenn

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of an Unhappy Family**

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Fenn George Manville

Eli's Children: The Chronicles of an Unhappy Family

Part 1, Chapter I.

Part 1 – The Rectory Folk.

Hot Water in Lawford

“Eh? What?”

“I say, why don’t you give it up quietly?”

“Speak up; I’m a little hard of hearing.”

“I say, why don’t you give it up quietly?” roared the speaker to a little bent old man, with a weak, thin, piping voice, and a sharp look that gave him somewhat the air of a very attenuated sparrow in a severe frost, his shrunken legs, in tight yellow leather leggings, seeming to help the idea.

“Don’t shout at me like that, Master Portlock. I arn’t deaf, only a trifle hard of hearing when I’ve got a cowl – just a trifle, you know.”

“Have you got a cold?” asked the man addressed, a sturdy-looking, fresh-coloured, middle-aged man, with a very bluff manner, and a look of prosperity in his general appearance that made him seem thoroughly adapted to his office. In fact, he was just the man that a country clergyman would be glad to elect at a vestry meeting for vicar’s churchwarden. “Eh?”

“I – say – have – you – got – a – cold? Hang him, how deaf he is!”

“Oh, no! oh, no!” chirped the little old man, sharply; “I’m not deaf. Just a little thick i’ the ears. Yes; I’ve got a cowl. It’s settled here – just here,” he piped, striking himself upon his thin chest with the hand that held his stick. “A bad cowl – a nasty cowl as keeps me awake all night, doing nowt but cough. It’s that stove, that’s what it is, Master Portlock.”

“Nonsense, man! It would keep the cold off.”

“Eh?”

“I say it would keep the cold off.”

“Nay, nay; not it. A nasty, brimstone-smelling, choking thing, as sends out a reek as settles on your chest. Stove, indeed! What do we want with your noo-fangled stoves? We never had no stoves before. Here he stops away from town all these years, only coming now and then, and now all at once he’s back at the Rectory, and nothing’s right. Mr Paulby never said a word about no stoves.”

“No; but see how damp the church was.”

“Eh?”

“Eh?”

“Damp,” roared the Churchwarden; “church – damp. Cush – shuns – moul – dee.”

“Chah! Nonsense, Master Portlock. Damp? Suppose it was? A chutch ought to be damp, and smell solemn like of owd age and venerations. Mouldy? Ay; why not?” he piped. “Mind ta chutch folk o’ decay, and what they’re comin’ to some day. I once went to London, Master Portlock – forty year ago now, sir – forty year ago. It was cowl weather, and I got ’most froze a’ top o’ the coach, and it was a ’mazin’ plaace. Ay, that it was. But you’ve been there?”

“Ay, lots o’ times in my life.”

“Niver been in your life? Then don’t go. Niver go if you can help it. Owd Mr Burton paid for me to go, he did – owd vicar’s father, you know – and he said to me a did, ‘Mind ta go and see some o’ the London chutches, Warmoth,’ he says; and I did, and bless thou, pretty places they weer.

I niver see a playhouse, but Sammy Mason wint to one i' London, and he tow'd me what it were like, and the chutch I went into i' the City weer just like it. Why, mun, theer were a big picter ower the 'mandments, and carpets on the floors, and all the pews was full o' red cushions an' basses, just as if they was all squires' sittings, and brass rails and red curtains an' grand candlesticks. Then reight up i' the gallery wheer the singers sit was a great thing all covered wi' goolden pipes, an' a man i' the front sittin' lookin' at his self i' a lookin' glass. That was t' organ, you know, and eh, but it was a strange sort o' plaace altogether to call a chutch."

"Not like our old barn, eh, Sammy?" shouted the Churchwarden.

"Nay, not a bit, Master Portlock," piped the old man. "Gi'e me whitewesh, and neat clean pews and a plait-straw cushion and bass. Folk don't go to sleep then, and snore through t' sarmunt. If I had my way, Master Portlock, I wouldn't hev a thing changed."

"No, I suppose not, Sam," said the Churchwarden, nodding.

"Sixty years have I been clerk o' t' owd chutch, and hae buried generations of them as comed to the owd place – christened 'em, and married 'em, and buried 'em, Master Portlock. They didn't like me being made clerk so young in them days. Jacky Robinson, as wanted to be clerk when father died, said I was nobbut a boy, but t' owd vicar said – owd Master Willoughby, you didn't know him?" The Churchwarden shook his head. "No; he died eight and fifty year ago. He said, 'No; let Sammy Warmoth step into his father's shoes, same as him as is dead stepped into his father's shoes. I find,' he says, 'there's been Warmoth's clerks here for a hundred years at least;' and now, Master Portlock, sir, I can say there's been Warmoths clerks here for a hundred and sixty year, and if my life is spared I'll make it two hundred, for they can't turn me out, and I wean't go."

"How old wert ta when you was made clerk, Sammy?" said the Churchwarden, looking at the old man with a pitying smile. "Thrutty-three, and I was just married, Master Portlock, and thrutty-three and sixty makes ninety-three, eh?"

"Fine owd age, Sam."

"Eh?"

"A fine owd age, I say."

"Chah! Not it. Read your Bible more, man. Ninety-three's as good as nowt to what men used to be. Nay, nay, nay, I shan't give up. Yow may go and tell parson as theer's lots o' life in me yet, and that he'd best go back again to London and foreign parts, and leave us alone here wi' Mr Paulby. He'll drive all the congregation over to the Dissenters, they're talking a'ready o' building noo chapel for ta Wesley folk."

"Ay, they're going ahead, Sammy, but we don't care for the opposition shop. We've got the old established bank, eh?"

"That's a true word, Master Portlock," piped the old man, "and we can pity 'em, wi' their plans and local preachers, a set o' nobodies, o' sons o' Levi, takking off their aprons and running fro' behind their counters to usurp the priest's office; but you mark my words, and you may tell parson what I say; if he's coming down here thinking to do just as he likes, he'll be driving all folk to chapel."

"No, no; not he, Sammy."

"Ay, but he will, altering ta chutch sarvice, an' upsetting all that's owd – schoolmaster, and clerk, and chutch. You tell him that he may keep his man till I'm dead, and then put him in, for I niver had a boy o' my own to tak' my place."

"But he hasn't got a man."

"Eh? Not got a man? Good job too. He don't want one?"

"No. He isn't going to have a clerk any more."

"Eh?"

"I say you'll be the last clerk o' Lawford. There'll nivver be another."

"Nivver be another? What dost ta mean?"

"Mr Mallow is going to do the service wi'out a clerk," roared the Churchwarden.

“Do sarvice wi’out a clerk!” piped the old man, indignantly; “who’s to say t’ ‘Amens’?”

“Congregation and singers.”

“An’ what ’bout t’ ’sponses?” quavered the old clerk.

“People!”

They were standing in the churchyard, walled up high above the town street, and as the Churchwarden spoke the old clerk placed his left hand across the small of his back, and stamping his stick on the cobble stones of the path, he made an effort to straighten himself up so as to gaze at the venerable mouldering square-towered church, taking it in from end to end with his pale grey eyes before resuming his former attitude with his head on one side.

“Not going to have another clerk?” he quavered.

“No,” roared the Churchwarden.

“No one to say t’ amens and ’sponses?”

“No.”

“Who’s t’ help him on wi’ his gownd?”

The Churchwarden shook his head.

“Who’s going to shut pulpit door?”

There was another shake of the Churchwarden’s head.

“Then who’ll gi’e out t’ psalms?”

“Parson.”

“Ah!” ejaculated the old man, staring down at his feet.

“Look here, Sammy,” said the Churchwarden, kindly, and with his lips close to the old man’s ear; “Mr Mallow’s a nice sort o’ man, and means kindly.”

“No one to say t’ amens?” said the old clerk, softly.

“He thinks you’re getting too owd for the work.”

“Nobbut t’ people to say the ’sponses,” continued the old clerk, without seeming to hear the Churchwarden’s words.

“He’s been talking to us at sort o’ meeting, and he wants to get up testimonial for thee. Says we owt to make un enew to mak’ thee comfortable to end o’ thee days, and he’ll give twenty pounds towards it, and you’re to have one of the Bede Houses.”

“How’s he going to bury them as dies?” piped the old man, suddenly.

The Churchwarden shook his head.

Old Sammy Warmoth took a couple of feeble steps towards the edge of the path, and began to poke at the loose, friable earth of the grave nearest to him with the long brass ferrule of his stick, taking two hands to the task, and making quite a little hole.

“It’s gotten time I was put down theer,” he said, in a low voice that was very pathetic in its tones. “There’s a sight o’ my owd friends I’ve seen put down here, and its gotten time for me to be put along wi’ ’em, sown a corruptible body to be raised an incorruptible, for I spose I’m gotten owd and good for nowt.”

“Oh, nay, nay, Sammy,” said the Churchwarden, warmly. “Don’t take on about it. Tak’ my advice. Don’t be obstinit, but just go up and see parson quiet like, an’ say you give up, and tak’ it kindly, an’ I’ll see as you don’t come to no wrong.”

“No one to say t’ amens,” muttered the old man – “no one to say t’ ’sponses – no one to gi’e out t’ psalms. Why,” he cried, raising his voice, “I b’lieve it now.”

“Believe what, Sammy?”

“That he’s goin’ to have t’ owd pews out, and put i’ benches; and I said when I heerd it as the dead wouldn’t rest i’ their graves if he did.”

“It’s all true, Sammy. They’re going to spend three thousand pounds i’ doing up t’ owd church, and young Lord Artingale’s going to give us an organ.”

“Then I wean’t go,” cried the old man, stamping his stick down on the stones. “I’ll nivver do it. I’ve been here clerk and saxton these sixty year, and I helps wi’ ivvery grave even now. It wean’t do. It’s a revvylootion, and a sweeping away of t’ owd chutch, like they did among the French, and I’ll be one o’ the faithful while I live.”

“Nonsense, man; come, say thou’lt give up quiet like,” said the Churchwarden, soothingly. “Eh?”

“Say thou’lt give up quietly.”

“Nivver, nivver!” quavered the old man, angrily. “It’s as much my chutch as his, and if he goes wrong wi’ his new notions and idees, I’ll stand by mine. There’s nivver been a clerk o’ Lawford as didn’t die a clerk, and dost ta think I’ll be the first, Master Portlock? Nivver. I’ll howd by chutch till t’ last, say what thou will!”

“Poor owd boy!” said the Churchwarden, as he stood watching the tottering figure descending the slope on the farther side of the churchyard, till it seemed from where the gazer stood as if the old man were sinking slowly into a grave. First he disappeared to the middle, then the path line was level with his shoulders, and a few moments more and his head had gone.

“Poor owd boy!” said the Churchwarden, musingly. “It can’t be for long. I’ll ask parson to let him stop.”

Part 1, Chapter II. The Rectory Girls

"I love the country! I love the country!"

"Hush, hush, Cynthia! don't be so childish; some one will hear you."

"No one is near us, Ju. That's why I like being down here."

"But it is so childish to keep running up the banks and shouting like that."

"Well, but that's what I like. It's the country air makes one feel so young, and I am so, so glad that we are going to stay at home. I want to know the people. Oh, I was tired of the Continent. I want to be free."

"Now, Cynthia, what would papa say if he saw you climb up on that gate?"

"Don't know – don't care!"

"Well, then," said Julia Mallow, smiling, "what, would Lord Artingale say?"

"That I was a jolly little girl, and come and sit beside me."

"Oh! Cynthia!"

"And put his arm round my waist to keep me from falling off. Oh, I say, Ju, he did once, and it was so funny."

"Cynthia, I'm ashamed of you," cried her sister, and there was a slight deepening of the colour in her sweet English face.

"Well, I am ashamed of myself," cried Cynthia, springing lightly off the gate, and passing her arm round her sister as they walked on along the rutty lane. "But I do feel so happy, Ju. So will you some day, when you meet the special him. Not Perry-Morton though. Ha, ha, ha! How stupid papa is! I say, Ju, though, who shall we go and see? Papa says we are to visit the people a great deal, and get them to know more of us, but I shan't go near any of the horrid Dissenters."

"Don't call people horrid because they don't think the same as we do, Cynthia."

"Well, but it is horrid. Papa says it's dreadful, the opposition that is in the town. I heard him say to mamma yesterday that he couldn't understand the people a bit, and that though he had now come to settle down amongst them for good, only when we go to town for the season, everybody seemed so independent, and they were all in opposition to him."

"Yes, he was talking to Mr Paulby about it at dinner on Tuesday."

"Papa is going to improve everything, he says. The place must have been terribly neglected by Mr Paulby. Oh, what a funny little man he is!"

"I think him very nice and genuine," said Julia, quietly.

"But you mustn't fall in love with him, Ju. He's too old. But I say, what was the real reason of our being away from Lawford so much?"

"Money matters," said her sister. "Papa got to be very much behindhand through Frank and Cyril."

"Oh, I wish I were a man!" cried Cynthia, with her pretty fair young face flushing. "How I would have whipped those two fellows and made good boys of them! They've half broken poor mamma's heart."

"I'm afraid papa indulged them too much," said Julia, quietly, and the two girls walked on for some little distance in silence, enjoying the briskness of the morning air.

"Now where are we going?" cried Cynthia suddenly. "Oh, I know. Down that lane leads to the ford, where the wheelwright's is. Let's go and see Polly Morrison."

"Shall we?" said her sister, smiling.

"Oh, yes. It will be a parochial visit all the same. Only fancy, Polly with a baby! What a little stupid she was to leave us to come back here and marry a wheelwright!"

"I don't know," said Julia quietly; "perhaps she is very happy."

"Oh, of course. People are when they get married. Come along; I want to see Polly's baby. I wish she had not left us. She was such a clever maid."

"I was very glad she went," said Julia gravely.

"Glad? Why?"

"Because of Cyril. He was always following her about. She complained to me several times."

"Cyril is a wretch!" said Cynthia, with heightened colour. "Papa ought to whip him. He always would look at pretty girls. I say, Ju, did you see Miss Portlock, the schoolmistress, on Monday? Was she nice?"

"Yes, I thought her very nice and superior. She is the churchwarden's niece. Hush! here is Mr Paulby."

"Good-morning, ladies," said a little plump man, raising his hat and showing his slightly-bald head. "What a lovely morning! I think I dare prophesy where you are going."

"If you prophesy Morrison's cottage, Mr Paulby, you are right," said Cynthia, merrily.

"Then I am right," said the curate. "I have just come from there, and Mrs Morrison has been chatting about old times, and how she went all over the Continent with you."

"She didn't tell you about Cyril, I know," said Cynthia to herself.

"I'm really very, very glad, ladies, that the rectory is inhabited again," said the curate, "and I hope you will help me a great deal."

"That indeed we will, Mr Paulby," said Julia.

"Yes, and visit, and do needlework, and help in the schools, and everything," said Cynthia, quickly. "And now we must say good-morning, Mr Paulby. Come, Julia."

There was the customary hand-shaking and raising of the curate's hat, and then they separated, the little plump rosy man looking very thoughtful as he made some observation to himself, and that observation was "Hah!" a remark that evidently meant a great deal.

"I'm not going to allow that, Ju," said Cynthia, decidedly. "The little man is quite smitten with you, and if Frank or Cyril were to know –"

"Don't be absurd!" said her sister, colouring a little.

"That would be as bad as Perry-Morton. Oh, here we are. Why, what a pretty little place Polly has got!"

The sisters stopped at the road-side to gaze at the long low ivy-covered cottage, with a broad patch of green in front, upon which was a lumber of broken carts and waggons waiting to be doctored. There was a shed at one end, from which came the sound of sawing, for which job there was a good-sized pit, while farther on the road dipped suddenly down and passed through a little river, which foamed and bubbled and sparkled as it turned the gravelly shallows into liquid silver in the morning sun.

"Oh, what a funny little thing!" cried Cynthia, as they were welcomed into the neat cottage. "Look at its little button-hole of a mouth. Let me take it, Polly."

The young mother, quite a rustic beauty, with a touch of refinement in her appearance, picked up during her stay on the Continent as maid to the rector's daughters, handed her plump little baby to the extended arms; watchfully, though, and as if afraid the treasure might be dropped upon the red-brick floor.

"And how are you, Polly?" said Julia, looking rather searchingly at the young wife as she set chairs for her visitors. "I hope you are very happy?"

"Oh, as happy, Miss Julia, as the day is long, and I'm so busy that the days are never long enough."

"Cooley, cooley, cooley, cooley!" cried Cynthia to the baby in a very dove-like manner, as she kissed and fondled it, laughing merrily the while.

"I was so surprised, Miss, to hear that you had come back to the rectory."

“Not going to stop very long this time, Polly – I mean Mrs Morrison,” said Cynthia, without raising her face from the baby. “We are going to town for the season. Oh, you, you, you funny little thing! There’s a wet mouth. Oh, I say, Ju, I wonder whether I shall ever have a baby of my own.”

“Cynthia!” cried her sister, reproachfully.

“It would be such fun. I say, Polly, is it good?”

“Oh, there never was such a good baby, Miss, and Tom worships it. She’s as good as gold.”

“She?” cried Cynthia. “Is it a she?”

“Oh, yes, Miss,” cried the young mother, proudly.

“How funny!” said Cynthia. “It might be anything, it is so round and soft.”

“Would you mind feeling how heavy she grows, Miss Julia?” said the young mother and the baby was duly handed to Julia, who held it to her cheek, and then gazed lovingly at the little thing, her eyes wearing a curious wistful aspect, full of tenderness, while the young mothers face lit up with pleasure.

“Isn’t it heavy, Miss?” she said.

“Wonderfully,” replied Julia quietly, and with as much decision as if her life had been spent in the management of babies.

“She don’t know!” laughed Cynthia. “I don’t believe she ever had hold of one before. Here, give it to me.”

“No; let it stay,” said Julia softly, and to the young mother’s great satisfaction, for she seemed rather scared lest Cynthia should let it fall in tossing it up and down.

“She gets heavier every day, Miss, and Tom says it’s wonderful now for a baby a month old.”

“You must introduce us to your husband, Polly.”

“Yes, Miss, I’ll call him in. Or no, Miss, not this morning,” said the young wife, rather hurriedly; “he is very busy.”

“Some other time then,” said Julia. “I suppose you are very fond of it, Polly?”

“Fond of it, Miss Julia? Oh, you can’t think how I love it.”

“No,” said Julia, softly, and looking curiously at the young mother, “I suppose not.”

“Oh, here is Budge,” said little Mrs Morrison, as a heavy, stolid-looking girl entered the room. “She will take baby now, Miss. There, Budge, take her in the kitchen, and don’t go too near the fire.”

“No, missus,” said the girl, taking the well-wrapped-up baby in her red arms, staring heavily the while at the visitors, and consequently nearly bringing her charge to grief by stumbling over a stool.

“Oh, Budge!” cried little Mrs Morrison.

“I ain’t hurt, missus,” said the girl coolly, and she allowed herself to be piloted out of the room by her mistress, when a chair was heard to scroop.

“Oh, how funny it does seem!” cried Cynthia.

“Hush! don’t talk like that,” said her sister; “here she is.”

Little Mrs Morrison came into the room again, looking very red-faced and hot.

“What a funny little maid you have got, Polly!” cried Cynthia.

“Yes, Miss Cynthia; she is from the workhouse, and she is a little clumsy, but she is very faithful, and so fond of baby.”

“And what is to be its name?” cried Cynthia.

“Rose, Miss; and – and,” stammered the young wife, looking very hard at Julia.

“And what, Polly?”

“I – I had a sort of idea, Miss Julia, that – ”

“That what, Polly? Speak out!”

“Of asking you and Miss Cynthia if – ”

“If what?”

“You wouldn’t mind being little Rose’s godmothers.”

“Oh, no, Polly,” said Julia, “I think not.”

"Oh, yes, Ju, it would be good fun," cried Cynthia.

"I told Tom it would be too much to ask, Miss Julia; but he said you could only say *no*."

"Of course," said Julia, thoughtfully. "And he is very kind to you?"

"Oh, kind isn't the word, Miss Julia," cried the young wife.

"And are his relations kind to you too?"

"He has no relations, Miss, but one brother," replied Polly, "and he is a good deal of trouble to him – I mean to us," she added, correcting herself.

"Trouble to you, Polly?"

"Yes, Miss; he won't work, and he has taken to a gipsy sort of life, and goes poaching, I'm afraid."

"That's *very*, very sad," said Julia, remembering that her father had just been made chairman of the bench of magistrates.

"Yes, Miss, very, very sad, for we are always afraid of his getting into trouble; but there, you know, Miss, what brothers are."

"Yes, yes," said Julia, hastily. "I will think about what you said, Polly," she added, rising, and holding out her hand, "and if papa does not object, Cynthia and I will be godmothers to baby."

"Oh, if you would, Miss!" cried the young wife, flushing with pride; and then, in a low voice, as Cynthia went on out of the room, "You always were kind to me, Miss Julia, and more like a sister than a mistress. May I kiss you, Miss?"

"Oh, yes, Polly," said Julia, kissing her smilingly.

"You always were kind to me, Miss, and there's nothing in life I wouldn't do for you if you wanted it."

"Come, Ju," cried Cynthia, from without.

"Oh, thank you, Polly, I know you would."

"And you'd come and ask me, Miss, if you wanted help, wouldn't you?"

"Indeed I would, Polly; but why do you ask me in that strange way?"

"Because – because, Miss, I want to ask a favour of you now," cried the young wife, desperately.

"What is it, Polly?" said Julia, showing deep interest now.

"Please, Miss, you – you remember when we were at Dinan."

"Yes, yes; what?" cried Julia.

"About Mr Cyril."

"Yes," cried Julia, catching her hand; "he has not dared?"

"He – he came here yesterday, Miss, while Tom was out," cried Polly, bursting into tears, "and he came once before; and it frightens me, Miss – it horrifies me; for Tom loves me so dearly, Miss; and it would make him angry, and break his heart if he thought ill of me, Miss Julia."

"But did you encourage him to come again?" cried Julia, angrily.

"No, Miss Julia, I nearly went on my knees to him, and begged him not to come again, but he only laughed, and – and called me a little fool."

"You shall tell your husband, Polly," cried Julia, hotly.

"I – I was afraid, Miss Julia," sobbed Polly. "I was afraid of making mischief. I dared not tell him. If he thought Mr Cyril came here and troubled me, he would be ready to kill him, Miss, and me too. Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do?"

"I'll tell papa," said Cynthia, who had come back unseen. "I declare it's shameful, and I – I wish my brothers were both dead. Oh, Ju, papa must know."

