Fenn George Manville

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
The First Morning

"Remember, Hazel," said Mrs Thorne, "remember this – we may be reduced in circumstances; we may have been compelled by misfortune to come down into this wretched little town, and to live in this miserable, squeezy, poorly-furnished house or cottage, with the light kept out by the yellow glass, and scarcely a chimney that does not smoke; we may be compelled to dress shab – "

"Yes, yes, mother dear – "

"*Bily*," said Mrs Thorne, with indignant emphasis on account of the interruption, "but remember this, Hazel, you are a lady."

"Forgive me for interrupting you, mother."

"*Mamma*, Hazel," said the lady, drawing herself up with great dignity. "If we are by a cruel stroke of fate compelled to live in a state of indigence when pride has made my eldest child refuse the assistance of my relatives, I still maintain that I have a right to keep up my old and ladylike title – mamma."

"But, dear, I am only a schoolmistress now – a national

schoolmistress, and it would sound full of foolish assumption if I called you mamma. And are you not my dear, dear mother! There, there, good-bye, dear," cried the speaker, kissing her affectionately; "and mind the dinner is done, for I shall be, – oh, so hungry."

"As you please, Hazel," said Mrs Thorne, smoothing down her dress, and looking ill-used. "Let it be mother then. My feelings have to be set aside as usual. My life is to be one slow glide down a slope of indignity to the grave. Ah, what have I done to deserve such a fate?"

"Mother, dear mother, pray, pray don't grieve, and I'll strive so hard to make you and the girls happy. You will soon like this little cottage; and when we get some more furniture, and some flowers, and a bird in the window, it will look so bright and cheerful and – there, there, pray don't cry. I must go; it only wants five minutes to nine, and I must not be late the first morning."

"I think it disgraceful that, in addition to six days a week, you should be compelled to go and teach on Sundays as well; and I shall make a point of speaking to Mr Lambent the first time he calls – that is, if he should ever condescend to call."

"No, no, pray don't think of such a thing, dear," cried Hazel Thorne excitedly. "You forget that I have the whole of Saturday, and – there, there – dear, dear mother, I must go. Good – good-bye."

Hazel Thorne kissed the stiff stately-looking lady in the stiffest of widow's weeds, and with a bright look and a cheery

nod, she hurried out of the little Gothic schoolhouse, with its prim, narrow lancet windows; but as she closed the door, the bright look gave place to one of anxious care, and there was a troubled nervous twitching about her lips that told of a struggle to master some painful emotion.

She had but a few yards to go, for the new school-buildings at Plumton All Saints were in one tolerably attractive architectural group, built upon a piece of land given two years before by Mr William Forth Burge, a gentleman who had left Plumton All Saints thirty – but it should be given in his own words, as he made a point of repeating them to every new-comer:

"Yes, sir; I left Plumton thirty year ago, after being two year with old Marks the butcher, and went up to London to seek my fortune, and I think I found it, I did."

Mr William Forth Burge's fortune was made by being a butcher's boy for some years, and then starting among some new houses near Chelsea on his own account. Fashion and the speculative builders did the rest. Mr William Forth Burge's business grew to a tremendous extent, and at forty-five he sold it and proudly returned to his native place – a gentleman, he said. Stout, red-faced, very pomatumy about his smooth, plastered-down dark hair, very much dressed in glossy broadcloth and white waistcoats, and very much scented with his favourite perfume, "mill flowers," as he called it.

Mr William Forth Burge left Plumton – "Bill"; he came back writing his name in full, and everybody followed his example

as soon as he had shown himself at the various land sales and bought pretty largely. For he was always looking out for "investments," and the local auctioneers addressed him with great respect as "sir." Why, upon the occasion of the dinner given at the "George," when he took the chair after the laying of the first stone of the new school-buildings by Sir Appleton Burr, the county member, whose name was down for ten pounds, the Reverend Henry Lambent, the vicar, made his chin sore with his very stiff cravat, rolling his head to give due emphasis to the very sermon-like speech, the text of which was that Mr William Forth Burge was an honour to the place of his birth; and the finale, received with vociferous cheering and stamping of feet, was the proposal of this gentleman's health.