"No, no," said Julia, holding the sobbing little woman to her breast; "Polly is right. It would be making terrible mischief. I'll speak to Cyril myself, and if he will not listen to me, mamma shall try. But, Polly, you will tell me if he comes again?"

"Oh, yes, yes, Miss Julia," cried the young wife, gazing up passionately in her visitor's face.

"And always tell me the whole truth?"

“Indeed – indeed I will. Please, Miss Julia,” she said simply, “I don’t think I ever told a lie.”

“I don’t believe you ever did, Polly,” said Julia, kissing her, and turning to the door to go. “There, good-bye, and don’t be low-spirited. Cyril is soon going away again, and even if he is not, he shall not trouble you.”

“Thank you, Miss Julia, and you too, Miss Cynthia,” said the young wife, wiping her eyes; “and perhaps you will be at baby’s christening?”

“If papa doesn’t object, indeed we will,” cried Julia, smiling, and the sisters went back along the lane.

“I would – I would indeed,” said the young mother, softly; “I’d do anything to serve dear Miss Julia, and I hope and pray she may never feel such trouble as I do now. Oh, if only they had stopped away!”

She was standing in the little porch, listening to the regular harsh sound of a saw in the work-shed, some fifty yards away, gazing after the sisters, till a step coming in the other direction made her sharply turn her head, and then, as she shrank back, her whole aspect seemed to change. She turned ghastly white, her eyes dilated, and she trembled visibly, as if at the sight of some great horror.

It was nothing so very terrible approaching either, being only a tall, well-built, handsome young man of six or seven and twenty, his hands in the pockets of his loose jacket, and a cigar in his mouth.

Part 1, Chapter III.

The State of Lawford

Only some twenty years ago, but from the streets and surroundings of the place the date might have been in the last century. For Lawford was in an out-of-the-way part of Lincolnshire towards which one of the main northern lines had been running straight, but the company were beaten in Parliament, and the iron road curved off, leaving Lawford where it was – all behind.

When the new rector was appointed to the living he resolutely refused to go without a fresh rectory was built, for the old house, with its low rooms, was ten yards from the churchyard, which in the course of centuries had gone up, while the old rectory seemed to have gone down, so that you walked along a slope and then descended three steps into the ancient, damp, evil-smelling place, which had more the aspect of a furnished mausoleum than a house.

The consequence was that a grant was made for the building of a new rectory, which was erected a mile and a half out of the town; and as the living was rich, the Rev. Eli Mallow borrowed a couple of thousand pounds to have the house made handsomer, and to add conservatories and greenhouses to the place, got it all in excellent order, and then went on the Continent for a few years, when the old rectory did very well for Mr Paulby, the curate who was left in charge.

Difficulties of pocket had certainly had something to do with the absenteeism of the Rev. Eli Mallow, but there had been other troubles as well in connection with his sons, whom he had made several efforts to start in life and get away from Lawford. They were the sons of a clergyman, but two more unclerical youths never troubled father, and so unfortunate were his efforts, so persistently did the young men return home to their fond and indulgent mother and their proud weak father, that the Lawford people, famous among themselves for nick-naming those that they did not like, called Frank Mallow, the elder brother, “The Bad Shilling,” while Cyril, consequent upon a visit to Australia, they named “The Boomerang.”

They were an old-fashioned people at Lawford, and the “owd rector” had been old-fashioned too. It was past the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and forty, and Victoria was seated upon the throne, but the old rector thought it no wrong to go to one of the inns and sit and drink his mug of ale and chat and gossip with any townsman who came in.

As to the church, a colder, damper, more musty-smelling place could not have been found. Its glory was its whitewash, which was so rich and fat and thick that every here and there it bore a crop of curious spindly mushrooms, which grew and flourished and died, leaving great black patches on the walls like hatchments to record their vegetable deaths, till about once in a generation the whitewash brush came into use again, and a new coat was laid on to moulder and grow damp, and fall in patches of a goodly thickness upon the stained stone pave.

The worst of that whitewash was that it was not white, only a dirty wash that covered the ceiling and face of the wall, great blank patches of which used to be mentally studied by the schoolboys as maps of unknown regions, for the moisture that streamed down from the roof soon marked black rivers, while dark boundary lines seemed to be traced by cracks and mould of strange continents, islands, and seas, upon which in summer-time bluebottle flies and spiders made islands or cruising barks.

In the moist autumn times the place always broke out into a cold perspiration, the wet standing in great tears upon the flat tombstones and even upon the broad slab of old blackened oak that served for Sammy Warmoth's desk, where his books, like those above his head, were patterned on their covers with white mould-spots exhaling an odour of mushrooms not fit to eat.

The pews were of dull white deal; the sacramental table was covered with a ragged green baize in the sere and yellow leaf, and as worthy of being called green as the church whitewash was of being

termed white. Taken altogether, there was a strong suggestion on entering Lawford church of going into a cellar without the sawdust, and wanting in the wine; and old Mrs Marley, lately gone to her rest, and over whom as a very ancient friend Sammy Warmoth had affectionately patted down the earth with his spade, moistening it a little with his tears to make it stick, afterwards building up her grave with a mound of the finest, most velvety turf he could cut, that he protected with brambles from the sheep – old Mrs Marley, when she was schoolmistress, always made a point in winter of taking a large stone bottle of hot water with her to the church, smuggling it regularly beneath her cloak, and pitying the four-and-twenty blue-nosed little children, whom she led, because only two could sit by her at a time and warm their hands.

Humphrey Bone, the schoolmaster, also made a point of taking a bottle to church, but his was small, and he made occasions for bending his head beneath the front of the pew and imbibing portions of its contents through a very long turkey quill.

The church had remained *in statu quo* during the Rector's stay abroad, but now that he had returned, it was with ideas similar to the new broom – he meant to sweep clean. Perhaps the Rev. Eli Mallow was a little conscience-stricken for past neglect. At all events the Rector had now set himself to work on a general reform, but his absence had embittered a by no means friendly people.

"Taking that great wage out of the place year after year," said Tomlinson, one of the townspeople, "and leaving that curate to do all the work on eighty pounds a year; I haven't patience with him."

Several other fellow-townsmen expressed their opinions that it was a shame, and declared that they had not patience with the parson, and the consequence was that he was so talked over, that when he came back and set about his work of reformation he was met at his very first movement by a hedge of thorns that regularly surrounded the church. Every one of these thorns was a prejudice which he had to fight.

"Church did very well for t' owd rector, and always has done," was the cry; "why won't it do for he?"

"*Festina lente*," said the Reverend Eli to himself; and he set to work slowly, cautiously, and well, making such advance in his undertaking that plenty of money was promised, and he saw in the future a handsome, well-warmed church, with all the surroundings for reverent worship.

"Poor old fellow!" he had said to himself as he listened to the clerk, for the old man would utter the three first words of a response in a shrill tenor, and then drop his voice, nothing, else being heard until it came to the end, when to a new-comer his peculiar "*Hup-men*" was almost startling in its strangeness.

"*Week, week, week; wubble, wubble, wubble*," the school-children always declared he said, no matter what was the response; and then, after giving out the psalm or hymn so that no one could hear, the poor old fellow would sing in a shrill unmusical voice from behind a huge pair of tortoiseshell framed spectacles, holding his great hymn-book with both hands, and emphasising the words he sang by raising and lowering the book; turning to right and left, singing to the people below his desk, and then at the huge whitewashed beams of the ceiling, before turning three parts round to send his voice into the chancel, for the benefit of the old women from the Bede houses who sat there upon a very uncomfortable bench.

"I dare say it is very wrong," said Lord Artingale, who had ridden over from Gatton one Sunday to welcome the Mallows back to Lincolnshire, "but much as I want to be reverent, I really don't think I could go to your church again, Mr Mallow, without laughing in the middle of the service."

The Rector looked grave, for poor old Warmoth was a great trouble to him, and, as may be gathered, he had consulted the churchwardens on the question of the alterations, and among other things suggested that the old clerk should be asked to resign.

The effect we have seen, and that same day Portlock, the farmer, went up and told the result of his chat with the old clerk.

"It is very provoking, Mr Portlock, very. I want the old man to go quietly – in fact, to resign," said the Rector. "If I send him away the people will say that he is ill-used."

"That they will, depend on't," replied the Churchwarden. "Our folk take a deal o' driving."

"Well, well; what is to be done?"

"Best let things bide as they are, sir; you wean't do any good by trying to alter 'em."

"Oh, but that is absurd, Mr Portlock, highly absurd. No, I regret it very much, but he must go. There, I will see him myself."

The Rector saw the old clerk sooner than he expected, for in crossing the churchyard next day he met him going up to the church.

"Poor old fellow! ninety-three," said the Rector to himself, as he looked curiously at the strange old figure tottering up the rough cobble-stone path.

"Good-morning, Warmoth," he said. "Here, give me your hand."

The old man stopped short, thumped his stick down, and peered up fiercely.

"Nay, nay, nay," he groaned, "not so owd as all that, mester. I can do it yet. Let me bide, I'm reight yet. Yow want to get shut o' me – to drift me off. Yow thowt wi' your new ways that I wasn't good enew for t' church, but revvylootion or no revvylootion, I stick to church as my fathers did afore me. When I'm down theer, and can howd out no more, thou mun do thy worst."

"That's all put aside, Mr Warmoth," said the Rector, smiling. "I do want to make improvements here, but not to that extent. I did not want to hurt your feelings. Come, shake hands."

"Nay; I'll not," cried the old man, fiercely, his bearing seeming to have wonderfully altered now. "Thou want'st to get round me wi' soft words, but I'll howd thee off – I'll howd thee off. There ain't every servant of t' owd church like me, and I'll howd my own unto the last."

"My good old fellow, Heaven forbid that I should be guilty of so unkind an act. You shall stop on, Warmoth, till the last, for no act of mine shall remove you from your post."

The old man's jaw fell, and he stepped back, slipped, and would have fallen, but for the Rector's hands, to which the old fellow clung spasmodically, his face working, his lips twitching in his efforts to speak. But for a long time no words would come, and then but two, twice repeated, though with earnest emphasis —

"Bless thee! Bless thee!"

Then, quickly snatching his hands away, the old man turned aside, leaned his trembling arm against a tombstone which had gradually encroached upon the path, and stood with his head bent down, trying to recover his strength.

It was a strange contrast: the thin, sharply featured old man, and the handsome portly figure of the Rector, as he stood there vexed with himself at having, as he called it, been so weak as to give way at the first difficulty that he had to encounter; and he afterwards came to the conclusion that he might just as well have held out, for the people gave him the credit of killing old Warmoth so as to have his way.

"Let me help you into the church to sit down for a bit," he said to the trembling old man.

Old Warmoth turned and laid one hand upon the Rector's, gazing up in his face, and there was a piteous smile upon his withered lips.

"I was afraid thou'd want me to go as soon as I heard thou was coming back; and they said thou'dst get shut o' me. But sixty year, sir! It would have killed me. I couldn't have beared to go."

Two Sundays later the congregation had just left the church, and Portlock was going up to the vestry, when he saw there was something wrong in the clerk's seat.

"Why, Sammy, owd man," he cried, "what ails —"

He did not finish his broken sentence, but tore open the door of the clerk's desk, the Rector coming forward to where the old man knelt in his accustomed narrow place, his hands upon his book, his head upon his breast, as he had knelt down after the sermon.

“He’s like ice,” whispered the Churchwarden, putting forth his great strength, and lifting the old man bodily out, to lay him by the stove, the Rector placing a cushion beneath his head.

The motion seemed to revive the old man for a moment, and he opened his eyes, staring strangely at the Rector, who held one hand.

Then his lips moved, and in a voice hardly above a whisper they heard him say —

“Bless – thou! – Bless – thou! – those words would – have killed me.”

There was a pause, and the Churchwarden was hastening forth to fetch help, when there arose in the now empty church a shrill “*Amen.*”

It was the old clerk’s last.

Part 1, Chapter IV. At Lawford School

“Oh!” in a loud shrill voice; and then a general titter.

“Silence! who was that?”

“Please, Miss, Cissy Hudson, Miss. Please, Miss, it’s Mr Bone.”

This last delivered in a chorus of shrill voices; and Sage Portlock turned sharply from the semi-circle of children, one and all standing with their toes accurately touching a thickly-chalked line, to see a head thrust into the schoolroom, but with the edge of the door held closely against the neck, pressing it upon the jamb, so that the entire body to which the head belonged was invisible.

The head which had been thus suddenly thrust into the schoolroom was not attractive, the face being red and deeply lined with marks not made by age. The eyes were dull and watery, there was a greyish stubble of a couple of days’ growth upon the chin, and the hair that appeared above the low brow was rough, unkempt, and, if clean, did no justice to the cleansing hand.

“How tiresome!” muttered Sage Portlock, moving towards the door, which then opened, and a tall man, in a very shabby thin greatcoat which reached almost to his heels, stumped into the room.

Stumped or thumped – either will do to express the heavy way in which Humphrey Bone, thirty years master of Lawford boys’ school, drew attention to the fact that he had one leg much shorter than the other, the difference in length being made up by a sole of some five inches’ thickness, which sole came down upon the red-brick floor like the modified blows of a pavior’s rammer.

Such a clever man! Such a good teacher! the Lawford people said. There was nothing against him but a drop of drink, and this drop of drink had kept Humphrey Bone a poor man, dislocated his hip in a fall upon a dark night, when the former doctor of the place had not discovered the exact nature of the injury till it was too late, and the drop of drink in this instance had resulted in the partaker becoming a permanent cripple.

Lawford was such a slow-moving place in those days, that it took its principal inhabitants close upon twenty years to decide that a master who very often went home helplessly intoxicated, and who had become a hopeless moral wreck, living in a state of squalor and debt, could not be a fitting person to train and set an example to the boys left in his charge. And at last, but in the face of great opposition from the old-fashioned party arrayed against the Rev. Eli Mallow and his friends – the party who reiterated the cry that Humphrey Bone was such a clever man, wrote such a copperplate-like hand, when his fingers were not palsied, and measured land so well – it was decided that Humphrey Bone should be called upon to resign at Christmas, and Luke Ross, the son of the Lawford tanner, then training at Saint Chrysostom’s College, London, should take his place.

It was only natural that Sage Portlock, as she advanced to meet Humphrey Bone, should think of the coming days after the holidays, when Mr Ross, whom she had known so well from childhood, should be master of the adjoining school, and that very unpleasant personage now present should cease to trouble her with visits that were becoming more and more distasteful and annoying.

“Mornin’! Ink!” said Mr Bone, shortly. “Ours like mud. How are you?”

“Ink, Mr Bone?” said the young mistress, ignoring the husky inquiry after her health. “Yes; one of the girls shall bring some in.”

This and the young mistress’s manner should have made Mr Humphrey Bone retire, but he stood still in the middle of the room, chuckling softly; and then, to the open-eyed delight of the whole school, drew a goose-quill from his breast, stripped off the plume from one side of the shaft, and, with a very keen knife, proceeded to cut, nick, and shape one of the pens for which he bore a great reputation, holding it out afterwards for the young mistress to see.

“That beats training, eh? Didn’t teach you to make a pen like that at Westminster, did they, eh?”

"No," said Sage, quietly; "we always used steel pens."

"Hah – yes?" ejaculated the old schoolmaster, with a laugh of derision. "Steel pens – steel teaching – steel brains – they'll have steel machine teachers soon, who can draw a goose like that on a black board with a bit of chalk. Faugh!"

He pointed to one of a series of woodcuts mounted on millboard and hung against the whitewashed wall, stumped away three or four yards, and then returned.

"New ways – new theories – new machines! Wear the old ones out and chuck 'em away – eh?"

"I do not understand you, Mr Bone," said the young mistress, longing for the interview to come to an end; but he went on, speaking angrily, and ignoring her words —

"When old Widow Marley died, I said to Mallow and the rest of 'em, 'Knock a hole through the brick wall,' I said; 'make one school of it; mix 'em all up together, boys and gals. Give me another ten a year, and I'll teach the lot;' but they wouldn't do it. Said they must have a trained mistress; and here you are."

"Yes, I am here," said Sage Portlock, rather feebly, for she had nothing else to say.

"Only the other day you were a thin strip of a girl. Deny it if you can!"

"I do not deny it, Mr Bone," said Sage, determining to be firm, and speaking a little more boldly.

"No," he continued, in his husky tones, "you can't deny it. Then you leave Miss Quittenton's school, and your people send you to town for two years to be trained; and now here you are again."

Sage Portlock bowed, and looked longingly at the door, hoping for some interruption, but none came.

"And now – " began the old master.

"Mary Smith, take the large ink-bottle into the boys' school," said the young mistress, quickly; and the girl went to the school cupboard, took out the great wicker-covered bottle, and was moving toward the door, when the old master caught her by the shoulder, and held her back.

"Stop!" he said sharply. "Take it myself. Ha! ha!"

Sage started and coloured, for the children were amused.

"Ha, ha! – Ha – ha – ha – ha – ha!"

The old man continued his hoarse cachinnation, ending by wiping his eyes on a washed-out ragged old print cotton handkerchief.

"It makes me laugh," he said. "Young Ross – him I taught to write – evening lessons up at his father's house. Young Luke Ross! warmed him up like a viper in my breast to turn and sting me. Ha, ha, ha! Master here!"

"For shame, Mr Bone," exclaimed the young mistress, indignantly. "Mr Ross never sought for the engagement. It was only after Mr Mallow's invitation that he accepted the post."

"Mr Mallow's invitation, eh? The Rev. Eli Mallow, eh? Better look after his sons. Nice wild sons! Nice old prophet he is. Better look after his boys."

"And only the other day when he was down, young Mr Ross said that he was doubtful about taking the post, and thought of declining it after all."

"Told you so, eh? Ha – ha – ha! Not he. Sweet-hearting, eh? Ha – ha – ha! Very well, when he comes, knock a hole through the wall, and make one school of it, eh? Get married. Fine thing for the school. Faugh!" Sage Portlock's face was now scarlet, and she was about to utter some indignant remonstrance against the old man's words, when, to her intense relief, he took the ink-bottle roughly from the girl's hand, and stumped with it to the door.

Before he reached it, however, there was a sharp rap. It was opened, the latch rattling viciously, and a common-looking woman, whose face told its own tale that its owner had been working herself up ready for the task in hand, entered, dragging behind her a freshly-washed girl of eleven or twelve, whose face bore the marks of recent tears.

"Youkem here," exclaimed the woman, dragging in the unwilling child, and finishing by giving her a rough shake. "Youkem here, and I'll see as you're reighted, Miss."

To Sage Portlock's great disgust, instead of the old schoolmaster passing through the open door, he carefully closed it behind the woman, set the ink-bottle down upon a form, and, taking out his knife, began to remake the pen, well attent the while to what went on.

"Now, Miss, if you please," said the woman, "I want to know why my girl was kep' in yesterday and punished. I told my master last night I'd come on wi' her this morning, and see her reighted; and, if *you* please, I want to know what she's done."

"I am sorry to say, Mrs Searby – " began the young mistress.

"Oh, you needn't be sorry, Miss. Strite up and down's my motto. I want to know what my 'Lizabeth's done. There's no getting her to school nowadays. When Mrs Marley was alive all the gals loved to come to school, but now they hates it, and all the noo-fangled ways."

As the woman spoke, she darted a glance at the old schoolmaster, who chuckled softly, and shook his head.

"If you will allow me to speak – " began the young mistress.

"Oh, lor', yes, Miss, I'll allow yer to speak. I don't forget my position. I'm only a humble woman, I am; but I says to my master only last night, the trouble there is to get them gals to school now is orful. When Mrs Marley was alive – "

"Your daughter, Mrs Searby – " began the young mistress, again.

"Yes, Miss, my daughter went to Mrs Marley, she did, and there was never no trouble with the gal then. As I said to Mrs Marley, I said, all she wants is properly putting forward, that's all she wants; for there couldn't be a quicker gal wi' her book; but nowadays there's no gettin' of her to come; and when she do come she don't larn a bit, with the noo-fangled ways, and gettins up and sittins down, and holdin' out their hands, and being drilled, and stood out, and kep' in for doing nowt. I say it isn't fair to a child, for as I said to Mrs Marley, I said, and she said to me, all my gal wanted was putting forward, for a quicker gal with her book there never was, and now there's no getting of her to school of a morning, and never no getting her back when she does come; and the boys as goes to Mr Bone a loving their master and their books, and a getting on wonderful. And now, if you please, Miss," said the woman, with a derisive curtesy, and so far run down that she had to keep taking up the tantalising iteration of uneducated people in a fit of temper, "I want to know, if you please, what my gal has done."

"Your daughter was very rude, very inattentive, refused to learn the lesson I set, and incited some of the older girls to insubordination, Mrs Searby, so that I was compelled, most reluctantly, to punish her as an example."

The old master went on carving the quill to pieces, making and remaking it, till the amount of useful pen was getting very short, chuckling the while, and evidently enjoying the sidewise compliments directed at him and his old system by the irate woman.

"My gal not behaving herself! Why, she's as good in school as her brothers is. She's the best o' gals at home; and poor old Mrs Marley, who used to keep the school here, said as my gal was one of the best behaved and nicest children she ever see."

"Then she must have altered very much in her opinion, Mrs Searby," said a quiet, deep, rich voice; and the woman and the old schoolmaster started to see the Rector standing in the open door. "Mrs Marley consulted me several times upon the advisability of expelling your child from the school, and, for my part, I must say that she is the most tiresome girl that attends the Sunday classes."

"My gracious, sir!" exclaimed the woman, curtsying humbly.

"Leave her a little more to Miss Portlock here, and don't interfere," continued the Rector. "Elizabeth Searby, you had better go to your class. Mr Bone, I have been waiting in the boys' school to see you. Mrs Searby's two sons are heading a sort of insurrection there, and the boys, when I went in, were pelting each other with pieces of coke from the stove."

“Let ‘em,” said Humphrey Bone, snapping his fingers in defiance, as Miss Elizabeth Searby took the opportunity of her elders’ backs being turned to put out her tongue at them, as if for medical inspection, and then sought her class, while her mother beat a hasty retreat from the Rector’s presence.

“Let ‘em!” said Humphrey Bone again; “I’ve done with ‘em all. I defy you all I’ve worked for this school,” he cried, raising his voice, “for thirty years, and trained boys to make good men. As for you, Rev. Eli Mallow, head of the parish as you call yourself, you haven’t.”

“Don’t be foolish, Humphrey Bone,” said the Rector, with a grave smile. “Don’t try to quarrel about the past. What I did was as my duty; and when you are calm you must know that it was inevitable. Forbearance has its limits.”

“Quarrel! Forbearance!” cried the old schoolmaster, furiously. “How have you done your duty? I’m not afraid of you; you shan’t kill me like you did old Warmoth; and I’ll speak now.”

“My duty? Not so well as I should,” said the old clergyman, sadly. “We all have our regrets, Bone, for the past.”

“Yes, for what you’ve neglected,” cried the master, furiously. “You’re not pitched out of your living in your old age; I am. I trained my boys well. How about the training of yours, Rev. Eli – old prophet? How about your boys? Say, if you can, they are not a disgrace.”

The old clergyman started as if he had been stung; his handsome, florid face turned deadly pale, but the next moment the hot flush of indignation suffused his countenance, mounting right up amongst the roots of his silver hair.

“How dare –” he began; but he checked himself by an effort, and the colour faded slowly from his face.

“Bone,” he said, sadly, “you are angry, and in no fit state, mental and bodily, to talk about these matters. I will forget what you have just said. Now, back to your school; but before you go, let me tell you that I am not the enemy you seem to think. I have here,” he said, drawing a blue envelope from his breast, “a list of contributions, which I am getting towards a testimonial to our old schoolmaster for his long services. I hope to make it reach a handsome sum.”

Humphrey Bone’s lips were parted to speak, but these words disarmed him, and, muttering and shaking his head, he turned and left the place.

“Poor fellow!” said the Rector, calmly. “I fear that at times he hardly knows what he says.”

Sage Portlock looked at him wonderingly for a few moments, and he stood gazing at her, his countenance growing less troubled the while; and no wonder, for Sage Portlock’s was a pleasant face. She was not handsome, but, at the same time, she was far from plain; and there was something attractive about her broad forehead, with its luxuriant, smoothly-braided hair crossing each temple – for young ladies in those days had not taken to either cutting their hair short, or to wearing fringes or hirsute hysterics on their fronts. There was a pleasant regularity in her by no means classical features; her eyes were large and winning, and her well-cut mouth, if too large according to an artists ideal, curved pleasantly, and displayed on parting the whitest of teeth.

“Well, Miss Portlock,” said the Rector, smiling, “what a bad mistress you must be!”

“Indeed, sir,” she exclaimed, colouring, “I try very hard to –”

“Of course – of course,” he said, laughing, as he walked up the schoolroom by her side. “My dear child, it is the old story.”

“But was Mrs Marley so good a mistress, sir?” asked Sage, eagerly.

“My dear Miss Portlock, she was one of the most amiable of old women; but it was quite shocking to see the state of the school. ‘Steeped in ignorance’ is about the best description I can give you of its condition. Such encounters as you have had this morning fall of necessity to the lot you have embraced, and, as you see, one of my cloth is not exempt from such troubles.”

The old man started and frowned, for just then the door was once more opened in reply to a summons, and the gentleman who had troubled Polly entered the school, took off his hat politely to the mistress, replaced it, and then, apparently feeling that he had done wrong, took it off once more.

“I heard you had come to the school,” he said, “and I thought I would follow you.”

“You might have known, Cyril, that I should not be long,” said the Rector coldly. “Good-morning, Miss Portlock,” and without another word he went to the door, pausing to hold it open while the new-comer passed out, saluting the mistress as he did so; and then Sage Portlock was left to continue her task.

Part 1, Chapter V.

One of the Boys

“Mr Mallow seemed displeased with Mr Cyril,” thought Sage Portlock, as she went on with her duties. “He must have done something to annoy his father.”

Her thoughts left the subject the next moment, as she casually glanced at the window, through which the sun was streaming, for it was one of those glorious days when the dying year seems to flicker up, as it were, into a hectic glow, and for the time being it seems as if summer has come again.

In the schoolroom there was the busy hum of some sixty girls, reading, repeating, answering questions, and keeping up that eternal whispering which it is so hard to check, and the sun's rays as they streamed across the room made broad, bold bars full of dancing dust. Outside there was the pleasant country, and, in spite of herself, the thoughts of the young mistress strayed away a couple of miles to her home, where on such a day she knew that they would be busy gathering the late apples, those great, red-streaked fellows, which would be laid in the rack and covered with straw till Christmas. The great baking-pear tree, too, would be yielding its bushels of heavy hard fruit, and the big medlar tree down by the gate – she seemed to see it, as she thought – would be one blaze of orange and red and russet gold.

It would be delicious, she thought, to run home at once instead of being busy there; but the next moment a calm, satisfied smile came across her face, as she recalled the long tedious days she had passed the year before at Westminster, and began thinking and wondering about some one else.

“I wonder how he is getting on?” she thought; “and whether he will get one of the highest certificates. He tries so hard, I should think it is almost certain.”

There was a pause here – a busy pause, during which a change of duty was instituted in two or three classes; but Sage Portlock's thoughts went back soon after, in spite of herself, to the progress of Luke Ross at the London training college.

As she thought her cheeks reddened slightly, and she could not help recalling the spiteful words of the old master; and, as thoughts will, hers bounded on ahead faster and faster, till in effect she did see the day when her old friend and companion would be settled at Lawford, and perhaps a closer connection than that of master and mistress of the schools have come to pass.

Meanwhile the look of displeasure upon the Rev. Eli Mallow's countenance had grown deeper and more marked as he walked away from the school with his son, and angry words had taken place.

“Why, what nonsense, father!” exclaimed the young man. “I heard that you had just entered the schoolroom, and I followed to speak to you, that's all; and here you turn rusty about it. Hang it all, a fellow comes home for a little peace, and the place is made miserable.”

“By you, Cyril,” retorted his father, sharply. “Home is a calm and peaceful place till you come back, and then – I grieve to say it – trouble is sure to begin.”

“Why, what have I done now?”

“Done?” said his father, bitterly, as they walked up the long town street. “Why, given up another chance in life. Here, at the expense of a thousand pounds, you are started upon this Australian expedition, to become a settler, but at the end of two years you are back home, with the money gone, and as unsettled as ever.”

“Well, we had all that over last night and the night before. You need not bring it up again. That is not why you have turned rusty,” said the young man, sulkily.

“I think I will ask you to speak respectfully to me, Cyril,” said his father, with dignity.

“Respectfully!” said Cyril, with a mocking laugh. “Why, I'm behaving wonderfully. If I had stayed out at the sheep farm for another year I should have been a perfect boor.”

“And I must request, finally, that you interfere no more in any of the parish matters.”

“Well, who has interfered, father?”

“To put it plainly, then, my boy, I insist upon your keeping away from that school.”

“And for goodness’ sake, father, why?”

“I will tell you,” said the old clergyman, with no small show of excitement. “I have been reviled this morning, and accused of being wanting in duty, especially in the management of my sons.”

“Who dared to be so insolent?” cried the young man.

“I was compared to Eli of old, my boy; and I fear only too justly.”

“Let’s see; Eli’s sons were very naughty boys, weren’t they?” said the young man, laughing.

“Silence, sir!” cried his father, flushing; “these are not matters for your idle jests. I acknowledge that, for your poor mother’s sake, I have given way, and been weak and indulgent to the boy she, poor invalid, has ever worshipped; but the time has come now for me to make a stand, ere worse befall our house.”

“Why, father, what do you mean?”

“This, my son,” cried the old clergyman, sternly. “You left home two years ago, wild and fighting against restraint. You have come back now rougher in your ways – ”

“No wonder. You should have led such a life as I have amongst sheep farmers and roughs, and you wouldn’t wonder at my ways.”

“And far less amenable to discipline.”

“Why, what do you want, father?” cried the young man, impatiently.

“Strict obedience in all things, but more especially in those where any lapse might reflect upon my conduct as the clergyman of this parish.”

“Why, of course, father – what do you suppose a fellow is going to do?”

“Do you think I’m blind, Cyril?” said his father, sternly.

“Not I, father. Why do you ask?”

“Answer me this question. Why did you follow me to the school?”

“To have a chat with you. It was precious dull at home.”

“Very. It must be,” said the old clergyman, ironically. “You have been away from home two years, and after a few days’ return, its calm and peaceful life is found dull.”

“Well, so it is; plaguy dull.”

“Your mother has been confined to her couch ever since Cynthia was born, Cyril. I have never yet heard her complain of home being dull, or repine at her lot.”

“Ah, well, I know all that! Poor mamma!” exclaimed the young man.

“And you make that pitiful excuse to me, Cyril,” cried his father: “you stoop to deceit already.”

“Who does?” cried the young man fiercely.

“You do, sir, and I tell you this shall not be. Sage Portlock is a pure, sweet-minded girl, in whom both your sisters and I take the greatest interest; and I tell you that, if not engaged, there is already a very great intimacy existing between her and Luke Ross.”

“Phew!” whistled Cyril. “What, that young prig of a fellow! I say, father, he’s turning schoolmaster, isn’t he?”

“It is settled that he shall succeed Mr Bone as soon as he has finished his training,” said Mr Mallow, quietly.

“Poor old Bone! – dry Bone, as we used to call him, because he was such a thirsty soul. And so Luke Ross is to be the new man, eh? I congratulate Lawford,” he added, with a sneer.

“You have never liked Luke Ross since he gave you so sound a thrashing,” said his father, quietly.

“He? Thrash me? Absurd, father! Pooh! the fellow is beneath my notice.”

“I think we understand each other now,” said Mr Mallow, with quiet firmness. “While you stay here, Cyril, there is to be no trifling with any one. You can share our home for the present – that is, until you obtain some engagement.”

“Oh, hang engagements!” cried the young man, impatiently. “You have plenty of money, father, both in your own right and mamma’s. Why should I be constantly driven from home to some menial work?”

“Because it is time that your spoiled life of indulgence should cease. There is nothing degrading in work; it is idleness that degrades.”

“Oh, yes; you’ve lectured me enough about that,” said the young man, rudely.

“And you may take it for granted that as soon as an opening can be made for you – ”

“Opening wanted for a pushing young man,” cried Cyril, mockingly.

“I shall ask you to leave home and try to do your duty in this busy world.”

“Thanks, father,” said the young man, roughly. “What am I to be?”

“Three years ago I felt that I was doing wrong in keeping you in idleness at home.”

“Idle? Why, I was always busy, father.”

“Yes – hunting, shooting, fishing, and the like; but you did not stop there.”

“Oh, nonsense?”

“To-day I feel certain that I should be doing a great injustice to the parish – to your mother – to your sisters – ”

“Any one else?” said the young man, mockingly.

“To you,” replied his father, sternly.

“Any one else?”

“And to Miss Portlock and Luke Ross by allowing you to stay here.”

They had reached the rectory, and the Rev. Eli Mallow, who had paused with one hand upon the oaken bar to finish his sentence, now pushed open the quaintly-made gate, held it for a moment as if for his son to follow; but as he did not, the Rector allowed it to close, and, placing his hands behind him, walked slowly up the well-kept gravel walk, too intent upon his thoughts to give heed to his favourite flowers, or to enter the conservatory, according to his custom, on his way to his own snug room, whose walls were well stored with works on botany and his favourite pursuit, gardening.

Cyril Mallow gave his long moustache a tug as he watched his father’s bent back till it disappeared amongst the choice shrubs and evergreens; then, taking out his cigar-case, he selected one from its contents, bit off the end viciously, and there was the petulance of a spoiled child in his action as he struck one of the old-fashioned flat fusees upon the rough oaken gate-post till he had torn the match to rags without obtaining a light, another and another following before he could ignite his cigar.

“Confound the place!” he exclaimed. “It’s as dull as ditch water. Pretty state of affairs, indeed! One can’t look at a soul without being jerked up short. Luke Ross, eh? I’d like to – ”

He did not say what, but he gave his teeth a grind, and, thrusting his hands deep down into his pockets, he walked on towards the fields beyond the little town.

“I declare everybody’s hard on me,” he said aloud. “Just because I’m a bit unlucky and want change. Here’s the governor rolling in riches, and might make me a handsome allowance, and yet I’m always to be driven out into the world. Hanged if it isn’t too bad.”

He leaped over a stile and strolled a little way on across a field, beyond which was a patch of woodland, all aglow with the rich tints of autumn, but Cyril Mallow saw them not, his thoughts being elsewhere.

“I won’t stand it,” he cried suddenly, as he stopped short. “A man can’t always be in leading-strings, and I’m old enough now, surely, to strike for my liberty, and – ”

His hand went involuntarily to his vest pocket, from which he drew a delicately-made lady’s gold watch, whose presence was accounted for by the fact that Cyril’s own stout gold watch had passed into the hands of a station shepherd out at a place called Bidgeewoomba, in Queensland, and Cyril’s indulgent mother had insisted upon his using hers until it was replaced.

“Beastly dull place!” he muttered, gazing at the watch. “It’s of no use to go across to the ford; ‘our master’ will be coming in to dinner. Little fool! why did she go and marry that great oaf?”

He turned the watch over and over, laughing unpleasantly.

“Pretty Polly!” he said out aloud, but ended by opening and snapping to the back of the watch.

“Five minutes to twelve,” he exclaimed, involuntarily. “The children will be coming out of school directly.”

He made a sharp movement in the direction of the town – stopped short – went on again – stopped to think of the words he had had with his father, and then, with an impatient “pish!” thrust his hands into his pockets, and walked quickly in the direction that he knew Sage Portlock would take on leaving the school, bent on the mission of causing misery and dissension between two young people just making their first start in life, and sowing the seed of certain weeds that would spring up to the overtopping of much goodly grain.

He paused again, hesitating as he neared the rectory gates, and for a moment he seemed as if he would enter.

But just then the church clock struck twelve, and the deep-toned bell, as it slowly gave forth, one by one, the tale of strokes announcing that the day had climbed to its greatest height, seemed to bring before Cyril Mallow the scene of the schoolgirls racing out, panting and eager, while Sage Portlock was putting on that natty little hat and long silk scarf she wore when going to and fro.

“Oh, what nonsense!” ejaculated Cyril. “What harm? Perhaps I shan’t see her after all.”

He strode off hastily back towards the town, for it was now five minutes past twelve, and just at this time Sage was locking the school door, and enjoying the fresh air, as she thought of Luke Ross with a pleasant little smile upon her lip, and a ruddy tint on the cheek; while just a hundred and twenty miles away Luke Ross had shouldered a spade on his way to the great garden for the hour’s manual labour prescribed by the rules of the training school; and, oddly enough, he was not thinking of the piece of earth he was about, in company with many more, to dig, but of Sage Portlock, and the pleasant days when he should be down in the country once again.

Part 1, Chapter VI.

Magisterial Functions

People had always said that the Rev. Eli Mallow was a most fortunate man, but somehow fate gave him his share of reverses. He had been born with the customary number of bones in his vertebra, wonderfully joined together after Dame Nature's regular custom and good style of workmanship, with suitable muscle and nerve to give proper pliability. The nurse who used to wash and wipe and then powder his delicate young skin considered that he was a beautiful baby, and certainly he had grown up into a very handsome man, an ornament, with his portly form and grey head, to the county bench, to his seat on which he was warmly welcomed back by his neighbours, for however unpopular he might be in the dissent-loving town of Lawford, the Rev. Eli Mallow was a favourite in his part of the county.

The late Lord Artingale had always been one of the loudest in his praise.

"He is a man of breed, sir," his lordship would say. "There's blood and bone in the man. I wish we had more clergymen of his kind. There'd be less poaching in the country, I can tell you, and fewer empty bags."

For the Rev. Eli Mallow worked by rule, that is to say, by law. Secular and ecclesiastical law were to be obeyed to the letter, and he was most exacting in carrying out what he considered to be his mission, with the result that, however well he stood in favour with his friends, his popularity did not increase.

He was not a bad man, for he was strictly moral and self-denying, fairly charitable, had prayers morning and evening, always walked to church on Sundays, kept a good table, and was proud of having the best horses in the neighbourhood. He did his duty according to his light, but that light was rather a small one, and it illumined a very narrow part of the great book of life. There were certain things which he considered duties, and his stern obedience to cut-and-dried law, rule, and regulation made him seem harsher than he really was.

During his absence from Lawford something approaching to economy had been practised, and his wife's and his own property had been nursed; but now the family had returned there was no sign of saving, for, in addition to being a clergyman, the Rector devoted himself largely to the carrying out of what he called his *rôle* as a country gentleman, and at whatever cost to his pocket and general strain upon the property, this he did well as a rule. Now, for reasons of his own relating to his two daughters, he was launching out to an extent that made a second visit to the Continent a very probable matter before many years were past.

Breakfast was over at the rectory. There had been words between master and Mr Cyril, the butler said, and master had been very angry, but, as was usually the case, Mr Cyril had come off victorious; and now, as it was market-day at Lawford, the bays were at the door, champing their bits, the butler and footman were in the hall waiting, and punctual to the moment the young ladies came hurrying down the oak staircase just as the Rev. Eli received his gloves from the butler and put them on, the domestic waiting to hand him his hat. This was carefully placed upon his head, and then there was a little ceremony gone through of putting on the glossy black overcoat, as if it were some sacred garment.

The Rev. Eli did justice to his clothes, looking a thoroughly noble specimen of his class, and once ready he unbent a little and smiled at his pretty, ladylike daughters, whom he followed down to the handsome barouche, which it had always been a custom to have out on bench days, the appearance of the stylish turn-out lending no little *éclat* to the magisterial proceedings.

It was certainly not a mile and a half to the market-place, but though that distance might be traversed again and again upon ordinary days, this was out of the question when the magistrates were about to sit.

So the steps were rattled down, the young ladies handed in, Cyril Mallow, with a cigar in his mouth, watching the proceedings from his bedroom window. The Rev. Eli followed and took his seat with dignity; the steps were closed, the door shut, the footman mounted to the box beside the coachman, both stretched their legs out rigidly, and set their backs as straight as their master's, and away the carriage spun, through the avenue, and out at the lodge gates, where the gardener's wife was ready to drop a curtsy and close them afterwards, and then away through the lanes by the longest way round, so as to pass Portlock's farm and enter Lawford by the London road.

Market-day was a busy day at Lawford, and the ostler at the King's Head had his hands full attending to the gigs of the farmers and the carts of the clergy and gentry round.

The word "cart" seems more suggestive of the vehicle of the tradesman; but it was the custom around Lawford for the clergy to use a capacious kind of spring cart, neatly painted and padded within, but in other respects built exactly on the model of an ordinary butcher's or grocer's trap, save that it had a door and step behind for access to the back seats, while, below the door, painted in regular tradesman style for the evasion of tax, would be, in thin white letters, the owners name and address, as in the case of the vicar of Slowby, whose cart was lettered —

"Arthur Smith, Clerk, Slowby."

There were several such carts in the inn yard on this particular morning, for the ladies of the clerical families generally shopped on market-days, and fetched the magazines from the bookseller's if it was near the first of the month.

The farmers' wives and daughters, too, put in a pretty good appearance with their egg and butter baskets, which were carried in good old style upon the woman's arm, irrespective of the fact that she was probably wearing a velvet jacket, and had ostrich feathers in her bonnet.

Tomlinson, the draper, was answerable for the show, and he used to boast that the Rector might preach as he liked against finery; his shop-window could preach a far more powerful sermon in silence, especially with bonnets for a text.

Some of the farmers had protested a little against the love of show evinced by their wives and daughters, but in vain. The weaker vessels said that the egg and butter money was their own to spend as they pleased, and they always had something nice to show for their outlay, which was more than the husbands and fathers, who stayed at the King's Head so long after the market ordinary, could say.

The Rev. Eli Mallow was dropped at the town-hall, where a pretty good group of people were assembled. There were the rustic policemen from the various outlying villages and a couple of Lord Artingale's keepers in waiting ready to touch their hats. Then the ladies went off in the carriage to make a few calls before returning to pick up papa after the magistrates' sitting was over.

The usual country town cases: Matthew Tomlin had been drunk and riotous again; James Jellicoe had been trespassing in search of rabbits; Martha Madden had assaulted Elizabeth Snowshall, and had said, so it was sifted out after a great deal of volubility, that she would "do for her" — what she would do for her not stated; a diminutive being, a stranger, who gave his name as Simpkins, had torn up his clothes at the workhouse, and now appeared, to the great delight of the spectators, in a peculiar costume much resembling a sack; another assault case arising out of the fact that Mrs Stocktle had "called" Mrs Stivvison, — spelt Stockton and Stevenson, — with the result that their lawful protectors had been dragged into the quarrel, and "Jack Stivvison had 'leathered' Jem Stocktle."

Upon these urgent cases the bench of magistrates, consisting of the Rev. Eli Mallow, chairman, the Rev. Arthur Smith, Sir Joshua St. Henry, and the Revds. Thomas Hampson, James Lawrence Barton, and Onesimus Leytonsby, solemnly adjudicated.

Then came the important case of the day; two men, who gave the names of Robert Thorns and Jock Morrison, were placed at the table.

The first was a miserable, dirty-looking object, who seemed to have made a vow somewhere or another never to wash, shave, or sleep in anything but hay and straw, some of which was sticking still in his tangled hair; the other was a different breed of rough.

Rough, certainly, a spectator who had judged the two idlers would have said; but he was decidedly a country rough, and did not belong to town. His big, burly look and length of limb indicated a man of giant strength; at least six feet high, his chest was deep and broad, and in his brown, half gipsy-looking face, liberally clothed with the darkest of dark-brown beards, there shone a pair of fierce dark eyes. Scraped and sand-papered down, and clothed in brown velveteen, with cord trousers and brown leather gaiters, he would have made a gamekeeper of whose appearance any country magnate might have been proud. As it was, his appearance before the country bench of magistrates was enough to condemn him for poaching.

There was something of the keeper, too, in his appearance, for he had on a well-worn velveteen coat and low soft hat, but his big, soft hands told the tale of what he was – a ne'er-do-well, who looked upon life as a career in which no man was bound to work.

Such was Jock Morrison.

The case was plain against them, and they knew that they would have to suffer, for Jock was pretty well known for these affairs. Upon former occasions his brother Tom, the wheelwright, had paid guineas to Mr Ridley, the Lawford attorney, to defend him, but there were bounds to brotherly help.

"I can't do it for ever," Tom Morrison had said to his young wife. "I've give Jock every chance I could; now he must take care of himself."

Big Jock Morrison looked perfectly able to do that, as he now stood with his hands in his pockets, staring about him in a cool defiant way. It seemed that he had been warned off Lord Artingale's ground several times, but had been too cunning for the keepers, and had only been taken red-handed the previous day, very early in the morning, so evidence showed; and he and his companion had upon them a hare, a rabbit, and a couple of pheasants, beside some wire snares and a little rusty single-barrelled gun, whose barrel unscrewed into two pieces, and which, so the head-keeper deposed, was detached from the stock and stowed away in the inner pocket of the big prisoner's coat.