He was a very modest, mild man, this donor of a piece of land of the value of some three hundred and fifty pounds to the parish; and though an ex-butcher, had probably never slain innocent lamb, let alone sheep or ox, in his life. When he rose to respond he broke forth into a profuse perspiration – a more profuse perspiration than usual; and his application of a fiery orange silk handkerchief to his face, neck, and hands, almost suggested that its contact with his skin would scorch him, or at least make him hiss, what time he told people that he left Plumton thirty year ago, after being two year with old Marks the butcher, etc., and then went on to speak of himself as if he were an oyster, for every few moments he announced to his fellow-townsmen that he was a native, and that he was proud of being a native, and

that he did not see how a native could better show his love for his native place than by giving his native place a piece of ground for the erection of the new schools; and so on, and so on.

Of course, Sir Appleton Burr, M.P., said that it was a charmingly *naïve* piece of autobiography, and that Plumton All Saints ought to be very proud of such a man, and no doubt Plumton was proud of him, for where was the need of grammar to a man with fifty thousand pounds; especially as Mr William Forth Burge, besides having no grammar, had no pride.

In due time, the money was found, with the help of a grant from the Committee of Council on Education, the schools being meanwhile erected – a long red-brick semi-Gothic central building, with houses for the schoolmaster and mistress at either end, each standing in its neat garden, the central school building being so arranged that, by drawing up and pushing down sash-hung shutters, the boys and girls' schools could be thrown into one, as was always the case on Sundays.

Just as Hazel Thorne left her gate to walk thirty yards to that leading to the girls' entrance, Mr Samuel Chute, master of the boys' school, left his door to walk thirty yards to the gate leading to the boys' entrance, but did not stop there, for he came right on, raising his hat, and displaying a broad white lumpy forehead, backed by fair hair that seemed to have been sown upon his head and come up in a sturdy crop, some portions being more vigorous than others, and standing up in tufts behind the lumps about his forehead; doubtless these latter being kindly arrangements made

by nature to allow room for brain projections, consequent upon over-study.

Mr Samuel Chute smiled, and said that it was a very fine morning, a fact that Hazel Thorne acknowledged, as the schoolmaster replaced his hat.

"The handle of the door goes very stiffly," he said, still smiling rather feebly, for he was annoyed with himself for not having offered to shake hands, and it was too late now. "I thought I'd come and open it for you."

Hazel thanked him. The heavy latch was twisted up by an awkward ring like a young door-knocker, and went *click*! and was let down again, and went *clack*! Then the new schoolmistress bowed and entered, and Mr Samuel Chute went back to his own entrance, looking puzzled, his forehead full of wrinkles, and so preoccupied that he nearly ran up against Mr William Forth Burge, whom he might have smelt if he had not seen, as he came to the school as usual on Sunday mornings to take his class, and impart useful and religious instruction to the twelve biggest boys.

There was a mist before Hazel Thorne's eyes as she entered the large schoolroom, with its so-called gallery and rows of desks down the side, all supported upon iron pedestals like iron bars with cricks in their backs. All about the floor were semicircles marked out by shiny brass-headed nails, as if the boards had been decorated by a mad undertaker after the fashion of a coffin-lid, while between the windows, and in every other vacant place, were hung large drawing copies of a zoological character,

embracing the affectionate boa-constrictor, the crafty crocodile, and the playful squirrel, all of which woodcuts had issued from the Sanctuary at Westminster, probably with the idea that some child in Plumton schools might develop into a female Landseer.

This being Sunday, Hazel Thorne's duties were light, and after Mr Samuel Chute had rapped upon his desk, and read prayers for the benefit of both schools, the new mistress had little to do beyond superintending, and trying to make herself at home.

She found that there were four classes in her side of the Sunday-school, each with its own teacher, certain ladies coming regularly from the town, chief of whom were the Misses Lambent – Beatrice and Rebecca, the former a pale, handsome, but rather sinister lady of seven or eight-and-twenty, the latter a pale, unhandsome, and very sinister lady of seven or eight-and-thirty, both elegantly dressed, and ready to receive the new mistress with a cold and distant bow that spoke volumes, and was as repellant as hailstones before they have touched the earth.

For the Misses Lambent were the vicar's sisters, and taught in the Sunday-school from a sense of duty. Hazel Thorne was ready to forget that she was a lady by birth and education. The Misses Lambent were not; and besides, it was two minutes past nine when Hazel entered the room. It was five minutes to nine when they rustled in with their stiffest mien and downcast eyes.

But they always displayed humility, even when they snubbed the girls of their classes – a humility which prompted them to give up the first class to Miss Burge – christened Betsey, a name

of which she was not in the least ashamed, and which, like her brother with his William Forth, she wrote in full.