Gun, powder-flask, tin measure, and bag of shot, with game, placed upon the table.

"And what did the prisoners say when you came upon them by – where did you say, keeper?" said one magistrate.

"Runby Spinney, Sir Joshua, just where the Greenhurst lane crosses the long coppice, Sir Joshua."

"And what did the prisoners say?" said the chairman stiffly.

"Said they was blackberrying, Sir."

"Oh!" said the chairman, and he appeared so stern that no one dared laugh, though a young rustic-looking policeman at whom Jock Morrison winked turned red in the face with his efforts to prevent an explosion.

"Did they make any – er – er – resistance, keeper?" said the chairman.

"The big prisoner, sir, said he'd smash my head if I interfered with him."

"Dear me! A very desperate character," said Sir Joshua. "And did he?"

"No, Sir Joshua, we was too many for him. There was me, Smith, Duggan, and the two pleecemen, so they give in."

And so on, and so on.

Had the prisoners anything to say in their defence?

The dirty man had not, Jock Morrison had. "Lookye here: he didn't take the game, shouldn't ha' taken it, only they foun' 'em all lying aside the road. It was a fakement o' the keeper's, that's what

it was. They was a pickin' blackberries, that's what him and his mate was a doin' of, and as soon as the 'ops was ready they was a going down south to pick 'ops."

The magistrates' clerk, the principal solicitor in the town, smiled, and said he was afraid they would miss the hop-picking that season, as it was over.

There was a short conference on the bench, and then the Rev. Eli Mallow sentenced the prisoners to three months' imprisonment, and told them it was very fortunate for them that they had not resisted the law.

"You arn't going to quod us for three months along o' them birds and that hare, are you?" said Jock Morrison.

"Take them away, policeman."

"Hold hard a moment," said the big fellow, so fiercely that the sergeant present drew back. "Look here, parsons, you'll spoil our hop-picking."

"Take them away, constable," said the Rev. Eli. "The next case."

"Hold hard, d'ye hear!" cried the big ruffian, in a voice of thunder. "I s'pose, parson," he continued, addressing the chairman, "if I say much to you, I shall get it laid on thicker."

"My good fellow," said the Rev. Eli, "you have been most leniently dealt with. I am sorry for you on account of your brother, a most respectable man, who has always set you an admirable example, and –"

"I say," exclaimed Jock, "this arn't chutch, is it?"

There was a titter here, but the chairman continued: —

"I will say no more, as you seem in so hardened a frame of mind, only that if you are violent you may be committed for trial."

"All right," said the great fellow, between his gritting teeth; "I don't say no more, only – all right: come along, matey; we can do the three months easy."

There was a bit of a bustle, and the prisoners were taken off. The rest of the cases were despatched. The carriage called for the chairman, and on the way back it passed the police cart, with the sergeant giving the two poaching prisoners a ride, but each man had his ankle chained to a big ring in the bottom of the vehicle, where they sat face to face, and the sergeant and his man were driving the blackberry pickers to the county gaol.

"What a dreadful-looking man!" said Julia, as in passing Jock Morrison ironically touched his soft felt hat.

"Yes, my dear – poachers," said the Rev. Eli calmly, as one who felt that he had done his duty to society, and never for a moment dreaming that he had been stirring Fate to play him another bitter turn.

Part 1, Chapter VII.

Polly's Surprise

There was a dark shadow over Polly Morrison's mind, and she started and shivered at every step when her husband was away at work, but only to brighten up when the great sturdy fellow came in, smelling of wood, and ready to crush her in his arms with one of his bear-like hugs.

Polly had been furtively gazing from the window several times on the afternoon of that market-day, and turned hot and cold as she had heard steps which might be those of some one coming there; but the cloud passed away in the sunshine of Tom Morrison's happy smile, now that he had come in, and she felt, as she expressed it, "oh! so safe."

"There, let me go, do, Tom," she cried, merrily. "Oh, what a great strong, rough fellow you are!"

"No, no; stop a minute," he said here. "I oughtn't to be smiling, for I've just heard something, Polly."

"Heard something, Tom!" she faltered, and she turned white with dread, and shrank away.

"Here, I say," he cried, "you must get up your strength, lass. Why, what a shivering little thing thou art!"

"You – you frightened me, Tom," she gasped.

"Frightened you? There, there, it's nothing to frighten thee. I have just heard about Jock."

"Oh! about Jock," cried Polly, drawing a breath full of relief. "I hope he has got off."

"Well, no, my lass, he hasn't, and I'm sorry and I'm not sorry, if thou canst understand that. I'm sorry Jock is to be punished, and I'm not sorry if it will do him good. Arn't you ashamed of having a husband with such a bad brother?"

"Ashamed! Oh, Tom!" she cried, throwing her arms about his neck.

"Well, if you are not, I am," said Tom, sadly; "and I can't help thinking that if old Humphrey Bone had done his duty better by us, Jock would have turned out a different man."

"But tell me, Tom, are they going to do anything dreadful to him?"

"Three months on bread and water, my lass," said Tom Morrison, – "bread of repentance and water of repentance; and I hope they'll do him good, but I'm afraid when he comes out he'll be after the hares and pheasants again, and I'm always in a fret lest he should get into a fight with the keepers. But there, my lass, I can't help it. I'd give him a share of the business if he'd take to it, but he wean't. I shan't fret, and if people like to look down on me about it, they may."

"But they don't, Tom, dear," cried Polly, with her face all in dimples, the great trouble of her life forgotten for the time. "I've got such a surprise for you."

"Surprise for me, lass? What is it? A custard for tea?"

"No, no; what a boy you are to eat!" cried Polly, merrily.

"Just you come and smell sawdust all day, and see if you don't eat," cried Tom. "Here, what is it?"

"Oh, you must wait. There, what a shame! and you haven't kissed baby."

She ran out to fetch the baby and hold it up to him to be kissed, while she looked at him with all a young mother's pride in the little one, of which the great sturdy fellow had grown so fond.

"It makes me so happy, Tom," she said, with the tears in her eyes.

"Happy, does it, lass?"

"Oh, yes. So – so happy," she cried, nestling to him with her baby in her arms, and sighing with her sense of safety and content, as the strong muscles held her to the broad breast. "I was afraid, Tom, that you might not care for it – that you would think it a trouble, and – and –"

"That you were a silly little wife, and full of foolish fancies," he cried, kissing her tenderly.

“Yes, yes, Tom, I was,” she cried, smiling up at him through her tears. “But come – your tea. Here, Budge.”

Budge had been a baby herself once – a workhouse baby – and she looked it still, at fourteen. Not a thin starveling, but a sturdy workhouse baby, who had thriven and grown strong on simple oatmeal fare. Budge was stout and rosy, and daily putting on flesh at Tom Morrison’s cottage, where her duty was to “help missus, and nuss the bairn.”

But nearly always in Polly’s sight; for the first baby was too sacred a treasure in that cottage home to be trusted to any hands for long.

She was a good girl, though, was Budge; her two faults prominent being that when she cried she howled – terribly, and that “the way” – to use Tom Morrison’s words – “she punished a quartern loaf was a sight to see.”

Budge, fat, red-faced, and round-eyed, with her hair cut square at the ends so that it wouldn’t stay tucked behind her ears, but kept coming down over her eyes, came running to take baby, and was soon planted on a three-legged stool on the clean, red-tiled floor, where she began shaking her head – and hair – over the baby, like a dark-brown mop, making the little eyes stare up at it wonderingly; and now and then a faint, rippling smile played round the lips, and brightened the eyes, to Budge’s great delight.

For just then Budge was hard pressed. Workhouse matron teaching had taught her that when she went out to service it would be rude to stare at people when they were eating; and now there was the pouring out of tea, and spreading of butter, and cutting of bread and bacon going on in a way that was perfectly maddening to a hungry young stomach, especially if that stomach happened to be large, and its owner growing.

Budge’s stomach was large, and Budge was growing, so she was hard pressed: and do what she would, she could not keep her eyes on the baby, for, by a kind of attraction, they would wander to the tea-table, and that loaf upon which Tom Morrison was spreading a thick coating of yellow butter, prior to hacking off a slice.

Poor Budge’s eyes dilated with wonder and joy as, when the slice was cut off, nearly two inches thick, Tom stuck his knife into it, and held the mass out to her, with —

“Here, lass, you look hungry. Tuck that away.”

Budge would have made a bob, but doing so would have thrown the baby on the floor; so she contented herself with saying “Thanky, sir,” and proceeded to make semicircles round the edge of the slice, and to drop crumbs on the baby’s face.

“Well, lass,” said Tom, as Polly handed him his great cup of tea, “about the christening? When’s it to be?”

“On Sunday, Tom, and that’s what I wanted to tell you – it’s my surprise.”

“What’s a surprise?”

“Why, about the godmothers, dear. Why, I declare,” she pouted, “you don’t seem to mind a bit.”

“Oh, but I do,” he said, “only I’m so hungry. Well, what about the godmothers?”

“Why, Miss Julia and Miss Cynthia have promised to stand. Isn’t it grand?”

“Grand? Oh, I don’t know.”

“Tom!”

“Well, I suppose it is grand, but I don’t know. It’s all right if they like it. But about poor Jock?”

“Oh, that won’t make any difference, dear. They’ve promised, and I know they won’t go back. They’ll be the two godmothers, and you the godfather.”

“Of course,” cried Tom, eating away; “two godmothers and a godfather, eh, lass? that’s right, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Tom,” said the little woman, eagerly attending to her husband’s wants, “and two godfathers and a godmother if it’s a boy.”

“It’ll be a grand christening, won’t it, Polly?” said Tom.

"Oh, no, dear. Miss Julia and Miss Cynthia are the dearest and best of girls, and they have no pride. Miss Julia talked to me the other day just like a friend."

"I say," cried Tom, eagerly.

"What, dear?"

"Why not do the thing in style while we're about it. What do you say to asking young Mr Cyril to be godfather?"

If Tom Morrison had looked up then he would have been startled at the livid look in his young wife's face, but he was too intent upon his tea, and Polly recovered herself and said —

"Oh, no, dear, that would not do, and the young ladies would not like it. Look here, Tom."

Polly tripped to a basket, from which she produced a white cloak and hood, trimmed with swan's-down; and these she held up before her husband, flushed and excited, as, in her girlish way, she wondered whether he would like them.

Budge left off eating, and wished for a white dress on the spot, trimmed with silk braid, like that.

"Say," said Tom, thickly, speaking with his mouth full, "they're fine, arn't they? — cost a lot o' money."

"No," said Polly, gleefully, "they cost nothing, Tom. Miss Julia made me a present of the stuff, and I made them."

"Did you, though?" he said, looking at her little fingers, admiringly. "You're a clever girl, Polly; but I often wonder how it was you came to take up with a rough chap like me."

Polly looked up in his steady, honest eyes, and rested one hand upon his, and gazed lovingly at him, as he went on —

"My old woman said it was because I'd got a cottage, and an acre of land of my own."

"Did she say so, Tom?"

"Yes," he said, taking her hand, patting it, and gazing up in the pretty rustic face he called his own; "but I told her you were a silly little girl, who would have me if I'd got a cottage and an acre less than nothing to call my own."

"And you told the truth, Tom, dear," she whispered. "Tom, you make me so happy in believing in me like this."

"Tut, tut, my girl. I'm not clever; but I knew you."

"And married me without anything, only enough to buy my wedding dress and a little furniture."

"D'yer call that nothing?" said the hearty, Saxon-faced young fellow, pointing to the baby; "because I don't. And I say, Polly, dear," he whispered, archly, "perhaps that's only the thin end of the wedge."

"Hush, Tom, for shame!" she said, trying to frown, and pointing to Budge; while he took a tremendous bite of bread and bacon, and chuckled hugely at his joke.

"The old lady used to have it that you were too fine for me, Polly, and would have been setting your cap at one of the young gentlemen at the rectory when you was abroad with them."

"Tom!" she panted, as his words seemed to stab her, and she ran out of the room.

"Why, Polly, Polly," he cried, following her and holding her to his breast, "what a touchy little thing thou art since baby came! Why, as if I didn't know that ever since you were so high you were my little sweetheart, and liked great rough me better than the finest gentleman as ever walked. There, there, there! I was a great lout to talk like that to thee. Come, wipe thy eyes."

"I can't bear it, Tom, if you talk like that," she sobbed, smiling at him through her tears. "There, it's all over now."

There was a little cold shiver at Polly Morrison's breast, though, all the same, and it kept returning as she sat there over her work that evening, rocking the cradle with one foot, and wondering whether she could gain strength enough to tell her husband all about Cyril Mallow, and the old days at Dinan.

But no, she could not, and they discussed, as Tom smoked his pipe, the state of affairs at the rectory; how Mrs Mallow remained as great an invalid as ever, and how they seemed to spare no expense, although people had said they went abroad because they had grown so poor.

"Folk seem strange and sore against parson," said Tom at last.

"Then it's very cruel of them, for master is a real good man," cried Polly.

"They don't like it about owd Sammy Warmoth. They say he killed him," said Tom, between the puffs of his pipe.

"Such nonsense!" cried Polly; "and him ninety-three."

"Then they are taking sides against him for wanting to get rid of Humphrey Bone."

"And more shame for them," cried Polly, indignantly.

"Well, I don't know," said Tom; "I've rather a liking for old Humphrey. He taught me."

"He's a nasty wicked old man," cried Polly. "He tried to kiss me one day when he was tipsy."

"He did?" cried Tom, breaking his pipe in the angry rush that seemed to come over him.

"Yes, Tom, and I boxed his ears," said the little woman, shivering again, for the fit of jealous anger did not escape her searching eyes.

"That's right, lass. I'm dead on for a new master now."

Then a discussion arose as to the baby's name, Tom wanting it to be called after his wife, who was set upon Julia, and she carried the day.

"There," said Tom, "if anybody had told me a couple of years ago that any bit of a thing of a girl was going to wheedle me, and twist me round her finger, and do what she liked with me, I should have told him he didn't know what he was talking about."

"And you don't mind, Tom, dear?"

"No," he said, smiling, "I don't mind, if it pleases thee, my lass."

"And it does, dear, very, very much," she said, kissing him.

But Polly Morrison did not feel happy, and several times that night there was the little shiver of dread at her heart, and she wished she could tell Tom all.

Part 1, Chapter VIII.

The Black Shadow

It was, as Julia Mallow said, a very pretty baby, that of Polly Morrison and her husband, when she spoke to her invalid mother, lying so patiently passive upon the couch in her own room; but that weak little morsel of humanity had a part to play in the troubles of the Rev. Eli Mallow's life. For hardly had the tiny babe sent to the care of Tom Morrison and his young wife begun to smile upon them, than it was taken suddenly ill.

No childish ailment this, brought on by careless attendance; but the cold grey hand of death was laid upon the fragile form, its little eyes – erst so bright and blue – sunken, and the tiny nose pinched and blue.

Julia and Cynthia Mallow had been in to see her, and found the little woman prostrate with grief, and then hurried to the town for medical advice, though that of fifty doctors would have been in vain.

"Pray, pray, Tom, go and ask Budge not to cry," sobbed Polly, as her husband knelt at her side; for ever and again, from below, came a long, dismal cry, that almost resembled the howl of a dog in a state of suffering.

Tom Morrison rose in a heavy, dull way, and slowly descended the stairs, returning in a minute to resume his place beside his wife, turning his eyes to hers, as they looked up to him in mute agony.

They could not speak, but they read each other's hearts, and knew full well that nothing could be done; that the tiny life that had been given to them to have in charge was passing fast away – so fast, and yet so gently that neither knew it had gone till, alarmed by the slow dilation of the little eyes, and their fixed and determinate look, Polly bent over the waxen form in eager fear, caught it tightly to her breast, and then sank back in her chair, crying —

"Tom, Tom, God has taken it away!" An hour later, husband and wife were sitting hand in hand by the little couch on which their darling lay, so still and cold, its tiny face seeming restful, free from pain, and almost wearing a smile, while on either hand, and covering its breast, were the best of the simple, homely flowers the garden could produce.

There was a heavy, blank look upon the parents' faces; for even then they could not realise their loss. It was so sudden, seemed so strange; and from time to time Polly got softly up, to lean down and hold her cheek close to the little parted lips, to make sure that the infant did not breathe; but there was no sign, and when she pressed her lips to the white forehead, it was to find it cold as ice.

Budge had been silent for some time, going about the house on tiptoe, and, like those above, too stunned to work; but her homely mind was busy for a way to show her sympathy, and this she did by making and taking up on the little tray two steaming cups of tea, each flanked by a goodly slice.

Poor Budge! she had not calculated her strength aright; for on softly entering the room, and setting down the tray, she turned her head, and saw the simple flower-strewn bier, gave a long, loving look, and then, sinking on her knees, with her hands to her eyes, burst forth into a wild and passionate wail.

It was even ludicrous, but it touched the hearts of those who heard; for with it came the passionate yearning of the desolate child for the love and sympathy it had never known, but for which its young heart had hungered so long. It told of nights of misery, and a desire for a something it felt it ought to possess but had never had, as now, raising her hands, she wailed forth her prayer —

"Oh, please, God, let me die instead, let me die instead."

As she finished, there was another wild burst of hysterical sobbing, and Polly had flung herself in the child's arms, clinging to her, kissing her passionately, as she cried —

"Oh, Budge, my poor girl! Oh, Budge, you'll break my heart!"

Tom Morrison could bear no more, but stumbled heavily from the room, down-stairs, and out into his garden, where daybreak found him sitting, with his face buried in his hands, on the bit of rustic seat beneath the old weeping willow that grew in the corner, with its roots washed by the river that formed one of the boundaries of the little freehold.

The sun was rising gloriously, and the east was one sheet of gold and orange damask, shot with sapphire, as the sturdy workman rose.

"I must be a man over it – a man," he faltered, "for her sake." And he slowly strode into the house, and up-stairs, to find his wife kneeling where he had left her, wakeful and watching, with poor Budge fast asleep, with her head upon Polly's lap, and her two roughened hands holding one of those of her mistress beneath her cheek.

The wheelwright walked up to the sleeping babe, and kissed it; then, gently taking Budge's head, he placed it upon a pillow from the bed; while, lastly, he raised poor Polly as though she had been a child, kissed her cold lips, and laid her down, covering her with the clothes, and holding one of her hands, as he bade her sleep; and she obeyed, that is to say, she closed her heavy eyes.

In the course of the morning, stern, crotchety old Vinnicombe, the Lawford doctor, sought out the stricken father, finding that he had not been to his workshop, but was down his garden, where, after a few preliminaries, he broke his news.

"What?" he said, starting. "There, sir, I'm dazed like now; please, say it again."

"I'm very sorry, Morrison – very," said the doctor, "for I respect you greatly, and it must be a great grief to your poor little wife; but I have seen him myself, as I did about Warner's child, and he is very much cut up about it; but as to moving him, he is like iron."

"I can't quite understand it, sir," said Tom, flushing. "Do you mean to say, sir, that parson won't bury the child?"

"Well, it is like this, Morrison," said the doctor, quietly, "he is a rigid disciplinarian – a man of High Church views, and he says it is impossible for him to read the Burial Service over a child that was not a Christian."

"That was not a Christian?" said Tom slowly.

"He says he condoles with you, and is very sorry; that the poor little thing can be buried in the unconsecrated part of the churchyard; but he can grant no more."

"Doctor," cried the wheelwright, fiercely, "I don't be – There, sir, I beg your pardon," he continued, holding out his rough hand; "but it seems too hard to believe that any one could speak like this. The poor little thing couldn't help it, sir; and we should have had it done next Sunday. Why, sir, the poor girl was only showing me the little – don't take notice o' me, sir, please; I'm like a great girl now."

As he spoke, he sank down upon an upturned box, and, covering his face with his hands, remained silent; but with his heaving shoulders telling the story of his bitter emotion.

"Be a man, Morrison – be a man," said the doctor, kindly, as he laid his hand upon the stricken fellow's shoulder.

"Yes, doctor," he said, rising and dashing away the signs of his grief – "this is very childish, sir; but it's a bit upset me, and now this news you bring me seems to make it worse. I'll go up and see parson. He won't refuse when he knows all."

"Yes, go up and see him," said the doctor, kindly. "Can I do anything for you?"

"No, sir, thanky," said the wheelwright, meekly; "you couldn't do what I wanted, sir – save that poor little thing's life. There's nothing more."

"No," said the doctor; "our profession is powerless in such a case. The child was so young and tender that –"

"Don't say any more, sir, please," said Morrison, with his lip quivering. And then he turned away from the house, so as to avoid Biggins the carpenter, who had just come in at the garden gate,

and walked on tiptoe along the gravel walk, up to the door, where he was met by a neighbour, who led him up-stairs.

Biggins, the Lawford carpenter, was the newly-appointed sexton of the church, and between him and Tom Morrison there was supposed to exist a bitter hatred, because Biggins the carpenter had once undertaken to make a wheelbarrow for the rectory garden, and Morrison had made a coffin for one of the Searby children who died of a fit of measles.

The feud seemed to be a bitter one, for when he came out of the cottage five minutes later, he turned down the garden, seeing which, the doctor shook hands with Morrison, and at parting said —
“Let me give you something to do you good, Tom.”

“What, sir, doctor’s stuff?” said the wheelwright, with a look of wonder. “I want no physic.”

“Yes, you do,” said the doctor, smiling, as he laid the silver knob of his stick on the stout fellow’s breast — “yes, you do. I can minister to a mind diseased as well as to a body. Look here, my lad, you must bear your suffering like a man; so, now go and do this — ”

Tom made an impatient movement to go, but the doctor stayed him.

“There is nothing like work at such a time as this,” he said. “Go and see the parson, and then set to and work harder than ever you worked before in your life. It will give you ease.”

“You’re right, Mr Vinnicombe, you’re right,” said Tom, bluntly. “Thanky, sir — thanky. Good-bye.”

As the doctor walked out of the gate, Biggins the carpenter, a hard-faced man, who emitted a strong odour of glue from his garments, walked up, tucking a piece of sandpaper upon which he had been writing, and his square carpenter’s pencil, that he had pointed with four chops of his chisel before starting, into one of his pockets.

“Thy savoy cabbages look well, neighbour,” he said quietly, as being the most sympathetic thing he could think of at the moment. Then he held out his hand, shook the other’s warmly, without a word, and then stood by him, breathing heavily, and looking down at the ground.

Five minutes passed like this, without a word on either side, Morrison manifesting no impatience, and Biggins showing no disposition to go; for it was his way of showing sympathy to a friend in distress, and Morrison felt it so to be, and thanked him in his heart.

At last the carpenter, who was used to funerals, and who was now next door to being clerk, heaved a heavy sigh, stooped down, picked a strand from the grass plot, and held it at arm’s length, looking at it fixedly for a minute or so, before saying, huskily —

“All flesh is grass, Tom Morrison — flowers of the field — cut down — withered. Amen.”

He said it in a slow, measured way, and with a nasal twang, the last word closing his disconnected speech after quite an interval; and then the two men stood together for some minutes in silence.

At last Biggins spoke again, but without raising his eyes, looking down at the garden path, as if for a place to plant the bent he had broken from its roots.

“Poor wife! She’s terribly cut up, Tom.”

There was another interval of silence, and then Biggins said, as if to himself, and still gazing at the path —

“White cloth, and silver breastplate and nails?”

There was another pause, and then Tom said in a weary, dull way —

“As if it was one of your own, my lad — as if it was one of your own.”

“Good-bye, Tom Morrison — good-bye, lad,” said Biggins, holding out his hand once more, but with his back half turned to his neighbour “Good-bye,” said Tom, squeezing the honest, hard fist held out to him in a manly grip; and, with a sigh, Biggins was turning off, when a word from the wheelwright arrested him. “Come down here, lad, away from the house,” said Tom, huskily.

Biggins looked up now, his heavy face lighting up. Tom Morrison wanted him to do something for him. He could do that, if he could not show sympathy.

They walked down the neatly-kept garden, till they stood under the willow tree, where, after a few minutes' silence, Tom Morrison said huskily —

"They've made you saxon now, haven't they, Joe?"

"Yes, and ought to be clerk as well, but it don't seem like being saxon in these newfangled days, when the ground's cut from under a man, and there's no chance of putting in a simple, honest amen anywhere. Ah, I don't know what poor, dear old parson would have said to see the change. He'd think we'd all gone over to Popery."

Tom waited till his friend, now suddenly grown voluble, had ceased.

"Joe Biggins," he said, "didst ever know old parson — God bless him! — to refuse to bury any one out of the place because — because they wasn't baptised?"

"Never," said Biggins — "never," energetically.

"He never had such a case, p'raps," said Tom.

"Oh, but he did," said Biggins — "even in my time. Why, there was poor Lizzy Baker's child. You knew Sam Baker?"

Tom nodded.

"Well, when their little one died it hadn't been christened, I know. I remember father talking about it while he made the coffin, and I recollect it so well because it was the first coffin I ever put the nails in all by myself. Let's see, that's a good fifteen year ago now, Tom, that it be."

"And he buried it?"

"To be sure he did. Why, I remember as well as if it had been yesterday. He says to my father, he says, 'I never like to be too partic'lar about these baptismal matters. It's not 'cording to church law, but I couldn't put such a sorrow on the poor father and mother as to refuse the service, and I hope I'm right.'"

"He said so?" whispered the wheelwright, half turning away his face.

"I can't as a man, Tom, sweer to the zact words," said the carpenter, earnestly; "but I'll sweer as they meant all that, long ago as it is."

"God bless him!" muttered Tom, with his lower lip working.

"Old parson wasn't particular about those sort o' things. Don't you remember about poor old Dick Granger? To be sure — yes — we were boys then, and went to Humphrey Bone. Ay, and what a rage he do wax in again parson now, toe be sewer. I recklect father talking about it. You remember, sewerly, old Granger went off his head, and drowned himself in Cook's mill dam, and the jury said it was *felo de se*; and Johnson up at the Red Cow was foreman, and wanted him to be buried at the cross roads, with a stake druv through his heart. Why, it's all come back now. I recklect it all; how old parson went to the poor old widow, and talked to her; and there was a big funeral. Everybody went to see poor old Granger buried in the churchyard; and he was buried all regular, and parson preached the next Sunday about brotherly love and Christian charity. Why, Tom, you and I was about seventeen then. How time do go!"

"Yes — I remember," said the wheelwright, bowing his head.

"Ah," said Biggins, "those were the days, Tom; even if one did get to know some of poor old parson's sarmons. We sang the old psalms and hymns then, and Miss Jane used to practise twice a week with us boys at the little organ that old Davy, Franklin's gardener, used to turn the handle on. There was no choral sarvice then, and white gowns for the children. Ah, a clerk's place was worth having then. It wasn't many on 'em as could roll out *Amen* like poor old Sammy Warmoth."

"Joe Biggins," said the wheelwright, checking the flood of recollections — "doctor says Rev. Mallow won't — won't —"

"Won't bury the little one?" Tom's voice failed him, and he nodded shortly.

"Phew!"

Biggins gave a low, sibilant whistle. Then, flushing up, he exclaimed —

“Damn him! No – I don’t mean that. Lord forgive me for speaking so of a parson. But, I say, Tom – oh, no, he can’t mean it, lad. Tell you what, he’s a queer one, and as proud as a peacock, and his boys arn’t what they should be. You needn’t tell him what I say, for I don’t want to offend nobody, that’s my motter through life; but parson’s a parson, and he’s bound to practise what he preaches. You go and see him.”

“I mean to.”

“Shall I go with thee, lad?”

“No. I’ll go alone.”

“P’raps you’d better, lad. If he makes any bones about it, ask him as a favour – don’t be hot with him, Tom, but a bit humble. I know thee don’t like to ask favours of any man; but do’t for her sake, Tom – indoors.”

Biggins pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, and the wheelwright nodded.

“When is the best time to see him?” said Tom, after a few moments’ silence.

“Well, it’s no good to go till ’bout two o’clock, after his lunch. He won’t see me, even on parish matters, in the morning.”

The wheelwright nodded, and, without another word, Biggins went away, passing the cottage, with its drawn-down blinds, on tiptoe, and shaking his fist at a boy who was whistling as he went along the road.

Part 1, Chapter IX. Orthodox to a Degree

The Rev. Lawrence Paulby looked rather aghast at the changes Mr Mallow was effecting in the church, and sighed as he thought of the heart-burnings that were ever on the increase; but he said nothing, only went on with his daily routine of work, and did his best, to use his own words, “for everybody’s sake.”

Joe Biggins, as we have learned, had succeeded old Sammy Warmoth as far as a successor was wanted, and he now, in a most sheepish manner, looking appealingly at the Curate, wandered about the church as a verger, in a long black gown, and carrying a white wand, to his very great disgust and the amusement of the schoolboys, several of whom had tested its quality. The little old organ had been brought down from the loft where the singers used to sit, and placed in the chancel, where there was no room for it, so a kind of arched cupboard had been built expressly to contain it; and where the Rector’s and churchwardens’ families used to sit, close up by the communion rails, was now occupied by the surpliced choir, who weekly attempted a very bad imitation of a cathedral service. They chanted all the psalms to the Gregorian tones, item, the responses and the amens; and beginning always very flat, they gradually grew worse and worse, till, towards the close of the service, they would be singing a long way on towards a semitone beneath the organ, which always gave a toot to pitch the key for the Rector or Curate to start in intoning his part.

The very first Sunday that this was tried, Mr Lawrence Paulby broke out into a vexatious perspiration that made his head shine; for in spite of all his practice at the schoolroom, no matter how he tried to draw their attention to the coming task, dwelling as he did upon such words at the end of a prayer as “Be with us all – ever – m – o – r – e,” the chanted “Amen,” delivered out of tune by the inattentive young surpliced choir, aided and abetted by the schoolmaster Bone’s bass, was something so shocking that, if it had been anything but a sacred service, it might have been called a burlesque.

It did not matter whether he was himself intoning, or listening to Mr Mallow’s rich deep voice, the Curate always sat in agony lest any one should laugh, a horror that he could not contemplate without a shudder, and he wished in his heart that the Rector would take it into his head to go again.

Parish business took the Curate over to the rectory on the morning succeeding the death of Tom Morrison’s little one. He had been up to town, and returned only late the past night, the result being that he had not heard of the wheelwright’s trouble, or he would at once have called.

He was a very nervous man, and the probabilities were that had he known what was about to happen, he would have stayed away. He had expected to be asked to stay lunch, and he had stayed. Then conversation had ensued on the forthcoming visitation of the bishop of the diocese. Cyril Mallow had made two or three remarks evidently intended to “chaff the Curate,” as he would have termed it, and to provoke a laugh from his sisters; but in neither case was he successful, and as soon as lunch was over, the Rector rose and led the way to his study, where he waved his hand towards a chair.

The Curate had hardly taken his seat, feeling rather oppressed at his principal’s grand surroundings as contrasted with his own modest apartments at the old rectory, when the butler entered softly to announce that the wheelwright wished to see him.

The Curate rose to leave.

“No, no, sit still,” said the Rector. “That will do, Edwards; I will ring,” and the butler retired.

“I am glad you are here, Paulby; I was going to speak upon this business. You have heard of it, I suppose?”

“Heard? Of what?” said the Curate.

“Morrison’s child is dead,” said the Rector.

"The baby! God bless me!" ejaculated the Curate. "I beg your pardon, Mr Mallow," he continued, blushing like a girl. "It was so shocking. I was so surprised."

The Rector bowed gravely, and went and stood with his back to the fireplace, and rang.

"You can show Mr Morrison in, Edwards," said the Rector, and poor Tom Morrison was ushered in a few moments later, to stand bowing as the door was closed; but in no servile way, for the sturdy British yeoman was stamped in his careworn face, and he was one of the old stock of which England has always felt so proud.

The Rector bowed coldly, and pointed to a seat – standing, however, himself behind his writing-table.

"Ah, Morrison," exclaimed the Curate, after an apologetic glance at the Rector, "I cannot tell you how I am shocked at this news. I did not know of it this morning, or I would have come down."

He held out his hand to the visitor as he spoke, an act Mr Mallow forgot, and it was gratefully pressed.

Then feeling that he was not at home, Mr Paulby coughed, and resumed his seat.

"I've come, sir," said the wheelwright, "about a little business."

He hesitated, and glanced at Mr Paulby as if he did not wish to speak before him.

"I think, sir," said the Curate, respectfully, "Mr Morrison wishes to speak to you in private."

"I believe it is on a church question," said the Rector, sternly. "Mr Morrison, you need not be afraid to speak before him."

"I'm not, sir, on my account," said the wheelwright, bluntly. "I was thinking of you, sir."

"What you have to say can be said before Mr Paulby. It would be affectation on my part not to own that I know the object of your visit."

"Well, sir, then, to be plain," said Tom, clearing his throat, but speaking very humbly, "I thought I should like to know, sir, whether what I heard from doctor was true."

"First let me say, Mr Morrison, that I heard with deep sorrow of the affliction that has befallen you. I am very, very sorry –"

"Thank you, sir, thank you," said Tom, with his under lip working.

"I say I am sorry that the chastening hand of the Lord has been laid upon you so heavily. But you must remember that it is not for us to question these chastisements. Whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth. I hope your wife seeks for consolation in prayer."

"Yes, sir, I know all that – thank you, sir – yes, sir – poor lass! – yes," he said, or rather murmured, with his lower lip quivering at the allusion to his wife.

The Curate fidgeted in his chair, and kept changing the crossing of his knees, his fingers moving uneasily, as if they longed to go and lay themselves on the poor fellow's shoulder while their owner said a few kindly words.

"I intend to call upon your wife this afternoon," continued the Rector.

"No, sir – thank you, sir – please, don't – at least not yet," said Tom. "The poor girl is so broken down, she could not bear it."

"The more need for me to come, Mr Morrison," said the Rector, with a sad smile. Then, seizing the opportunity to deliver the first thrust after all his fencing, he continued, reproachfully, "I am sorry I did not know, Morrison, how ill your infant was. You should have sent to me; it was your duty."

"Yes, sir, I suppose it was," said the wheelwright, humbly. "But, gentlemen," he continued, looking from one to the other, "I was in such trouble – my poor wife – we thought of nothing but saving the poor child's life."

"There is a life beyond the grave, Thomas Morrison," said the Rector, whose voice grew firmer as he found that his visitor seemed awed at what he said. "The duty of man is to think of that before the world. I am sorry that you and your wife – such respectable, well-educated people – should have put off your duty to your offspring so long, neglecting it even at the very last, when I was but a few hundred yards from your door. I am grieved, deeply grieved. It has been to me a terrible shock, while

you and your wife have incurred an awful responsibility by wilfully excluding your first-born from the pale of Christ's Church."

The stricken man looked from one to the other – the tall, portly, calm clergyman, standing behind his table, with one hand resting upon a large open book, the other upon his heart, his eyes half closed, his face stern and composed, and his words falling, when he spoke, in measured cadence, as if they had been studied for the time.

The Curate uncrossed his legs, and set his knees very wide apart, resting his elbows upon them, and joining his fingers very accurately, as he bent down his head, till Tom Morrison could see nothing but his broad, bald, shining crown.

"Not wilfully, sir – not wilfully," said the wheelwright, appealingly, and his voice grew very husky. "The poor girl, sir, had set her mind – on the christening – Mr Paulby was to do it, sir, as he married us – next Sunday; and now – "

The poor fellow's voice shook, and his face grew convulsed for a moment; but he clenched his fists, set his teeth, and fought hard to control his grief. The Curate drew a long breath and bent down lower.

"But, sir," said Morrison, after a few moments' pause, during which the library, with its rows of books, looked dim and misty, while the clergyman before him stood as if of marble – "but, sir, I know I deserve it – and I suppose I have neglected my duty; but the poor innocent little one – don't say as it's true that you won't bury it in the churchyard."

The Rector sighed and coughed vaguely. Then, in a low, sad voice, he said —

"Morrison, I am grieved – deeply grieved and mine is a most painful duty to perform; but I stand here the spiritual head of this parish, a lowly servant of Christ's Church, and I must obey her laws."

"But, sir," said Tom, "that tiny child, so innocent and young – you couldn't be doing wrong. I beg your pardon, sir, I'm an ignorant man, but don't – pray, don't say you won't bury it."

"Mr Morrison, you are not an ignorant man," said the Rector, sternly. "You know the laws of the Church; you know your duty to that unfortunate child – that you have wilfully excluded it from the fold of Christ's flock. I cannot, will not, disobey those laws in departing from my duty as a clergyman."

The Curate moved his fingers about an inch apart, and then rejoined them, in time to a deep sigh, but he did not raise his head; while Tom Morrison stood, with brow contracted, evidently stricken by some powerful emotion which he was struggling to master; and at last he did, speaking calmly and with deep pathos in his appealing voice.

"Sir, I am a man, and rough, and able to fight hard and bear trouble; but I have a wife who loved, almost worshipped – "

"Set not your affections upon things on earth," said the Rector, in a low, stern voice, as if in warning to himself.

Tom paused a few moments, till the speaker had finished, and then he went on —

"She almost worshipped that child – I ask you humbly, sir, for her sake, don't say no. At a time like this she is low, and weak, and ill. Parson, if you say no, it will go nigh to break her heart."

"Morrison," said the Rector, slowly, with his eyes still half closed – "as a man and a fellow-Christian, I sympathise with you deeply. I am more grieved than I can express. By your neglect you have thrown upon me a painful duty. The fold was open – always open – from the day of its birth for the reception of your poor lamb, but in your worldliness you turned your back upon it till it was too late. I say it with bitter sorrow – too late. Let this be a lesson to you both for life. It is a hard lesson, but you must bear it. I cannot do what you ask."

The wheelwright stood with the veins in his forehead swelling, and his clenched fists trembled with the struggle that was going on within his breast; but the face of his sorrowing wife seemed to rise before him, and he gained the mastery once more, and turned to the silent Curate.

"Mr Paulby, sir, you married Mary and me, and, we seem to know you here, sir, as our parson – "

The Rev. Eli winced as he heard the emphasis on the *you*.

"Please help me, sir," continued Morrison, appealingly; "you've known me many years, and I hope you don't think I'd be the man to wilfully refuse to do my duty. Will you say a word for me, sir? You understand these things more than me."

The Curate raised his head sharply, and as his eyes met those of the suffering man, they were so full of sympathy, that the look was like balm to the poor fellow, and he took heart of grace.

"I will, Morrison – I will," said he, huskily; and he turned to his brother clergyman.

"Mr Mallow," he said, gently – and there was as much appeal in his voice as in that of the suppliant before them – "forgive me for interfering between you and one of your parishioners, but I do it in no meddling spirit, only as a servant of our Great Master, when I ask you whether in such a case as this the Church would wish us to adhere so strictly to those laws made for our guidance so many years ago. I think you might – nay, as a Christian clergyman, I think you should – accede to our suffering brothers prayer."

"God bless you, sir, for this!" ejaculated Morrison, in a broken voice.

The Rector turned slowly round, and his eyes opened widely now as they fixed themselves upon the countenance of his curate.

For a few moments he did not speak, but panted as if his feelings were too much for him. Then, in a voice faltering from emotion, he exclaimed —

"Mr Paulby, you astound me. You, whom I received here with testimonials that were unimpeachable, or I should not have trusted you as I have, – you, a priest of the Church of England, to counsel me to go in direct opposition to her laws!"

"I ask you, sir," said the Curate, gently, "to perform, at a suffering father's prayer, the last duties to the dead, over the body of an innocent babe, freshly come from its Maker's hands, freshly there returned."

"Sir," exclaimed the Rector, and there was indignation now in his words, "well may the enemies of the Church triumph and point to its decadence, when there are those within the fold who openly, and in the presence of back sliders, counsel their brother priests to disobey the sacred canons of her laws. I feel sure, however, that you have been led away by your feelings, or you would not have spoken so."

"Yes," said the Curate, sadly. "I was led away by my feelings."

"I knew you were, sir," said the Rector, sternly. "Sir, it was time that a party should arise in the Church, ready and strong, to repair the broken gaps in the hedges, and to protect the sheep. I grieve to find that I have been away too long. I thought, sir, you would have been ready to stand fast in the faith, when assaulted by the worldly-minded who would lead men astray; ready to –"

"Forget the dictates of humanity, for the hard and fast laws made by men who lived in the days of persecution, and before the benignant, civilising spread of education had made men to know more fully the meaning of brotherly love."

"Sir –"

"I beg your pardon, Mr Mallow," said the Curate, whose face was now flushed. "You seem to forget that we do not live now in the days of the faggot and the stake. But, there," he said, gently, "I think you will accede to the wishes of my poor friend."

"Sir," said the Rector, "I can only repeat that I am grieved beyond measure at this expression of opinion. What you ask of me is impossible."

The wheelwright had listened with growing indignation to these words on either side, and now, flushed and excited, he spoke out.

"You will not do this, then, sir?" he said, hoarsely.

"You have had my answer, Mr Morrison," was the cold reply, and he walked towards the bell.

"Stop, sir – a minute," exclaimed Morrison, panting. "You called me an educated man time back?"

The Rector bowed coldly.

"You're not right about that, sir; but I have read a little, and so as to behave as a decent man, as I thought, next Sunday, I read through the christening service, and what it says about children who have been baptised dying before they sin being certain to be saved."

"That is quite right," said the Rector, gravely; and he now seemed to ignore the Curate's presence.

"And do you take upon yourself to say, sir, that, as my child was not baptised, it goes to – the bad place?"

"I am not disposed to enter into a controversy with you. My duty is to obey the canons of the Church. 'He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved: he that believeth not shall be damned,'" he added, only to himself, but heard by the others.

"How could that tender child believe?" said Morrison, fiercely.

There was no reply.

"Mr Mallow, sir," exclaimed Morrison, difference of grade forgotten in his excitement, "you refuse my child Christian burial, and you speak those dreadful words. I say, sir, do you wish me to believe that my poor, tender infant, fresh given to us by God, has gone to everlasting punishment for what it could not help – my neglect, as you call it?"

"I have told you that I cannot enter into a controversy with you; these are matters such as you cannot understand."

"Then I swear – " roared Morrison.

"Stop!" exclaimed the Curate. "Thomas Morrison, my good friend, you are angry and excited now, and will be saying words that, when cooler, you may repent."

"This is little better than an outrage," said the Rector, in whose cheeks two angry spots now glowed.

"Allow me to speak, sir," said the Curate, firmly. "I speak on behalf of that fold whose fences you accused me of neglecting."

The Rector turned upon him wonderingly, while the wrath of the wheelwright was quelled by the calm, stern words of the little man who now stood before them.

"Morrison," he continued, "I have been a clergyman many years, and, God helping me, it has been my earnest work to try and convince my people of the love and tenderness of the Father of all for His children. Whenever a dogma of the Church has been likely to seem harsh to our present day ideas, I have let it rest, knowing how much there is of that which is just and good in our grand old religion. Mr Mallow, as your subordinate, sir, I may seem presumptuous. You are an older man than I, and perhaps a wiser, but I ask you, sir, with no irreverent feeling, whether, if it were possible that He who said, 'Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not,' were holding your position here – the God as man and teacher of the people of this parish – He would act as you are acting? Would He not deal with such a canon as He did with the teachings of the Pharisees? Why, sir, He took little children into His arms, and blessed them, and said, 'Of such is the kingdom of heaven.'"

He paused for a moment, while the Rector stood calm, stern, and cold, with his eyes once more half closed, covered in his cold church armour, and a pitying smile of contempt upon his lip; while Morrison stayed, angry still, but with quivering lip, and his hand upon the door.

A dead silence fell upon the little group when Mr Paulby had done speaking, and both the Curate and Tom Morrison watched the Rector, expecting him to make some reply, but none came.

At last the silence was broken by the wheelwright, out of whose voice every tinge of anger had now gone, and he spoke in tones which sounded deep, and trembled exceedingly at first, but gained strength as he went on: —

"Mr Paulby, sir," he said, "I thank you. I can't say all I feel, sir, but my poor wife and I thank you with all our hearts for what you've just said for us. I'm only a poor ignorant man, sir, but if I couldn't feel that what you've said is just and true, I should be ready to do what so many here have

done – go to the chapel. That wouldn't be like the Morrisons though, sir. We've been church-folk, sir, for a couple of hundred years, and if you go round the churchyard, sir, you will see stone after stone marked with the name of Morrison, sir; some just worn out with age, and others growing plainer, till you come to that new one out by the big tower, where my poor old father was laid five years ago. There's generations and generations of my people, sir, lying sleeping there – the whole family of the Morrisons, sir, save them as left their bones in foreign lands, or were sunk in the deep seas, sir, fighting for their country. And now my little one is to be kept out. Oh, parson, it's too bad, and you'll repent all this. Mr Paulby, sir, God bless you for your words. Good-bye!"

He strode out of the room, and the two clergymen stood listening to his heavy feet as he crossed the hall and passed out of the house. For a few minutes neither spoke.

At length the Curate broke the silence. The fire had gone out of his voice, and the light from his eye, as he said in a low voice —

"Mr Mallow, I am very, very sorry that this should have occurred."