The third and fourth class girls had an enmity against those of the first for no other reason than that they were under Miss Burge, who heard them say their catechism, and read, and asked questions afterwards out of a little book which she kept half hidden beneath her silk *visite*; for pleasant, little, homely, round-faced Miss Burge could hardly have invented a question of an original character to save her life. One thing, however, was patent, and that was that the first class was so far a model of good behaviour that the girls did not titter very much, nor yet pinch one another, or dig elbows into each other's ribs more than might be expected from young ladies of their station; while they never by any chance made faces at "teacher" when her back was turned, a practice that seemed to afford great pleasure to the young ladies who were submitted to a sort of cold shower-bath, iced with awkward texts by the Misses Lambent, in classes third and fourth.

The second class was taken by another maiden lady – Miss Penstemon, sister of Doctor Penstemon, M.D., F.R.C.S., of the High Street. She was thinner and more graceful than the Misses Lambent, and possibly much older; but that was her secret and one which she never divulged.

The Misses Lambent, as before mentioned, bowed with dignity and grave condescension to the new mistress; and, taking her cue from the vicar's sisters. Miss Penstemon bowed also,

plunging her hand afterwards into her black bag for her smelling-bottle, for she thought the room was rather close.

The bottle she brought out, however, she thrust back hastily, and gave a quick glance round to see if she had been observed; for, instead of its containing a piece of sponge saturated with the colourless fluid labelled in her brother's surgery, "Liq. Amm.," and afterwards scented with a few drops of an essential oil, the little stoppered bottle bore a label with the enigmatical word "Puls." thereon, and its contents were apparently a number of little sugar pills.

For be it known that Maria Penstemon had a will of her own, and a strong tendency to foster crotchets. The present crotchet was homoeopathy, which, without expressing any belief for or against, the doctor had forbidden her to practise.

"No, 'Ria," he said, "if you want to go doctoring, doctor the people with your moral medicines. It won't do for you to be physicking one way and me another, so let it alone."

But Miss Penstemon refused to submit to coercion, and insisted in secret upon following her path while the doctor went his, Maria's being the homoeopath, while the doctor's was, of course, the allopath; and he was a long time finding out that his sister surreptitiously "exhibited" pilules, for she never did any harm.

Hazel Thorne met with a different reception, however, from downright Miss Burge, who rose from her seat, looked red and "flustered," as she called it, smiled, and shook hands.

"I'm very, very glad to know you, my dear," she said warmly, "and I hope you'll come and see me often as soon as you get shaken down."

Shaken down! The words jarred upon the young mistress, who felt that she could never become intimate with Miss Burge, whom she left to her class, and then busied herself with the attendance register and various other little matters connected with her duties. Once she stole a glance across at the boys' school, to become aware of the fact that Mr Chute was watching her attentively, so was Mr William Forth Burge; and, to make matters worse, half the boys in the classes were following their teachers' eyes, so that it was with something like a feeling of relief that Hazel saw that the clock pointed to half-past ten, the time for closing for the morning, and marshalling the girls in order for walking two-and-two as far as the church.

Chapter Two.
The Vicar sees a Gentleman

Mr Chute rang a bell and said, "Sh! sh!"

Books were put away, the lady teachers rose, and, with the exception of Miss Burge, moved towards the door, the latter lady glancing at the new mistress, and, apparently pitying her strangeness, seeming disposed to hang back and walk with her; but Hazel Thorne's attention was too much taken up by her task, and getting her little force of about eight-and-thirty or forty girls two-and-two, she started them for church, herself taking the smallest morsel – to wit, little Jenny Straggalls – under her wing.

Now, the only ways to march forty girls two-and-two to church with anything like order are either to put the two smallest pupils in the front, and then go on rising in years till you have the two eldest in the rear, or to pair off the largest and smallest children together.

If neither of these plans is adopted, discipline is liable to fail. One black sheep will corrupt a flock, and though not a black sheep but a very red-haired frisky lamb, there were qualities in Ophelia, or more commonly "Feelier," Potts sufficiently mischievous to corrupt any flock of girls.

The experiences she had picked up at Whitelands were forgotten by Hazel Thorne in the flurry and excitement of this

her first morning with her school. The stern looks of the lady teachers had made her feel nervous. It was tiresome, too, just at starting that Mr Chute should be holding his boys in hand at the door, with a politeness of which he had never before been guilty, to allow the girls to go on first to church; and Mr William Forth Burge was standing by him, smiling all over his round, closely-shaven face, which was so smooth that it shone in the sun, and preparing himself for the incense of forty bobs, that he would receive from the girls as they went by.

This was Feelier's opportunity. As one of the biggest girls, she had been placed first with Ann Straggalls, the fair, round eyed, and fat; and as Feelier went marching on with head erect, she turned the said head slowly round towards the boys, and squinted so horribly that her eyes half disappeared beneath the bridge of her nose, and Tommy Sullins, a very wild, excitable little boy, forgot his awe of Mr Samuel Chute, and burst into a loud "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sullins!" shouted Mr Chute; and Feelier was gazing wonderingly at the boy with her eyes in their normal, position, as the little fellow became perfectly snail-like in his action, and crept back into the very stiff long pinafore he was wearing.

Then bob, bob, bob, bob went the girls as they passed Mr William Forth Burge, who came out of the gate as the last pair passed and smiled his way up to his sister, who was toddling along beside Hazel Thorne, and making Mr Samuel Chute feel annoyed, for he was obliged to leave some little space before

starting his boys; and then as he had always been in the habit of walking last, it would have looked peculiar to walk in front. Besides which there would have been the risk of little boys straggling behind, and perhaps not appearing in church at all; so, in spite of an intense desire, freshly developed, to keep near the new schoolmistress, he was compelled to walk at a distance of twenty-two doubled boys behind, and this made him metaphorically gnash his teeth.

Mr Chute's way of gnashing his teeth was, paradoxical as it may sound, with his hands, upon which he wore a pair of brand new kid gloves, bought late on Saturday night expressly to impress the new mistress. These hands seemed to have been suddenly seized with an angry itching to seize little boys' arms and shoulders, to give them nips and shakes and pushes for not walking better than they did; and the severe drilling he gave them as he walked backwards and forwards along the semi-military column made the boys stare. But it was upon Master Sullins that the vials of his wrath threatened to be emptied. He could not forgive that laugh. What, he asked himself, would Miss Thorne think? It was terrible, and seemed to him like the first step towards blasting the hopes that had already begun to bud after seeing the new mistress only twice. The consequence was, that whenever he told himself never had the boys walked to church so badly before, he glanced at Tommy Sullins, and when he glanced at Tommy Sullins, he thought of a certain length of that thin rattan or *rotan* cane that grows so beautifully in the Malay

Peninsula, running up and down trees in festoons for two or three hundred feet. Utterly ignorant as he was of the beauty of rotan cane in its native state, Tommy had so lively a recollection of it in its cut-up or commercial form, that reading threats in Mr Chute's eyes, the boy's face began to work, and had not the master gone right to the rear, and rigidly abstained from further demonstrations, the procession would have been enlivened by a most tremendous howl.

Quite disposed to be friendly. Miss Burge, then, while her fellow Sunday-school teachers sailed gracefully on to church, toddled and prattled beside the new-comer to Plumton, feeling pleased and attracted by her gentle ways.

Toddled is the only word that will express Miss Burge's way of progression, for it seemed as if there were no joints to her legs, and consequently, as she walked she rolled sharply first to right and then to left, but got over the ground pretty smartly all the same.

"Oh, this is my brother, Miss Thorne," she prattled pleasantly. "My brother, Mr William Forth Burge, who presented the town with the site for the new schools. Bill, dear, this is our new mistress. Miss Hazel Thorne, and a very pretty name, too, isn't it?"

"A very nice name indeed," said "Bill," taking off his hat and perfuming the morning air with a whiff of pomatum scent; after which he replaced his hat and smiled, and breathed very hard, but took his place, to Mr Chute's great annoyance, on Hazel's

other side, evidently with the intention of walking with her and his sister right up to church.

Hazel felt more nervous than before. It was very kind and friendly of these people, but they divided her attention, and the schoolgirls wanted it all. For, having succeeded so well over the squinting, and thereby won the admiration of her fellow-pupils, girl-like, Miss Feelier must attempt something new, and this novelty was the giving vent to little mouse-like squeaks, just loud enough to be heard by Ann Straggalls, who began to titter, and of course this was communicated to others near.

The long notes became so marked at last that Hazel had to apologise to her new friends, and hurry to the front and admonish, painfully conscious the while that plenty of the inhabitants were at their windows and doors, watching and commenting upon the appearance of the new mistress, some remarks being loud enough for her to hear.