"And at a time when I am fighting so hard to win these erring people to a better way, Mr Paulby," said the Rector, sternly.

"And I have tried so hard too, Mr Mallow," said the Curate, plaintively. "When they all seem bent on going to one or the other of the chapels here."

"I do not wonder, sir," said the Rector, "but I do wonder that my own curate should turn against me."

"No, do; not turn against you, sir. I wished to help."

"Mr Paulby, I regret it much, but I shall be obliged to ask you to resign."

"No, no, sir; I beg you will not," cried the Curate, excitedly. "I have grown to love the people here, and —"

"Mr Paulby," said the Rector, "our opinions upon the duties of a priest are opposite. You will excuse me – I wish to be alone."

The Curate stood for a moment or two with his hand extended, then he let it fall to his side.

"As you will, sir," he said, sadly. "But there, you will think about this. Let me come over tomorrow, and see you. Will you be at home? Let us talk the matter over."

No response.

"I spoke hotly, perhaps, sir. I ought not to have done so, but I was moved. Forgive me if I was wrong – let us part friends."

Still no reply.

"I will leave you now, as you wish it, sir. Drop me a line, and send it by one of the school-children, and I will come over and see you."

The Rector might have been made of stone as he stood there motionless, till, with a heavy sigh, his visitor slowly left the room, and trudged across the fields to his gloomy little room in the old, half-buried rectory.

Part 1, Chapter X.

Another Trouble for Discussion

That night, just at dark, Joe Biggins walked on tiptoe along the little gravel walk, bearing something beneath his arm; and, as he tapped at the door, the wheelwright rose and led his sobbing wife to an inner room, where he held her tenderly, with her head resting upon his breast, as they stood listening to the opening door, the creaking stairs, and the smothered, heavy step in the bedroom overhead. Then, after a few minutes, there was the sound of descending footsteps, the creaking of the cottage stairs, a whisper or two in the little entry, the closing door, the step upon the gravel, and all was still.

The sad hours glided by in the little darkened house, till Saturday arrived. There had been gossip enough in the place, and endless messages, fraught with good feeling, had come to the stricken couple from far and near; but there had been no sign from the rectory, and it was the general belief that the wheelwright would take the infant to the graveyard at the Wesleyan Chapel at Gatton. For somehow the whole affair had been well spread, and, as Humphrey Bone, the schoolmaster, said with a hearty chuckle of delight, it was a glorious chance for the Rector's enemies to blaspheme, and there and then, in the presence of several witnesses, he took advantage of the glorious opportunity.

Both Julia and Cynthia had called and sympathised very warmly with their old maid, to have the door opened to them by Tom Morrison himself, who frowned when he saw who were the visitors; but as Julia laid her hand upon his arm, and he saw Cynthia with her eyes overflowing, he drew back, and somehow the wheelwright's heart was softened, and grew softer still as he saw his young wife sobbing in Julia Mallow's arms.

Both Julia and her sister tried to mediate, but were sternly forbidden to interfere, and though they tried again through the interposition of Mrs Mallow, she shook her head.

"No, my dears," said the patient invalid, looking at her daughters with her great wistful eyes, "it is of no use; papa will never give way upon a matter of the Church. He says –"

Mrs Mallow paused, for she felt that she ought not to repeat her husband's words, which were to the effect that he had been neglectful for years, and that now nothing should turn him from the path of duty.

Towards evening Joe Biggins went softly along the lane, and on seeing him at the gate, Tom Morrison went to meet him, and returned his friendly grip, the visitor standing afterwards, as before, perfectly silent and looking down at the walk.

"You've come to say something to me," said Tom at last, in a quiet, resigned way.

"Amen to that, Tom; I have," said the other, in a low voice. "I thought I should see you here. About to-morrow aft'noon."

"Yes," said the wheelwright, quietly.

"I don't like troubling you about it, lad," said Biggins, "only I must. I wanted to tell you, you know. You see, I must be up at church, and if you hear from parson, why, I shall meet you all right; if you don't hear from him, there'll be the little mourning coach all ready waiting to take you all to Gatton. I've seen to everything. That's all."

He was going off on tiptoe, but Morrison stopped him, to press his hand with a strong man's hearty grip; and he walked with him to the gate.

"Call in when you go up to the church in the morning," he said, quietly; and then they parted.

It was quite dark before the wheelwright had finished his work in the garden, and went in to the evening meal, to be met by his wife's searching look.

He shook his head sadly, as he bent down and kissed her.

"No, my lass," he said, "Joe brought no message."

Polly began to weep, the tears flowing fast, till she saw Budge's face working, ready for a tremendous howl, when, mastering her emotion, she sat down with her husband to the table where their evening meal was spread.

An hour later, husband and wife, hand in hand, ascended to the death chamber, where, with the moonlight full upon it, lay the tiny coffin, bathed in a silvery flood of light.

Biggins had obeyed his friend's instructions, even as if it had been for one of his own, and the simple silver ornamentation shone upon the coarse white cloth.

The tear-blinded pair lingered for a few moments without approaching their sacred dead; but at last they stood beside it, and the young mother removed the lid that lightly pressed the flowers which covered the tiny breast.

Their loving lips kissed, for the last time, the cold, waxen forehead; and a groan escaped from Polly's heart as the lid was replaced closely, this time by the father's hands.

"Hush, Polly," he whispered, "you said you would be strong."

"I will, I will," she sighed. And they stood for a few moments, hand clasped in hand, with the silence only broken by a smothered sob from below.

At last, reverently taking the little coffin in his arms, Tom Morrison bore it slowly down the stairs, followed by his weeping wife, who held something white in her hands, and this she laid over the coffin like a little pall.

Poor Budge was there, trying hard to keep down her grief, but a wail would burst forth; and covering her mouth tightly with her hands, she darted away into the back kitchen.

It was the little christening robe, that was to have been worn next day; and drip after drip, to form dark spots in the moonlight, the hot, burning tears of anguish fell from the mother's eyes as they slowly bore the little burden out into the garden, down the neat path, and away to the corner where the willow laved its long green branches in the brook – a veritable stream of silver now, dancing and sparkling in the beams of the broad-faced moon.

Where Tom Morrison stopped at last, beneath the willow, was his evening's work – a small, dark trench, lying amidst the mellow, sweet-scented, newly-turned earth; and here, upon his own land, he was about to lay the dead – to be sown in corruption, to be raised in incorruption – in soil unconsecrated, and without the rites of the Church.

Unconsecrated? No, it was consecrated by the loving tears that bedewed the earth, and fell upon the little white coffin as it was tenderly lowered to its resting-place; and, failing rites, the stricken pair kneeled on either side in the soft mould, and, joining hands, prayed that they might meet again.

Tom's words were few; but simple and earnest was his prayer as ever fell from the lips of man; while, kneeling at the foot of the grave was poor Budge, who only burst forth with a sob when all was over. For the mother stayed while the earth was reverently drawn over the cold bed, till a little hillock of black soil lay silvered by the dropping moonbeams falling through the willow boughs.

It was poor Budge who laid her offering – a bunch of daisies – upon the little grave, while Tom led his trembling wife back to their desolate home.

Joe Biggins, true to his word, called at the wheelwright's next morning on his way to church, and on coming within sight of the house he took off his hat to indulge in a good scratch, for he was puzzled on seeing that the blinds were all drawn up.

Replacing his hat very carefully, he softly entered upon tip-toes, and walked up the little path, where he was met by Tom Morrison, looking pale and worn, but with a restful look in his face that had not been there for days.

They shook hands warmly, for Joe Biggins had resolved never to think about that coffin Tom Morrison had made again, and just then fresh steps were heard, and they saw old Mr Vinnicombe coming up.

"I thought I'd call, Morrison," he said, "and ask you to let me be the bearer of a message to the rectory. Let's make a last appeal to the bigot."

“Hush, sir! – don’t call him names,” said Tom. “He thought he was right, no doubt.”

“Then you’ve heard from him.”

“No, sir, no,” said Tom, sadly; “but I forgive him all the same, though I could never bear to go and hear him more.”

The doctor and Biggins looked at each other, and the latter shook his head till his white cravat crackled, for he was got up ready for his verger’s gown.

“Will you walk down the garden, doctor?” said the wheelwright, quietly.

They both followed him, wonderingly, till, nearing the willow, they heard a low, wailing sob; and, drawing nearer, found poor Budge crouching in a heap upon the ground, her face buried in her hands, sobbing as if her desolate young heart would break.

They approached her unheard; and, at the scene before them, they involuntarily took off their hats, and stood watching, as Tom bent over the weeping girl.

“I did, oh, I did love you so!” they heard her sob in broken accents. And then, as Tom touched her gently on the shoulder, she started up in a frightened way, staring at him wildly, and, but for his firm grasp, she would have fled.

By many a scene of sorrow had old Vinnicombe stood untouched, but his eyes were moistened now, and a choking sensation seemed to affect his throat, as Tom looked kindly down on the poor rough girl, and, bending over her, lightly pressed his lips upon her brow.

“Thank you, my little lass. Don’t cry no more,” he said. “Poor baby’s happy now, and quite at rest.”

There was silence for a moment or two in the little shady garden, for the tinkling streamlet seemed to be at rest as well. Then came the soft buzzing of a bee seeking a fresh flower; from the fields beyond, a lark shot up in the blue sky, lay-laden, and flashed a fount of sparkling notes upon the morning air; a creamy white butterfly flitted through the trees, poised itself for a moment, lit upon the bunch of daisies lying on the little grave, and then rose and rose till hidden from their sight, as they stood where the dark soil was dappled now with the morning sunbeams glancing through the willow boughs.

“Yes,” said Tom, with a smile, as the breeze brought a waft of flowery scent to mingle with the newly-turned earth, “perhaps Parson Mallow is quite right, but I feel as if my little one’s at rest.”

Part 1, Chapter XI.

The New Master for Lawford

Oh, that bell! A clanging, jangling, minor-sounding bell that always sounded so harsh and melancholy at six o'clock, if the particular morning happened to be dark, wet and wintry in chill December, and he who heard it was rudely awakened from pleasant dreams of home and country and those he loved, to the fact that if he got up then he would have some time to wait, and that if he dropped asleep again he might sleep too long.

The warm bed was very tempting as Luke Ross lay gazing at the spot where he knew the window must be, but where there was no light of coming day, and listened to the hissing, fluttering noise made by the gas-jets just turned on to enable the students to dress and, such of them as had beards, to shave, for it was in that happy, blissful time when the natural growth of hair upon a man's chin was spoken of as "filthy," and, if the beard was at all full, said to look "like some old Jew."

The warm bed, it is repeated, was very tempting; but after a few minutes' hesitation, and just as that fatal drowsiness was coming on, Luke Ross rose, tried to repress a shiver, failed, and began to dress hastily by such light as came over the open partition from the corridor, where the four gas-jets sang and sputtered and sent a blue glare into the twenty-four dormitories – very prisonlike, with their sham stone walls, narrow barred windows, and iron bedsteads – that this corridor contained.

For some minutes the hissing of the gas was the only sound heard, till the trickle of water into Luke Ross's basin, and sundry pantings, sighs, and splashings, seemed to arouse others to their fate, when there was a thud as of some one leaping out of bed, a loud yawn prolonged into a shivering shudder, and an exclamation of "Oh, that blessed bell!"

A more thorough scene of discomfort than Saint Chrysostom's on a dark winters morning – one of those mornings that might be midnight – it would be impossible to conceive, and the students seemed to feel it, and try to vent their feelings upon their fellows.

"Here, I say!" said a voice, "I know these beds are damp. I've got my hands covered with chilblains."

"Get out!" cried another – conversation being easy, from the fact that every dormitory opened for a space of a couple of feet above its door on to the passage. "Damp don't give chilblains. Oh, I say, how miserable it is to have to shave with cold water in the dark!"

"Serve you right for having a beard!" cried another.

"Which you'd give your ears to own. Oh, hang it! now I've cut myself. Here, who's got a silk hat? Pull us out a scrap of down, there's a good fellow."

"Wipe it dry, and stick a bit of writing-paper against it."

"Will that stop it?"

"Yes."

"Mind and get your hair parted right, lads. Examination day!"

"I'll give any fellow a penny to clean my boots."

"Why don't you let Tycho clean 'em?"

"Hot water, gentlemen! hot water! Any gentleman who wants his boots cleaned please to set them outside the door."

"There, get out. It won't do, Tommy Smithers. I'd swear to that squeak of yours from a thousand."

"If you come that trick again, Tommy, we'll make you clean every pair of boots in the corridor," shouted a fresh speaker, for by degrees the yawning, and creaking of iron beds and thuds of bare feet upon bare floors had grown frequent, with shuffling noises, and gurgling, and splashing, the chinking of ewers against basins, the swishing of tooth-brushes, and the stamping of chilblained feet being

thrust into hard, stout boots, and all done in a hurried, bustling manner, as if those who dressed were striving by rapid movement to get some warmth into their chilly frames.

Luke Ross was one of the first dressed: a well-built, dark-eyed, keen-looking young man of five-and-twenty, with a good deal of decision about his well-shaped mouth.

The noise and bustle was on the increase. With numerous grumblings and unsatisfied longings floating about his ears, he stood gazing at the square patch of yellow light near his door, thinking of the trials of the day to come, till, apparently brought back to the present by the shudder of cold that ran through him, he turned and began to pace rapidly up and down his little room, from the dark window covered with soft pats of sooty snow to the dormitory door.

That brought no warmth, and, knowing from old experience that the fire in the theatre stove would only be represented by so much smoke, he began to beat his chest and sides in the familiar manner by flinging his arms across and across to and fro.

This set off others, and then there was the stamping of feet and the sound of blowing of hands to warm them, mingled with which was the scuffling noise made by late risers who had lain until the last minute, and were now hurrying to make up for lost time.

The clanging bell once more, giving five minutes' law for every student to be in his place by ten minutes to seven, at which time, to the moment, the little self-possessed principal would walk into the theatre, with his intellectual head rigidly kept in place by the stiffest of white cravats.

Upon this particular morning the vice-principal had the first lecture to deliver, and the very last man had scuffled into his place, ink-bottle and note-book in hand, and a buzz of conversation had been going on for nearly a quarter of an hour before the little well-known comedy of such mornings took place.

Then enter the vice-principal, looking very brisk and eager, but particularly strained and squeezezy about the eyes, and he had nearly reached the table and was scanning the rows of desks and their occupants, rising blue cold, tier above tier, into the semi-gloom beneath the organ, when a broad face that was not blue, cold, nor red, but of a yellowish white, stared him full in the eyes from the whitewashed wall, and mutely reproached him for being late.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, "that clock is not right!"

"Yes, sir, quite right," exclaimed half-a-dozen eager voices, and their owners consulted their watches.

"Oh, dear me, no!" exclaimed the vice-principal, sharply; "nearly a quarter of an hour fast."

No one dared to contradict now, and the lecture by gaslight, in the cold, dark morning, went on till nearly eight, when those who assisted at tables left to look after the urns and cut the bread-and-butter.

A dozen students hurried off for this task, glad of the chance of feeling the fire in the great dining-hall; and, intent as he was upon the business of the exciting day to come, Luke Ross was not above sharing with his fellow-students, in providing a more palatable meal for himself and the head of his table by washing the coarse salt butter free of some of its brine.

The bell once more, and the rush of students into the dining-hall in search of the warmth that a couple of cups of steaming hot coffee, fresh from the tall block-tin urns, would afford.

The students assembled at the two long boards, and looked strikingly like so many schoolboys of a larger growth; there was the sharp rapping of a knife-handle upon a little square table in one corner, the rustling noise of a hundred men rising to their feet, grace spoken by the vice-principal, in a rich mellifluous voice, followed by a choral "Amen" from all present, and then the rattling of coffee cups and the buzz of conversation, as the great subject of the day – the examination – was discussed, more than one intimating in a subdued voice that it was a shame that there should have been any lecture on such a morning as this.

Breakfast at an end, there was the regular rush again, schoolboy like, out into the passage, where a knot of students gathered round one of the masters, who was giving a word or two of advice.

"Ah, Ross," he said, smiling, "I have been saying now what I ought to have said before breakfast, that no man should eat much when he is going in for his examination. Brain grows sluggish when stomach is full."

"I'm afraid we have all been too anxious to eat much, sir," replied Ross.

"I'm sure you have, Ross; but don't overdo it. Slow and steady wins the race, you know. Ah, here comes some one who has made a good meal I'll be bound. Well, Smithers," he continued, as a remarkably fast-looking young man came up, "have you had a good breakfast?"

"Yes, sir, as good as I could get."

"Thought so," said the assistant master, smiling. "Well, what certificate do you mean to take, eh? First of the first?"

"Haven't been reading for honours, sir," said Smithers, grinning.

"No, indeed," said the assistant master, shaking his head. "Ah, Smithers, Smithers! why did you come here?"

"To be a Christian schoolmaster, sir," was the reply, given with mock humility by about as unlikely a personage for the duty as ever entered an institution's walls.

The bell once more; and at last, feeling like one in a dream, and as if, in spite of a year's hard training and study, he was no wiser than when he first commenced, Luke Ross was in his place with a red sheet of blotting-paper before him, and the printed set of questions for the day.

The momentous time had come at last, a time which dealt so largely with his future; and yet, in spite of all his efforts, his brain seemed obstinately determined to dwell upon every subject but those printed upon that great oblong sheet of paper.

He had no cause to trouble himself. All he had to do was to acquit himself as well as he could as a finale to his training; but in the highly-strung nervous state to which constant study had brought him, it seemed that his whole future depended upon his gaining one or other of the educational prizes that would be adjudged, and that unless he were successful, Sage Portlock, his old playmate and friend – now some one very far dearer – and for whose sake he had striven so hard, would turn from him with contempt.

At another time the questions before him would have been comparatively easy, and almost, without exception, he could have written a sensible essay upon the theme; but now Sage, his old home at Lawford, the school, the troubles in the town and opposition to the Rector, and a dozen other things, seemed to waltz through his brain.

He had several letters in his pocket, from Sage and from his father, and they seemed to unfold themselves before him, so that he read again the words that he knew by heart: how indignant the people were at the death of poor old Sammy Warmoth and the appointment of Joe Biggins; the terrible quarrel that there had been between Mr Mallow and the Curate about the burial of Tom Morrison's child, and how the quarrel had been patched up again because Mr Mallow had not liked Mr Paulby to leave just when people were talking so about the little grave in Tom Morrison's garden. There was the question of the wretched attempt at choral singing too on Sunday – singing that he was to improve as soon as he was master; for Sage said it did not matter how well she taught the girls, Humphrey Bone made his boys sing badly out of spite, so as to put them out.

Then he had a good look at the examination paper, and tried to read, but Humphrey Bone's threat to expose him and show him up as an ignoramus before all the town, – a clod who ought to go back to his father's tannery, – all duly related in one of her letters by Sage Portlock, came dancing out of the page before him.

Again he cleared his head and took up his pen, but he felt that he could not write. And now came up the letter which told how Cyril Mallow had come back from Queensland – handsome Cyril, whom he had severely punished some time before, just, in fact, as he was about to sail for Australia.

Luke Ross did not know why he should feel uneasy about Cyril Mallow being back; it was nothing to him. He was a bit of a scamp, and so on, but he was not so bad as Frank Mallow, who had

been obliged to get off to New Zealand after the scandal about a couple of the Gatton village girls, and the fight with Lord Artingale's keepers, in which he was said to have joined Jock Morris. The Lawford people said it was from this that the Rector became non-resident, as much as from having overrun the constable.

It was tantalising to a degree, for, strive hard as he would, these things seemed to dance before Luke Ross's eyes; while as to the questions themselves, as he read them through and through, not one did it seem that he could answer.

And so it was morning after morning during the few busy days that the examination lasted. Every night he went to bed almost in despair; every morning he gazed blankly at the various questions.

But, in spite of his self-depreciation, first one and then another of the masters, who gathered up the papers at each sitting's end, gave him a friendly nod of approval, and glanced with interest at the closely-written sheets.

"I've made a dismal failure, sir," he exclaimed at last, as night closed in upon his fifth day's work.

The assistant master in whose hands lay the everyday subjects taught at the institution laughed as he clapped the young man upon the shoulder.

"I wish every man in the college had made as great a failure, Ross," he said. "There, there, you are weary and nervous. Get out of doors and have a good blow and as much exercise as you can till you have regained your tone. I ought not to say so, perhaps, but, Ross, you might, if you liked, look higher than a schoolmaster's life; that is, if you have any ambition in your soul."

At that moment Luke Ross's highest ambition was to win Sage Portlock's regard, and to acquit himself so creditably as the new master of Lawford School, that there might be no room for that modern Shimei, Humphrey Bone, to say hard words against his management and power of training the young. Later on circumstances caused him to undergo a complete revolution of thought.

Part 1, Chapter XII.

A Question of Income

They were busy times at Kilby, the farm occupied by the Portlocks, and Sage was laughing and merry in her holiday enjoyment of domestic duties.

A few friends were expected next night, and busy preparations were being made by Mrs Portlock and her niece, whose pleasant-looking, plump, white arms were bloomed to the elbow with flour, to which was soon to be added the golden-looking yolks of a dozen eggs, being beaten up in a large white basin in the most unmerciful way by Mrs Portlock herself.

It was a comfortable-looking country kitchen where they were busy, in thorough, old-fashioned style. Not from necessity, for from the back kitchen and room beyond came the sound of voices where the two maids were engaged over other household duties. In the low, wide window, in spite of the season, were some brightly blooming geraniums, between which could be seen the home close, dotted with sheep, and through which field meandered the path leading down to the town.

"Don't forget the salt, Sage," said Mrs Portlock, "and put in a dash of carb'nate. For goodness' sake let's have the cake light, and – why, what ails the girl now?"

Sage had darted back from the table, and torn off the large bibbed apron she wore so roughly that she snapped one of the tape strings, before hastily wiping the flour from her arms, and pulling down her pinned-up sleeves.

The reason was plain enough, and to be seen through the geraniums, where Luke Ross was making his way across the home close, looking fresh and eager in the crisp January air, as he gazed straight before him at the farm.

"There, get on with thy work, child," cried Mrs Portlock, in a half-petulant, half-laughing way; "there's nothing to be ashamed of in making a cake. If you marry Luke Ross you won't have many cakes to make," she added petulantly.

"Oh, for shame, aunt! How can you?" cried Sage, looking conscious and uncomfortable, as her cheeks turned scarlet.

"Because that's what he has come for, I'll be bound. There, go and let him in."

"Oh, no, aunt! I'd – I'd rather not," faltered Sage.