Order being restored, Hazel resumed her place, and Mr William Forth Burge took up his parable and said: —

"Plumton's a deal altered. Miss Thorne, since I knowed it first."

"Is it?" said Hazel.

"Oh, a deal. Why, when I left Plumton thirty year ago, after being two year with old Marks the butcher, and went up to London to seek my fortune – and I think I found it eh, Betsey?"

"That you did indeed, dear," said little Miss Burge proudly.

"Ah, I did, Miss Thorne," he continued. "Why, at that time – "

"I beg your pardon," said Hazel; "the girls are not yet used to me."

She had become aware just then that something else was wrong in the van of her little army, and hurrying to the front, she found fat Ann Straggalls furiously red, and choking with laughter.

"For shame!" began Hazel severely. "I don't yet know your name."

"Straggalls, teacher," burst out a chorus of voices. "Annie Straggalls."

"Straggalls, I shall have to punish you if you do not walk properly. A great girl like you, and setting so bad an example."

"Please, teacher, it wasn't me," began fat Ann Straggalls.

"It was you," retorted Hazel; "I saw you laughing and behaving very badly."

"But please, teacher, it was Feelier Potts kept tiddling of me _ "

"Oh, what a wicked story, teacher."

"Silence!" cried Hazel.

"Inside of my 'and, where there's a 'ole in my glove, teacher."

"'Strue as goodness I didn't, teacher," cried Feelier.

"Not another word. Walk quietly on to church. I will talk about it to-morrow."

This was, of course, as the progression went on, and just at that moment, as she was resuming her place. Hazel Thorne felt as if she had been attacked by a severe spasm. Her heart seemed to stand still, and she turned pale; then it began to beat furiously,

and there was a crimson flush in her face and temples as she became aware of the fact that a tall, well-dressed, gentlemanly-looking young man was walking on the other side of the long street leading into the town, and she saw him change his thin, closely-folded umbrella from one hand to the other, ready to raise his hat to her if she would have looked across the road again. But she let her eyes fall, and this time returned to her place between Mr and Miss Burge, feeling glad that they were there, and almost glorying in the vulgarity of their appearance as a safeguard to her from recollections of the past, and the possibility of troubles in the future.

"Ah, as I was a-saying," resumed Mr William Forth Burge, "Plumton's wonderfully changed since I went to London. Do you know London, Miss Thorne?"

"Oh, yes, I know London," she replied. "I used to live at Kensington."

"Did you now!" cried her companion, looking at her with admiration. "Well now, that is strange!"

Hazel could not see the strangeness of the fact, but she said nothing.

"Why, my carts used to go all round Kensington, right to Notting Hill, and take in Chelsea and Pimlico as well."

"I really must beg of you to excuse me once more," said Hazel.

"Naughty child. Sh – sh – sh!" said little Miss Burge, shaking her parasol at the two first girls of the rank, as Hazel went off again. For, highly indignant at having been charged with

"tiddling" her fellow pupil. Miss Ophelia Potts had snatched herself together very tightly, and keeping hold of Ann Straggalls' hand – the one that had a hole in the glove – she had begun to walk as fast as she could with so much heavy ballast as Miss Straggalls proved. The consequence was, that the girls behind followed suit not quite so fast, the next couple caught the infection, and then there was a hiatus, six girls straggling a long way ahead, and after a great gap of twenty or thirty yards there was the rest of the school. Hazel hurried after her disordered forces, and checked the advance guard till they were joined by the rest, after which she allowed the brother and sister to come up to her, when she once more took her place, looking terribly conscious of the fact that Archibald Graves was on the other side, keeping pace with them, and looking across as if begging for a glance.

"Quite a stranger, Betsey. No; I never see him afore."

"Why, how hot and flustered you do look, my dear!" said little Miss Burge. "The girls *is* tiresome this morning. If that Feelier Potts don't behave herself, she sha'n't come up to the garden to tea."

"You haven't seen my garden, Miss Thorne," said the ex-butcher.

"No."

"Ah, you'll have to come up and see my garden. My sister here will ask you to bring up some of the best girls to take them on the lawn, and eat cake."

"But not a bit for that naughty Feelier Potts," cried Miss Burge, shaking her parasol at the delinquent. "Look at that now, Bill. Well, of all the aggravating hussies."