"Such stuff, child! Just as if I couldn't see you were longing to go. There, if you don't run and open the door, I'll go myself, and tell him you were ashamed."

"I'll go and open the door," said Sage, quietly; and there was a curious, introspective look in her countenance, as, after waiting till the imperative rap of the young man's knuckles was heard, she hastily replaced the apron, turned up her sleeves, and floured her hands, before going to let the visitor in.

"I'm not ashamed of making cakes, aunt," she said, quietly.

"Bless the girl, what a strange one she is!" muttered Mrs Portlock, apostrophising the great eight-day clock, and then pausing in the beating of eggs, to listen, with the greatest eagerness, as Luke Ross's voice was heard at the door, and Sage's directly after, but in quite a low buzz, for the intervening door was shut.

"I don't know what to say to it," said Mrs Portlock, querulously. "He's very nice, and kind, and good-looking, but I'd a deal rather she married a farmer. Schoolmastering don't fill bacon-racks, nor the tub with pickled pork."

The buzzing at the front door continued, and the increased current of air made the fire to roar up the wide kitchen chimney.

"For goodness' sake, why don't they come in?" exclaimed Mrs Portlock. "That girl will catch her death o' cold."

She made this remark also in confidence to the brass-dialled eight-day clock, at the top of which a grotesque-looking human-faced sun was just peering over an engraved arc, above which it revolved in company with various other planets when the mechanism within properly worked; and, after making the remark, Mrs Portlock's wooden spoon began once more to batter the already well-beaten eggs, between pauses to listen what was going on at the door.

"I hate such shilly-shallying ways," she muttered. "He's come on purpose to see us, so why does he loiter there at the door? I'll be bound to say if it was young Cyril Mallow he'd have been here by now."

The mention of this name made Mrs Portlock pause and rub her face thoughtfully with one corner of her apron.

"I don't see why not," she muttered. "I'm sure he likes her, or else he wouldn't be so fond of coming out here to smoke a pipe with Joseph. And if they are gentry, why, gentry are only human flesh; and as to their money, I'll be bound to say they're not so much better off than we are, in spite of their show."

There was another fierce attack upon the golden fluid in the white basin.

"He seems nice, does Cyril; very different to his brother. Poor Rue, she had an escape there; and I dare say this will only be a bit of a flirtation with both of them. I shall not interfere, and matters may go as they like."

The eggs once more suffered from the severe attack.

"It's my belief Sage don't know her own mind," exclaimed Mrs Portlock. "Here, Anne, bring some more coals to this fire; I want the oven to be well hot."

Just then there was the sound of the closing door, and Luke Ross entered, followed by Sage, looking more conscious than before.

"Morning, Mrs Portlock," cried the young man frankly.

"Good-morning, Luke," she replied. "Why didn't you take him in the parlour, Sage? There's a good fire there."

"Because I begged to be allowed to come here, Mrs Portlock, so as not interfere with the preparations. My father said he would be glad to come."

"Ah, that's right!" exclaimed Mrs Portlock. "There, sit down by the fire; you must want a bit o' lunch. Sage! – why, bless the girl, I didn't see her go."

"She has gone up-stairs, I think," said Luke.

"To put her hair straight or some nonsense, when we are that busy that we shall never be ready in time."

"No, no, Mrs Portlock," said Luke, who looked hot and nervous, and instead of taking a chair by the fire, he edged away to stand by the crockery-covered dresser, with his back half turned from the light; "I think she has gone up-stairs on account of what I wanted to say."

"There, there, there," said Mrs Portlock, labouring frantically now at the egg-beating, "I think I know what's coming, and I'd a deal rather you wouldn't say a word to me about it."

Luke Ross looked discomfited and troubled, and became exceedingly interested for a moment in the little silk band of his soft felt hat.

"But surely, Mrs Portlock," he began at last, "you must have known that I was deeply attached to Sage?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I did," replied Mrs Portlock; and this time some of the yellow egg flew over the basin side; "but it's a very serious matter."

"Indeed, yes," said Luke, quietly, "I look upon it as the turning-point of my life."

"And I don't believe that Sage half knows her own mind yet. She's too young, and it's not as if she was my own child."

"But we can wait, Mrs Portlock," said Luke, gaining confidence, now that he had made the first plunge. "Of course we should have to wait for some time."

“Won’t say anything about it,” cried Mrs Portlock, as the sturdy red-faced servant-maid entered to pour a half-scuttle of coals on the roaring fire. “If you want to talk about it – ”

Mrs Portlock here began to work viciously with a piece of nutmeg, the eggs being considered enough beaten.

“I should be sorry to hurt your feelings about this matter, Mrs Portlock,” continued Luke; “but I have always thought you looked upon Sage and me as being as good as engaged.”

“Oh, I don’t know! I can’t say! There, I won’t say anything about it. Oh! here’s Master, and you must talk to him.”

Luke Ross’s face wore a particularly troubled look, as a hearty, bluff voice was just then heard bidding a dog lie down, and, directly after, the kitchen door was thrown open, and the broad-shouldered bluff Churchwarden, in his loose brown velveteen coat and cord breeches with leather leggings, entered the room. His clear blue eyes and crisp grey hair made him look the very embodiment of health, and his face lit up with a pleasant smile as he strode in with a double gun under his arm, while his pockets had a peculiarly bulgy appearance at the sides.

“Ah, Luke, my lad! how are you?” he said, bluffly, as he held out his hand. “Glad to see you, my boy. Why, you ought to have been out with me for a run. Thy face looks as pasty as owt.”

“I should have liked the walk immensely,” said Luke, brightening up at the warmth of his reception, and he wrung the others hand.

“Schoolmastering don’t improve thy looks, Luke, my lad,” continued the Churchwarden. “Why, you are as pale as if you had been bled. Hang that London! I don’t care if I never see it again.”

“There’s worse places than London, Joseph,” said Mrs Portlock, who had a weakness for an occasional metropolitan trip.

“Tell me where they are, then,” said the Churchwarden, “for I don’t know ’em. Got two hares,” he said, standing the gun in the corner by the dresser.

“Ah! we wanted a hare,” said Mrs Portlock, busying herself over the work her niece had left undone.

“There you are, then,” said the Churchwarden, drawing them, one at a time, from the inner pockets of his shooting-coat.

“But is that gun loaded, Joseph?” cried Mrs Portlock, who had been to the dresser and started away.

“Yes, both barrels,” said the Churchwarden, with a comical look at the visitor. “I wouldn’t touch her if I were you.”

“I touch the horrid thing?” cried Mrs Portlock. “There, for goodness’ sake unload it, Joseph, before we have some accident.”

“All right,” said the Churchwarden, tossing the hares out into the stone passage at the back, and taking up the gun just as Mrs Portlock had raised the great white basin of well-beaten egg to pour into a flour crater which she had prepared. Stepping to the window, the head of the house turned the fastening quietly, and opened the casement sufficiently wide to allow of the protrusion of the barrels of the gun, when —

Banff! Banff!

Crash!

All in rapid succession, for the double report so startled the good housewife that she let the great white basin slip through her fingers to be shattered to atoms on the red-brick floor, and spread its golden treasure far and wide.

“Joseph!” exclaimed Mrs Portlock.

“Say, Luke, I’ve done it now,” he cried. “There’s nothing the matter, lass, only a basin broke.”

“And a dozen eggs destroyed,” cried Mrs Portlock, petulantly.

“Here, let’s go into the parlour, Luke,” continued the Churchwarden, after a merry look at Sage, who had run down-stairs, looking quite pale. “Sage, my dear, send Anne in with the bread and cheese,

and a mug of ale. Luke Ross here will join me in a bit of lunch.” He led the way to the parlour, Luke following him, after pausing a moment to obtain a look from Sage; but she was too conscious to glance his way, and had begun already to help Mrs Portlock, who looked the very picture of vexation and trouble combined.

The parlour was a fine old oak-panelled, low-ceiled room, with dark beams reflecting the flaming fire, whose ruddy light danced in the panes of the corner cupboard and glistening sideboard and polished chairs.

“Sit down, my boy, sit down,” cried the Churchwarden, as he stooped to toss a piece of oak root on the flaming fire. “What with Christmas-keeping, I’ve hardly seen thee since you came back. My word, how time goes! Only the other day thou wast a slip of a boy helping me to pick the apples in the orchard and playing with Sage, and now thou’rt a grown man.”

The Churchwarden seated himself, took his tobacco-jar from a bracket, his pipe from the chimney-piece, and proceeded to fill it.

“You won’t smoke, I know. Good job, too. Bad habit, lad. But what’s the matter – anything wrong?”

“Only in my own mind, sir,” said Luke, rather excitedly, as he sat opposite the farmer, tapping the table.

“Out with it, then, Luke, my boy, and I’ll help thee if I can. Want some money?”

“Oh, no, sir,” said Luke, flushing. “The fact is, I have finished my training, and I am now down home expecting to take the management of the school as master.”

“Ha! yes!” said the Churchwarden softly, leaning forward to light a spill amongst the glowing logs. “There’s a bit o’ trouble about that. Half-a-dozen of ’em’s taking Humphrey Bone’s side against parson, and they want me to join.”

“But you will not, I hope, sir?” said Luke, anxiously.

“I should, my lad, but for Master Humphrey’s drink. He’s not a man to have the care of boys.”

“No, sir, indeed,” said Luke, who paused, while the ruddy servant lass brought in a napkin-covered tray, with the bread and cheese, and a great pewter tankard of home-brewed ale.

“Help thyself, lad,” said the Churchwarden; “and now what is it?”

“I must speak out plainly, sir, or not at all,” said Luke, excitedly.

“Surely, my lad,” said the other, watching him keenly, as he poured out some ale.

Luke hesitated for a few moments, and then tried to clear his voice, but failed, and spoke huskily as he rose from his seat.

“Mr Portlock,” he said, “you have known me from a boy.”

“And always liked thee, my lad, and made thee welcome,” still watching him keenly.

“Always, Mr Portlock, and you will agree that it is not strange that now I am grown a man I should love my little playmate Sage, whom I’ve known ever since the day you called at our house with her and Rue – poor little orphans, looking so pretty and helpless as they sat in black in your gig.”

“Ay! ay! that was a sad time, Luke Ross,” said the Churchwarden, thoughtfully. “Poor little bairns! mother and father in one sad week, Luke. Hah! well, I’ve never had any of my own, and I never think of ’em now but as if they had been born to me.”

“No, sir, I know that,” said Luke, smiling.

“And you want me to say thou mayst have Sage for thy wife. That’s the plain English of it, lad, eh?”

“Yes, sir – yes, sir,” cried Luke, excitedly; but delighted to have his task cut short.

“Ha!” said the Churchwarden, thoughtfully. “I expected as much. I said to myself that was what you would ask me when you came back.”

“And you consent, sir?” cried Luke, joyously.

There was a moment's silence, while the Churchwarden crossed a sturdy, well-shaped leg over the other, Luke gazing the while upon his lips, until he spoke, and then sinking back, as if smitten, into his chair.

"No, my lad, I do not give my consent. I like thee, Luke, almost as well as if thou wast my own son, and I believe you'd make Sage a good husband; but, to be plain with you, I don't like this schoolmastering and mistress work."

"You don't like it, sir!"

"No, my lad. It was against my wish that Sage took to it. I would rather have seen her making the bread-and-butter at home; and there was no need for her to have gone into the world; and as you know, it was then I set my face against your going in for it as well."

"Indeed, sir!"

"Yes, my lad. You'd a deal better have been content to take up with your father's honest old business of tanning. There's a good trade to be done."

"Yes, sir, but I felt myself so unsuited for the trade, and I liked books."

"And didn't care about dirtying thy hands, Luke. No, my lad, I think it was a mistake."

"A mistake, sir?"

"Yes, and I'll show you. Now, look here, my boy," continued the Churchwarden, pointing with the waxy end of his pipe. "No lad of spirit thinks of taking help from his father, after his first start in the world."

"Of course not, sir."

"And a lad of spirit don't go hanging on to his wife's people."

"No, sir."

"Then, look here, my boy. What is your salary to be, if you get Lawford School; I say, *if* you get it?"

"Seventy pounds per annum, sir, with a house, and an addition for my certificate, if I have been fortunate enough to win one."

"Seventy pounds a year, with a house, if you get the school, and some more if you win a certificate, my lad; so that all your income is depending upon ifs."

"I am sure of the school, sir," said Luke, warmly, as he coloured up.

"Are you, my lad? I'm not," said the Churchwarden, drily. "No, Luke Ross, I like you, for I believe you to be a clever scholar, and – what to my mind's ten thousand times better than scholarship – I know you to be a true, good-hearted lad."

"I thank you, sir," said Luke, whose heart was sinking; and Portlock went on —

"I'm not a poor man, Luke, and every penny I have I made with my own hand and brain. Sage is as good as my child, and when we old folks go to sleep I dare say she and her sister will have a nice bit o' money for themselves."

"I never thought of such a thing as money, sir," cried Luke, hotly.

"I don't believe you ever did, my boy," said the Churchwarden. "But now listen. Sage is very young yet, and hardly knows her own mind. I tell you – there, there, let me speak. I know she thinks she loves you. I tell you, I say, that I'd sooner see Sage your wife than that of any man I know; but I'm not going to keep you both, and make you sacrifice your independence, and I'm not going to have my child goto a life of drudgery and poverty."

"But you forget, sir, we should be both having incomes from our schools."

"No, I don't, boy. While you were young. How about the time when she had children – how then? And I don't believe in a man and his wife both teaching schools. A woman has got enough to do to make her husband's home so snug that he shall think it, as he ought to do, the very best place in the whole world, and she can't do that and teach school too. Do you hear?"

"Yes, sir," said Luke, very humbly, though he did not approve of his old friend's opinions.

“Then look here, Luke Ross, I like you, and when you can come to me and say, ‘Joseph Portlock, I have a good permanent income of five hundred a year,’ Sage, if she likes, shall be your wife.”

“Five hundred a year, sir!” faltered Luke, with a strange, unreal dread seeming to rise before him like a mist of the possibility that before then Sage’s love might change.

“Yes, my lad, five hundred a year.”

“Uncle,” said Sage, opening the door, “Mr Mallow has called to see you;” and a strange look passed between the two young men, as Cyril Mallow entered the room.

Part 1, Chapter XIII.

Visitors at the Farm

The morning of Mrs Portlock's party, and Uncle Joseph just returned from his round in the farm, to look smilingly at the preparations that were going on, and very tenderly at Sage, who looked downcast and troubled.

"Well, girls," he cried, "how goes it? Come, old lady, let it be a good set-out, for Sage here won't have much more chance for helping you when these holidays are over."

"I wish she'd give the school teaching up," said Mrs Portlock, rather fretfully, as she sat gathering her apron into pleats.

"She can give it up if she likes," said the Churchwarden, heartily. "It's her own whim."

"Well, don't you fidget, Joseph, for Sage and I will do our best."

"Of course you will, my dears," he said. "Here, Sage, fill me the old silver mug with ale out of number two."

"But it is not tapped, uncle."

"Ah!" he shouted, "who says it isn't tapped? Why I drove the spigot in night before last on purpose to have it fine. And now, old woman, if you want any lunch, have it, and then go and pop on your black silk and bonnet, while I order round the chaise, and I'll drive you in to town."

"No, Joseph, no," exclaimed Mrs Portlock, who had now gathered the whole of the bottom of her apron into pleats and let them go. "I said last night that I would not go with you any more unless you left the whip at home. I cannot bear to sit in that chaise and see you beat poor Dapple as you do."

"But I must have a whip, old girl, or I can't drive."

"I'm sure the poor horse goes very well without."

"But not through the snow, my dear," said Sage's uncle, giving her another of his droll looks. "Really, old girl, I wouldn't answer for our not being upset without a whip."

"But you wouldn't use it without you were absolutely obliged, Joseph?"

"On my honour as a gentleman," said Uncle Joseph; and his wife smiled and went up-stairs to get dressed, while Sage took the keys to go down to the cellar and draw the ale, as her uncle walked to the door, and she heard him shouting his orders to Dicky Dykes to harness Dapple and bring him round at once.

Sage stood in the low-ceiled, old-fashioned parlour, with the quaintly-made silver tankard in her hand, waiting for her uncle to come in. There was a smile upon her lip, and as she listened now to the Churchwarden's loud, hearty voice shouting orders to the different men about the yard, and now to her aunt's heavy footsteps overhead, she was gazing straight into the great glowing wood fire, whose ruddy flames flickered and danced in the broad, blue-tiled chimney; and though it was so cold that the frost was making silver filigree upon the window panes, she felt all aglow, and kept on picturing in the embers the future that might have place.

"By George!" roared the Churchwarden, coming in. "Hallo! didn't kick all the snow off. Here, let's melt it before the tyrant comes down;" and he shone all over his broad face, and his eyes twinkled with mirth, as he held first one boot and then the other to the blaze. "Now, the ale, Sage, my pet. Give's a kiss first, darling, to give it a flavour."

He hugged her to his side, and gave her a loud-sounding smack upon the lips, holding her close to him as he smiled down in her eyes.

"And I used to grumble, my pet, because I had no children," he said, tenderly, "little thinking I should have Sage and Rue to take care of till – Oh! I say. Ha-ha-ha! Look at the colour. Poor little woman then. Was he coming to-day?"

"Please don't tease me, uncle dear," she whispered, as she laid her head upon his shoulder, and hid her burning face.

"I won't then," he said; but she could feel him chuckling as he went on. "I say though, Sage. I've been thinking one ought to have asked him to come and stay here for a few days. Very hospitable, eh? But hardly conventual. That's not right, is it, schoolmistress? No, no; I mean conventional. No you don't. I've got you tight," for Sage had tried to run away.

"Then please don't tease me, uncle."

"But what will old Vinnicombe say?"

"Uncle dear," she whispered, appealingly. "There then, my pet, I won't," he said. "What time do you expect Jack and Rue?"

"By about four o'clock, uncle dear."

"That's right, my pet, and now you must bustle. See that there's plenty of jolly good fires, for I hate people to come and find the place chilly. Let's give 'em a warm reception, and I'll see if I can't fill up some of old Vinnicombe's wrinkles out of his face. Let me see, I want some more tobacco. Hah!" he cried, after a deep draught, "that's good ale. Taste it, pet."

Sage took the tankard with a smile, raised the creaking lid, and put her lips to it to please him.

"Fine, ain't it, lass?"

"Capital, uncle."

"I say, Sage, if that don't make old Vinnicombe smile I'm a Dutchman. By the way, my dear, shall I ask Cyril Mallow to drop in?"

"Uncle!" cried Sage, turning pale.

"Well, why not? He has no pride in him, not a bit. And if he wants gentlemen to meet, why, there's Paulby and Vinnicombe. Hang it all, my girl, if I liked to set up for a gentleman I dare say I could, after you had toned me down and mended my manners, and oiled my axles with grammar grease, eh?"

"Oh, no, no, uncle; don't think of it," she said, imploringly.

"Just as you like, my dear; 'tis your party like, and it's for you to choose. He is a bit cocky and priggish, and a bit gallant, but my darling knows how to keep him in his place."

"Oh, yes, uncle, of course," said Sage, hastily; "but Rue will be here, you know, and it might set her thinking of his brother Frank."

"Hah! Yes; I had forgotten that," said the Churchwarden, thoughtfully. "To be sure! she did think a little about him, didn't she? Hullo!"

"I want Sage," cried Mrs Portlock down the stairs.

"Yes, aunt, dear."

"Hold that wrapper to the fire, my dear, ready for your uncle," and she threw down a great white cashmere belcher to her niece.

"Here! Hoi! I say, old girl, I'm not going to wear that thing."

"Yes, dear, it's a very long drive, and the air is very cold."

The Churchwarden sank into a chair, and, raising the lid of the tankard, gazed into it despondently.

"Tyranny, tyranny, tyranny!" he groaned. "Oh! why did I ever marry such a woman as this?"

"Now don't talk nonsense, Joseph," cried his wife, rustling down into the room so wrapped up that she looked double her natural size, what with cloak, and boa, and a large muff. "Put it round your uncle's neck, Sage, the frost is very severe."

The Churchwarden threw his head back ready for Sage to tie on the wrapper, uttering a low moan the while, and then sighed as he stood up and walked – at first slowly and then with alacrity – into the hall to put on his hat.

"I can't get into my coat with this thing on," he roared. "Come and give us a lift."

Sage ran laughingly into the hall to help the greatcoat on to his broad shoulders just as the four-wheeled chaise came crunching to the front door, Dapple giving a loud snort or two, and stamping upon the frozen gravel.

Just then the Churchwarden gave a comical look at his niece, rushed to the corner by the eight-day clock, and made a great deal of rattling as he took up the whip and gave it a sharp lash through the air, and a crack on the broad balustrade.

Sage heard her aunt start, and her uncle chuckled.

"Now, old lady," he said. "That's right, Sage, plenty of rugs, or we shall have her frozen. That's it, old girl, right leg first. Hold his head still, Dicky. There you are; tuck that rug round you. There, that's better," he cried, taking his seat and fastening the apron. "Let him go, Dicky. Tck!"

He started Dapple, and then stood up in the chaise with a quick motion, raising the whip as he set his teeth, and seemed about to strike the cob a tremendous blow, making Mrs Portlock jump and seize his arm, when he subsided, looking round at Sage with a comical expression in his eye, but pulled up short.

"Here. Hi! I say. Yah! artful. Here you, Luke Ross, you're three hours before your time," he cried.

"Yes, sir. I thought I might help a little, and – "

"You thought you might help a little, and – G'on with you – get out. G'long!" and the Churchwarden flicked and lashed at Luke Ross, as he stepped to the side of the chaise and shook hands, while Sage, with her heart beating fast, drew back into the porch, seeing her uncle begin poking at the new arrival with the butt of the whip-handle.

Then the cob was started again with another pretended furious cut, which made Sage's aunt catch at her uncle's arm; and then as, frightened, fluttering, and yet happy, she saw Luke coming towards her, the Churchwarden's voice came roaring through the wintry air —

"Here! I say, Luke Ross, remember what I said. I mean it – seriously."

"Sage, my dear Sage!" Those were the next words Sage Portlock heard, as Luke took her hand to lead her, trembling and nervous, into the hall.

"I hardly hoped for such good fortune," he cried, as Sage gently disengaged herself from his clasp, and stood gazing rather sadly in his face; "but oh! pray, pray don't look at me like that, darling, I'm here to go down on my knees to you, Sage. There," he cried, "I will, to beg pardon – to tell you I was a weak, jealous fool – that I know you could not help Cyril Mallow coming and admiring you (he'd have been a fool if he hadn't!) – that you're the best, and dearest, and truest, and sweetest, and most innocent-hearted of girls – that I love you more dearly than ever, and that I've been a miserable wretch ever since last night."