Hazel was already on in front, to where Miss Feelier had turned what her mother termed "stunt;" that is to say, she behaved as a horse does that has a character for jibbing – she was not allowed to go her own pace, so she began to walk as slowly as possible, and almost stopped.

It needs neither blackboard nor chalk to demonstrate the problem that follows:

A, B, and C, are divisions of a column of troops on the march. Portion A forms the advance guard; B the centre; C the rear. If A marched one mile per hour, B two miles per hour, and C three miles per hour, what would be the result?

Setting aside miles per hour. Hazel Thorne's column behaved as above; and in two minutes, to Feelier Potts' great delight of which, however, she did not display an inkling in her stolid face, the little column was all in confusion, while the young lady called out loudly:

"Please, teacher, they're a-scrouging of us behind."

There was nothing for it but for Hazel Thorne to lead the van, leaving little Miss Burge in charge of the rear, seeing which state of affairs, Mr William Forth Burge was about to leave his sister and go up to the front and continue his egotistical discourse; but here he was checked by Miss Burge.

"No, no, Bill; you mus'n't," she whispered.

"Mus'n't what?"

"Mustn't go after her and walk like that."

"Why not?"

"Well, because – because she's – well, because she's so nice, and young, and pretty," whispered Miss Burge, who was at a loss for a reason.

"But that's why I like to go and talk to her, Betsey," exclaimed the man of fortune heartily. "She's about the nicest young lady I think I ever did see."

"But you mus'n't, Bill," said his sister in alarm, "people would talk."

"Let 'em," said the ex-butcher proudly. "I can afford it. Let 'em talk."

"But it might be unpleasant for Miss Thorne, dear."

"Oh! Hah! I didn't think of that," said the gentleman slowly; and, taking off his hat he drew his orange silk handkerchief from his pocket, and blew such a sonorous blast that little Jenny Straggalls, who was last in the rank, started in alarm.

After this Mr William Forth Burge held his hat in one hand, his orange handkerchief in the other, and looked at both in turn, scenting the morning air the while with "mill flowers," and the essential oil in the pomade he used.

Custom caused this hesitation. For years past he had been in the habit of placing his handkerchief in his hat – the proper place for it, he said – but Miss Burge said that gentlemen did not carry their handkerchiefs in their 'ats. "And you are a gentleman, you

know, now, Bill."

So, with a sigh, Mr William Forth Burge refrained from burying the flaming orange silk in the hollow of his hat, thrust it into his pocket, and replaced his glossy head-piece, uttering another sigh the while, and looking very thoughtful the rest of the way.

Oh! the relief of reaching the church door, and following the children into the cool shadows of the empty building. Not quite empty though, for the Misses Lambent were in their places in the pew near the chancel, and the Reverend Henry Lambent, cold, calm, handsome, and stern of mien, was raising his head with a reproving frown at the girls who clattered so loudly up the stairs, in spite of Hazel's efforts to keep them still.

"Why, Betsey," said Mr William Forth Burge, "that chap seems to know our new mistress."

"Ye-es, dear, perhaps he's her brother," whispered back Miss Burge, as they entered their richly-cushioned pew – one which used to belong to the old manor-house that was pulled down.

"Beatrice, did you see a strange gentleman go up to Miss Thorne and speak to her as she came into church?" said the Reverend Henry Lambent, as he and his sisters were going back to the vicarage after the morning service.

"Yes, brother Henry; we both saw it," said Miss Beatrice, "and were going to mention it to you."

The incident was this: —

Just as Hazel Thorne was going to her seat in the gallery, the

tall gentleman came through the porch, hesitated a moment, and then, seeing that the church was nearly empty, he went quickly up to the young mistress.

"Hazel," he whispered, "I have come down on purpose. I must – I will see you after church."

"I beg your pardon," she said coldly; "our acquaintance is at an end."

"End! No. I have come to my senses. It must not – it shall not be."

"It must and shall, Mr Graves," she said, turning away.

"For Heaven's sake, why?" he whispered excitedly, as she was going.

"Times are changed, sir. I am only a schoolmistress now."

Just then Mr Chute entered with the boys, and he turned white as he saw the stranger there.

Chapter Three.
Hazel's Troubles

About a year and a half before Hazel Thorne had the task of conducting her school for the first time to Plumton church, she was in her home at Kensington, leading the every-day pleasant life of the daughter of a stockbroker, who was reputed among his friends as being "warm," that being the appropriate term for a man who is said to have a pretty good store of money well invested in solid securities.

"Fred Thorne will buy mining shares for you, or shares in any bubble that is popular at the time; but catch him putting his coin in anything doubtful."

That is what people said; and as he had a good home at Kensington, and gave nice, quiet little dinners, he and his were pretty well courted.

"Well, yes, I don't mind, Archy," said old Graves, the wholesale cork merchant of Tower Hill. "Hazel Thorne is a very nice girl – very pretty and ladylike, so I suppose we must swallow the mother for her sake."

The boa-constrictor-like proposition was naturally enough taken by Archibald Graves in its slango-metaphorical sense, and slango-metaphorically Mrs Frederick Thorne was swallowed by the whole of the Graves family, and she did not agree with them.

For Mrs Thorne was not a pleasant woman. Tall, handsome, and thoroughly ladylike in appearance, she was very proud of having been considered a beauty, and was not above reminding her husband of the fact that she might have married So-and-so and What's-his-name, and You-know-whom, all of which gentlemen could have placed her in a better position than that she occupied; and as she grew older these references were more frequent. Each child she had seemed to be looked upon by her as a fresh grievance – a new cause for tears, and tears she accordingly shed to an extent that might have made any one fancy this was the reason why the Thorne home generally seemed damp and chilly, till Hazel entered the room like so much sunshine, when the chill immediately passed away.

Gradually growing weaker in act and speech, the unfortunate woman received a shock which completed the change that had been gradually heretofore advancing, for Fred Thorne – handsome, bright, cheery, and ever ready to laugh at mamma's doldrums, as he called them – went out as usual one morning to the City, saying that he should be back a little earlier to dinner that day, as he had stalls for the opera.

"I'll come back through Covent Garden, Hazel, and bring you a bouquet," he cried merrily.

"You need not bring flowers for me, Frederick," said Mrs Thorne, in an aggrieved tone. "I am growing too old for flowers now."

"Too old? Ha, ha, ha!" he cried. "Why, you look younger than

ever. Smithson asked me the other day if you and Hazel were my daughters."

"Did he, Frederick," said Mrs Thorne, in a rather less lachrymose tone.

"To be sure he did; and of course I am going to bring you a bouquet as well."

He bought the two bouquets, and they were kept fresh in water, taken to pieces, and spread over his breast, as he lay cold and stern in his coffin: for as he was carefully bearing the box containing the flowers across Waterloo Place on his way home that evening, there was a cry, a shout, the rush of wheels, and the trampling of horses; a barouche came along Pall Mall at a furious rate, with two ladies therein clinging to the sides, and the coachman and footman panic-stricken on the box. One rein had broken, and the horses tore round the corner towards Regent Street as if mad with fear.

It was a gallant act, and people said at the inquest that it saved the ladies and the servants, but it was at the sacrifice of his own life. For, dropping the box he was carrying, Fred Thorne, a hale strong man of five-and-forty, dashed at the horses' heads, caught one by the bit and held on, to be dragged fifty or sixty yards, and crushed against the railings of one of the houses.

He stopped the horses, and was picked up by the crowd that gathered round.

"Stop a moment, he wants to say something – he is only stunned – here, get some water – what say, sir!"

"My – poor – darlings!"

They were Fred Thorne's last words, uttered almost with his last breath.

The shock was terrible.

Mrs Thorne took to her bed at once, and was seriously ill for weeks, while Hazel seemed to have been changed in one moment from a merry thoughtless girl to a saddened far-seeing woman.

For upon her the whole charge of the little household fell. There was the nursing of the sick mother, the care and guidance of Percy, a clever, wilful boy of sixteen, now at an expensive school, and the management of the two little girls, Cissy and Mabel.

For the first time in her life she learned the meaning of real trouble, and how dark the world can look at times to those who are under its clouds.

The tears had hardly ceased to flow for the affectionate indulgent father, when Hazel had to listen to business matters, a friend of her father calling one morning, and asking to see her.

This was a Mr Edward Geringer, a gentleman in the same way of business as Mr Thorne, and who had been fully in his confidence.

He was a thin, fair, keen-looking man of eight-and-thirty or forty, with a close, tight mouth, and a quick, impressive way of speaking; his pale-bluish eyes looking sharply at the person addressed the while. He looked, in fact, what he was – a well-dressed clear-headed man, with one thought – how to make

money; and he found out how it was done.