"Don't do that, Luke," she said, as he literally went upon his knees; "it hurts me."

"And I'd suffer anything sooner than give you a moment's pain," he cried, springing to his feet; and they stood now in the middle of the old parlour. "But you haven't forgiven me, Sage," he said, piteously.

"Yes, Luke, I've forgiven you, but I want you to know and trust me better. Your words seemed so cruel to me, and if you knew me you would not have said them. I did not know that Cyril Mallow when he called did so that he might see me, and we hardly exchanged a dozen words."

"And if you had exchanged a thousand, sweet, what then?" cried Luke, proudly. "I was a jealous idiot, and ought to have known better; but it has been a lesson to me on my weakness, and now I am going to wait patiently till I can say what your uncle wishes."

Sage was silent, for she was thinking it was her duty to tell him that, after the sad little trouble that had come between them, it would be better for them to be more distant for a time; but she could not say it with his eyes looking appealingly at her. She had felt so proud of him for his manly bearing and straightforward honesty of purpose. The words would not come, and somehow the next minute she was sobbing in his arms as he whispered those two words, but in such a tone —

“My darling!”

She started from him guiltily the next moment, and ran up-stairs, and stayed till there was a fresh crunching of wheels and the trampling of a horse's hoofs, when she came down again to welcome her sister and her husband, John Berry – a bluff, middle-aged farmer to whom Rue had been married some five years, and they had come now to spend a few days, bringing their two little girls.

“Ah, Luke, my man of wisdom, how are you? Sage, my dear, give us a kiss. Bless you, how well you look. How am I? Hearty, and so's Rue.”

Sage was kissing her sister affectionately the next moment, heartily glad to see her looking so rosy and well, but blushing redder as she whispered merrily —

“Oh! I am sorry we came and interrupted you. You look so guilty, Sagey. When's it to be?”

“Not for years to come, dear,” said Sage, as she busied herself with Lotty and Totty, their two golden-haired little children, who were so wrapped up that they were, as John said, warm as toasts.

He plumped himself into a chair directly, to take one on each knee. Then Sage and Rue busied themselves in taking off pelisses and woollen leggings, and reducing the little things into a less rounded shape, while John sat as stolid and serious as a judge, evidently being very proud of his two little ones, as he was of his handsome young wife.

“And now, John, you'd like a tankard of ale, wouldn't you?” cried Sage.

“Well, I don't know,” said John, quietly; “a mug of squire's ale is nice, if Luke there will have one too.”

“Oh! I'll join,” said Luke, heartily; and, after drawing it, Sage went up with Rue to her room, and she began to tease her about Luke, but ended with an affectionate embrace.

“I'd marry him any time, dear,” she said, “for I think he's a good fellow, and if you are as happy as I am with dear old John you will be satisfied.”

“But uncle has said that it is not to be till Luke has five hundred a year,” said Sage, dreamily, “and that will not be for a long time; and – and, Rue, dear,” she faltered, “I – I don't think I feel quite happy about it.”

“Stuff and nonsense, Sagey! Uncle will come round. He wants to see us quite happy.”

“But you misunderstand me, dear,” said Sage, thoughtfully. “I mean that I'm half afraid I'm not doing right in letting Luke Ross believe I love him, because – because – ”

“Because – because you are a goose,” cried Rue, merrily. “I felt just the same about John, and was ready to break it off, and now I think him the dearest and best fellow under the sun. Sage, dear.”

“Yes, Rue.”

“You are in the sugar-plum stage just now, and don't know your own mind. I like Luke Ross. He's frank and straightforward. Don't play with him, for he's a man to be trusted, and you're lucky to have him care for you.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Sage, dreamily; “but it is not to be for a long time yet.”

As she spoke she was thinking of the past, and her sister's love affair with Frank Mallow, who used to follow her whenever she was out for a walk; and then about the trouble at the rectory, when Frank Mallow went off all on a sudden. Of how poor Rue was nearly heartbroken, and used to tell Sage that she would go after him if he sent for her; but he never even wrote to her in spite of all his professions; and then they learned how badly he had behaved; and after that Rue never mentioned his name but in a quiet subdued way, and at her uncle's wish accepted John Berry – a man of sterling qualities – and she had grown brighter and happier ever since she had been his wife.

The final preparations were made and the table spread long before the Churchwarden and his wife came back, with the chaise loaded up, and Mrs Portlock protesting that she would never go again if Joseph took a whip.

The culprit chuckled as Sage helped him with his overcoat, shouting orders all the while to Luke and John Berry, who were busy bringing in the load of parcels till it seemed wonderful how they could all have been packed into the chaise.

At last the final packet was in, and the cold air shut out; but hardly had the door been closed, and they were standing laughing at Rue's little girls, who were staggering in and out of the great parlour with packets which they carried by the string, than the bell rang.

"Here's Vinnicombe!" cried Portlock, and the doctor, in a fur cap tied down over his ears, blue spectacles over his eyes, and his tall lean form muffled in a long thick greatcoat, came in, stamping his feet.

"Here, help me off with this coat, somebody," growled the doctor. "How do, girls? Take away those children, or I shall tread on 'em. Hate youngsters running about under one's feet like black beetles. What have you got there?" he added, pointing to the parcels.

"Fal-lals and kickshaws. The old woman's been pretty well emptying the grocer's shop."

"Now, Joseph, that is really too bad," said Mrs Portlock, full of mild indignation. "Now you know you would persist in buying three-parts of what is there."

"Humph! Thought you fancied you were going to be snowed up," growled the doctor, shaking himself free of his coat, and holding out first one leg and then the other for Luke to pull off his goloshes. "That's right, Luke Ross; I don't see why you young fellows shouldn't wait on us old ones. I had lots of trouble with you, you young rascal; fetched out of bed for you often."

"Well, doctor," cried Luke, "you see I'm willing enough," and his cheeks flushed with pleasure to find that in spite of the Churchwarden's serious treatment of his proposals, he was warmer than ever he had been before.

"There, look sharp, girls," cried the Churchwarden. "Come, old lady, take off your things. Sage, put the doctor in the chimney-corner to thaw. He'll soon come round."

Dr Vinnicombe shook his fist at the speaker, and let Sage lead him to the glowing fire, while the next moment the Churchwarden was having what he called "a glorious cuddle," four little chubby arms being fast about his great neck, and a couple of pairs of little red lips kissing him all over his rugged, ruddy face.

Part 1, Chapter XIV.

The Bad Shilling

Michael Ross, Luke's father, came soon after with a couple of fellow-townsmen, and their chat about the state of affairs, social and political, that is to say, the state of affairs in connection with the rectory and the price of corn, was interrupted by the call for tea.

The warm fire and the pleasant social meal did make the doctor come round, and very pleasant everything seemed as they afterwards sat about the blazing fire. Sage noted how happy and contented her sister was, with her pretty young matronly face, as she sat by her husband's side and seemed to glow with content, as first one little golden-haired cherub and then the other was seated on Dr Vinnicombe's knee, the soured old cynic telling them tales to which they all listened with almost childish delight.

Luke's heart was full of joy, and he kept glancing across at Sage, who avoided his gaze in a timid, cast-down manner; but it did not displease him, for he thought she was all that was modest and sweet, and told himself that he was proud indeed to have won such a woman for his future wife.

Then there seemed to be a blank in the room, for Sage left with her sister to put the little ones to bed, Rue sending the blood flushing into her cheeks as she half mockingly said —

"How long will it be, Sage, before I am helping you to put a little Luke and a little Sage to sleep?"

They were very silent directly after, and Sage felt a kind of wondering awe as, in obedience to a word from their mother, the two little white-robed things, with their fair hair like golden glories round their heads, knelt at Aunty Sage's knee to lisp each a little simple prayer to God to send his angels to watch round their couch that night; and then back came Rue's merry words, and with them wondering awe, almost dread, at the possibility of such as these at her feet ever calling her mother, and looking to her for help.

They stayed for a few minutes to see the children sleep, with their rosy little faces on the same pillow, and then, with their arms around each other, Sage and Rue, happy girls at heart once more, descended to the dining-room, where their aunt was telling Doctor Vinnicombe about her troubles with her garden, while their uncle's face was full of good-humoured crinkles as she spoke.

"Here, girls," he said, putting down his pipe, "come and comfort me while I'm being flogged."

"I'm not flogging you, Joseph," said Mrs Portlock, speaking in a serious, half-plaintive way; "but it will soon be time for Dicky to be doing up my garden again, and I do say that it is a shame that in my own ground you will be always planting seeds and things that have no business there."

"Never put in anything that isn't useful," chuckled the Churchwarden, with his arms round his nieces' waists as they stood by his side.

"Useful, yes; but you ought not to sow carrot-seed amongst my mignonette, and plant potato-cuttings in amongst my tulips and hearts-ease. I declare, doctor, if my verbena-bed was not full of cabbage plants one day, and when I pulled them up he had them set again, and often and often I've allowed swedes, and mangolds, and rape to get ever so big in the garden before I've known what they were."

"He's a terrible rascal, Mrs Portlock, that he is; and if I were you I'd have a divorce," said the doctor.

"Ah, do, old lady," chuckled the Churchwarden, but he became serious directly as his wife rose from her seat and went and stood behind his chair, with her hands upon his shoulders.

"A divorce?" she said, smiling. "Thirty years we've been man and wife, Joseph;" and he leaned back his head and said softly —

"Ay, dear, and I worked five years till I was well enough off to give you a good home, and please God we'll have thirty more years together — here, or in the better world."

Luke Ross felt that the words were meant for him, and he tried to catch Sage's eye, but she would not raise her face, and he sat thinking that after all the farmer was right.

There was a dead silence in the room for some minutes, and then Dr Vinnicombe exclaimed —
“Come, Churchwarden, here are Michael Ross and I famishing for a game at whist.”

“To be sure,” cried the Churchwarden. “Now, girls, let's have the card-table. My word, what a night! It's a nipper indeed. Let's have another log on, old lady, and — What the dickens is the matter with those dogs?”

For just then, as the flames and sparks were roaring up the chimney, the two dogs in the yard set up a furious barking, growing so excited, and tearing so at their chains, that the Churchwarden went out to the door, opened it, and a rush of cold, searching wind roared into the room as he shouted —

“Down, Don! Quiet, Rover! Who's there?”

“Port — lock, ahoy!” came in reply, and Rue turned pale, uttered a low moan, and clung to her sister, who trembled in turn as another voice shouted —

“Call off the dogs, Mr Portlock; it is only I.”

“Sage,” whispered Rue, with her face close to her sister's ear, “let us go away.”

“Why, it must be Mr Frank Mallow,” cried Mrs Portlock, excitedly, and she glanced in a frightened way at her nieces.

“Yes, that it is,” she said, beneath her breath, as a tall, dark man with a heavy beard entered the room, closely followed by Cyril Mallow.

“Beg pardon,” he said, in a curious, half-cynical way. “Didn't expect to see me, I suppose. Only got back this afternoon; thought I should like to see all old friends.”

“Hearty glad to see you back again,” said the Churchwarden, frankly. “Sit down, Mr Cyril,” he continued, as the new-comer shook hands. “Take a chair, Mr Frank. It's like old times to see you here again.”

“Hah! yes. How well you look, farmer, and you too, Mrs Portlock. Miss Sage, I presume? Why, what a change! Grown from a slip of a girl to a charming woman. And how is Miss Rue Portlock?” he said, with mock deference, as he fixed the pale, shrinking face with his dark eyes.

“I am quite well, Mr Frank,” said Rue, making an effort to be composed, but not taking the visitor's extended hand. “John, dear,” she continued, turning to her husband, “this is Mr Frank Mallow, of whom you have heard me speak.”

“Ah! to be sure,” said John Berry. “Glad to know my little wife's friends. How are you, sir — how are you?”

Frank Mallow's eyes closed slightly, and he gazed in a half-curious, contemptuous way at John Berry as he shook hands, and then turned to Luke Ross.

“And is this Miss Sage's husband?” he said, laughingly, but in a sarcastic way that turned Sage cold.

“Well, no; I am not Miss Portlock's husband, Mr Mallow,” said Luke, smiling, and taking the extended hand, his tone saying plainly enough that he hoped soon to be.

“Ah, well, we all get married some time or other,” said the visitor, in a careless, unpleasant way.

“Have you got married then, my lad?” said the Churchwarden, reaching a cigar-box from the fireplace cupboard.

“No, not yet,” he replied, “not yet. Cyril and I are particular, eh, Cil, old man? I've come over to fetch myself a wife perhaps. Cigar? Yes; thanks. Take one, Cil? Hah! how cosy this old room seems! I've spent some pleasant hours here.”

“Ay, you've smoked many a pipe with me, Mr Frank. That was when you were in your farming days.”

“Farming days?”

“Ay,” chuckled the Churchwarden, “sowing thy wild oats, my lad.”

“Ha, ha, ha! Why, Portlock, you’re as fond of a joke as ever. Ladies, I hope you won’t mind so much smoking,” he said, puffing away vigorously all the same, while Luke Ross gazed uneasily from one brother to the other, till he caught Cyril looking at him in a haughty, offended manner, when in spite of himself his eyes fell.

“Old folks surprised to see you, eh, sir?” said the Churchwarden, to break the blank in the conversation.

“Yes, precious,” was the short reply.

“Humph!”

Frank Mallow, who was staring at Rue, while his brother was trying to catch her sister’s eye, turned at this loud grunt and smiled.

“Oh, you’re there!” he exclaimed. “And how is Doctor Vinnicombe?”

“Doctor Vinnicombe is in very good health, and in the best of spirits,” said the doctor, sarcastically, “for one of his old patients has come back, evidently to pay a heavy bill that his father refused to acknowledge.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Frank Mallow.

“And how have you got on, Mr Frank?” said the Churchwarden. “I hope you’ve made a better hit of it than Mr Cyril there, and after all the teaching I gave him about sheep.”

“Better hit? Well, I hope so. Nice fellow he was to come out to the other side of the world, and never call upon his brother.”

“You took precious good care not to let us know your address,” retorted Cyril.

“And what may you have been doing, Mr Frank?” said the Churchwarden, who was beginning to have an uneasy idea that the visitors were not adding to the harmony of the evening, and also recalling the ugly little affairs that had to do with Frank’s departure.

“Doing?”

“Yes; sir; did you try tillage?”

“Not I, farmer,” exclaimed Frank Mallow, staring hard at Rue, who kept her eyes fixed upon the carpet, or talked in a low voice to Sage, while bluff John Berry listened eagerly for what seemed likely to be an interesting narrative.

“Let’s see, Mr Frank, you went to New Zealand?”

“Yes, but I did not stay there; I ran on to Australia, and tried the diggings.”

“And did you get any gold, sir?” said John Berry, eagerly.

“Pretty well,” replied Frank Mallow; “enough to buy and stock a good sheep farm; and now I’m as warm as some of them out there,” he added, with a coarse laugh, “and I’ve come back home for a wife to take care of the house I’ve built.”

“That’s right, sir,” said John Berry, nodding his head, and smiling at Rue; “nothing like a good wife, sir, to keep you square.”

“Then you are not going to stay?” said the Churchwarden.

“Stay! what here? No thank; I had enough of England when I was here. Other side of the world for me.”

The Churchwarden was right in his ideas, for, as the night wore on, Frank Mallow seemed to be trying to pique Rue by his strange bantering ways, while all the time he was so persevering in his free attentions to Sage that Luke’s face grew red, and a frown gathered upon his forehead.

Cyril saw it too, and as he found that his brother’s conduct annoyed both Sage and Luke, he increased his attentions, laughingly telling Frank not to monopolise the ladies, but to leave a chance for some one else.

“And they call themselves gentlemen!” thought Luke Ross, as he listened gravely to all that was said, and tried to keep from feeling annoyed at the free and easy way of the two brothers, who seemed to have put on their Australian manners for the occasion, and refused to believe in Mrs Portlock being troubled and her nieces annoyed.

They had the greater part of the conversation, and thoroughly spoiled the evening, so that it was with a feeling of relief that Luke heard Cyril Mallow say —

“Well, come along; we must get back. Past twelve; and the governor likes early hours in the country.”

“Let him,” said Frank Mallow, lighting his fourth cigar.

“But the mater said she should wait up to see you before she went to bed,” said Cyril.

“Poor old girl! then I suppose we must go,” said Frank, rising. “Ladies, I kiss your hands, as we say in the east. Good-night!”

He shook hands all round, holding Rue Berry’s hand very tightly for a moment, at the same time that her brother had Sage’s little trembling fingers in his clasp.

“Good-night, gentlemen; you don’t go our way.”

The next minute Mrs Portlock uttered a sigh of relief, for the dogs were barking at the visitors whom Churchwarden Portlock was seeing to the gate.

“There’s a something I like about that young fellow,” said John Berry, breaking the silence, as the sisters stood hand clasped in hand, with Mrs Portlock looking at them in a troubled way. “I’ve heard a good deal of evil spoke of him, but a young fellow who is fond of his mother can’t be so very bad. Good-night, doctor; good-night, Mr Ross; good-night, Luke Ross. I’ll walk with you to the gate.”

The “good-night” between Luke and Sage was not a warm one, for the girl felt troubled and ill at ease, but Luke was quiet and tender.

“She’s very tired,” he said, “and I promised her — yes, I promised her — ”

He did not say what he promised her, as he went thoughtfully home, leaving his father and Doctor Vinnicombe to do all the talking; but as they parted at the doctor’s door in the High Street, the latter turned sharply, and said —

“Good-night, Luke Ross. I say, Michael Ross, I don’t think you need envy the parson his good fortune in the matter of boys.”

“I don’t envy him, Luke, my boy,” said the little thin, dry old man, as soon as they were out of hearing; “and if I were you, my boy, I’d have precious little to do with these young fellows.”

“Don’t be alarmed, father,” said Luke, laughing; “they would think it an act of condescension to associate with me.”

“No,” he said to himself, as he stood at last in his clean, plainly-furnished bedroom in the quaint little market-place, “I should be insulting Sage if I thought she could care for any one but me.”

But all the same Luke Ross’s dreams were not of a very pleasant kind that night; and those of the two sisters of a less happy character still.

Part 1, Chapter XV.

The Prodigal Sons

To look at the red-brick gabled rectory, with its rose and wistaria-covered trellis-work, the latter at its season one mass of lovely pendent lavender racemes, and the former in some form or other brightening the house with blossoms all the year round, it might have been thought that it was the home of peace and constant content. The surrounding gardens were a model of beauty, the Rector sparing no expense to make them perfect in their way; but he had long enough before found that beauty of garden and choicest interior surroundings would not bring him peace.

His first great trouble had been the illness of his wife, who, after the birth of Cynthia, had for years and years been taken to this famous specialist, to that celebrated physician, and from both to springs all over the Continent, till, finding no relief, Mr Mallow had yielded to the suffering woman's prayer.

"It is hopeless, dear," she had said, with a calm look of resignation in her pensive eyes. "Let us go home, and I will pray for strength to bear my lot."

They returned then, and it was for her sake that the garden was made to bloom with flowers, and the hothouses to produce the most delicious fruits. Their income was large from private resources, while the Lawford living was good, so that all that money could bring to alleviate the suffering woman's trouble was there, and the Rector was almost constantly at her side.

But Fate, as has been said, who had endowed the Rev. Eli Mallow with wealth, a handsome presence, and with good intellect, had not been chary in the matter of what commercial people term set-offs. Trouble besides his wife's sickness came upon him thickly, principally in the persons of his handsome, manly-looking sons.

Frank had been a difficulty from childhood. He had not been more spoilt than most boys are, though certainly his invalid mother had been most indulgent; but there was a moral bias by nature in his disposition, which somehow seemed to make him, just as he was apparently going straight for a certain goal, turn right off in a very unpleasantly-rounded curve.

Quite early in his youth he had to be recalled, to save expulsion from a certain school, on account of his heading a series of raids upon various orchards, and in defiance of divers corrections on the principal's part.

He had to return home from his two next schools for various offences against their rules, and finally his college career came to an end with rustication.

Frank laughed, and said that he did not know how it was. One thing, he said, was evident: he was not cut out for the church, and he would not go back to college when the term of his rustication was at an end.

A clerkship was obtained for him then, through great interest, in the Treasury, and here for three or four years he got along pretty well, the confinement not being great, and the number of friends he met with being of a character to suit his taste.

There were bounds, though, even in those days, to the limits accorded to a gentlemanly clerk of good birth, and when Frank took to absenting himself from the office for a week at a time, matters became serious.

For the first time or two the plea of illness was accepted, but when another absence occurred, also from illness, and Mr Frank Mallow was seen by his superiors riding a showy-looking hack in the park, and was known to have given a bachelors' party in the same week, to which several fellow-clerks were invited, it became necessary to hint to the peccant youth that the next time he was unwell, a certificate to that effect would be necessary from some well-known medical man.

Frank was ill again, so he sent in word to the office, and stayed away for another week, after which, on presenting himself, he received a warning – one which he bore in mind for a couple of months, and then his head must have once more been very bad, for there was a fresh absence, and this endured so long that Frank's seat in the Treasury knew him no more.

"Well, it don't matter, mother," he said. "It was a wretched set-out, and I was sick of the eternal copying."

"But it was such a pity, dear," his mother said, in a tone of remonstrance.

"Pity? Stuff! Eighty pounds a year, and a rise of ten pounds annually! Not bricklayer's wages, and all the time people think it's such a tremendous thing to be a Treasury clerk."

"Poor papa is so vexed and grieved, for he took such pains to get you the appointment."

"Then poor papa must get pleased again," said the young man, petulantly. "I cannot, and I will not, stand a clerk's desk. I'd sooner enlist."

"Frank!" cried his mother, reproachfully.

"Well, I declare I would, mother," he said, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and walking up and down the room.

"To find freedom?" said his mother, with a smile.

"Oh! I dare say there would be discipline to attend to, and officers to obey; but there would be some change. I should not have to be tied down to a wretched writing-table, copy, copy, copy, the whole day long."

"Change?" said Mrs Mallow, and she gazed wistfully in her son's face.

"Yes, of course; one must have some excitement."

He stood gazing out of the window, and did not notice the strange despairing look in his mother's eyes, one which seemed to tell of her own weary hours – weary years, passed upon that couch, with no hope of change save that of some day sinking into the eternal rest. It was evident that she was contrasting the selfishness of her son and his position with her own, and she sighed as she closed her eyes and lay there in silence for a time, uttering no reproach.

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