That is hardly fair, though. He had another thought, one which had come into his heart – a small one – when the late Mr Thorne had brought him home one day to dinner and to discuss some monetary scheme. That thought had been to make Hazel Thorne his wife, and he had nursed it in silence till it grew into a great plant which overshadowed his life.

He had seen Hazel light and merry, and had been a witness, at the little evenings at the house in Kensington, of the attentions to her paid by Archibald Graves. He knew, too, that they pleased Hazel; and as he saw her brightened eyes and the smiles she bestowed, the hard, cold City man bit his lips and felt sting after sting in his heart.

"Boy-and-girl love," he muttered though, when he was alone. "It will not last, and I can wait."

So Edward Geringer waited, and in his visits he was in Hazel's eyes only her father's friend, to whom she was bright and merry, taking his presents of fruit and flowers, concert tickets, and even of a ring and locket, just as one of her little sisters might have taken a book or toy. "Oh, *thank* you, Mr Geringer; it was so good of you!" That was all; and the cold calm, calculating man said to himself: "She's very young – a mere child yet; and I can wait."

And now he had come, as soon as he felt it prudent after the funeral, to find that he had waited and that Hazel Thorne was no longer a child; and as he saw her in her plain, close-fitting mourning, and the sweet pale face full of care and trouble, he

rose to meet her, took both her hands in his, and kissed them with a reverence that won her admiration and respect. “My dear Hazel,” he said softly.

She did not think it strange, but suffered him to lead her to a chair and saw him take one before her. He was her father’s old friend, and she was ready to look up to him for help and guidance in her present strait.

For some minutes they sat in silence, for she could not trust herself to speak, and Geringer waited till she should be more composed.

At last he spoke.

“Hazel, my dear child,” he said.

“My dear child!” What could have been kinder and better! It won her confidence at once. Her father’s old friend would help and counsel her, for she needed the help much; and Archibald had seemed since those terrible days to be thoughtless and selfish instead of helpful.

“I have come to talk to you, Hazel, on very grave matters,” Geringer went on; and she bowed her head for him to continue. “I have to say things to you that ought by rights to be spoken to your mother; but I find here that in future you will be the head of this household, and that mother, brother, sisters will turn to you.”

“Poor mamma! she is broken-hearted,” sighed Hazel. “I shall try to do my best, Mr Geringer.”

“I know you will, Hazel, come what may.”

“Yes, come what may,” she replied, with another sigh.

"Shall I leave what I have to say for a few weeks, and then talk it over? I can wait."

"I would rather hear it now," replied Hazel. "No trouble could be greater than that we have had to bear, and I see you have bad news for us, Mr Geringer."

"I regret to say I have – very bad news."

"Tell me," said Hazel sadly, as she gazed in her visitor's face.

"It is about the future, my dear child," he said slowly; and he watched the effect of his words. "You and your brother and sisters have been brought up here quite in luxury."

"Papa was always most indulgent and kind."

"Always," assented Geringer. "There, I will not hesitate – I will not go roundabout to tell you. I only ask you, my dear Hazel, to try and bear with fortitude the terrible news I have to inflict upon you, and to beg that you will not associate it in future with me."

"I shall always think of you as my father's most trusted friend. But pray, pray tell me now, and – and – I will try to bear it as I should."

She was choked now by her sobs, and as Geringer tenderly took one of her hands, she let him retain it while he spoke.

"My dear Hazel," he said, "your late father always passed for a wealthy man, but I grieve to say that of late he had embarked in some most unfortunate speculations."

"Poor papa!"

"They were so bad that at last all depended upon one change in

the market – a change that did not take place till after his death."

Hazel sobbed.

"If he had lived two days longer he would have known that he was a ruined man."

Hazel's tears ceased to flow, and Geringer went on: —

"I grieve, then, to tell you, my dear child, that instead of leaving his family in a tolerably independent state, my poor friend has left you all penniless."

"Penniless?"

"Yes. Worse; for this house and its furniture must go to defray the debts he has left behind. It is terrible – terrible indeed."

"Terrible?"

"Yes, dreadful," he said, gazing in her face.

"Is that all?"

"All? All, my child? What do you mean?"

"Is that the terrible trouble you said that you had to communicate."

"Yes, my dear child," he exclaimed; "it is dreadful news."

"But it is only money matters," said Hazel innocently; and her face lit up with a pleasant smile. "I thought it was some dreadful trouble – some fresh misfortune." And as she sat looking him full in the eyes, her quick imagination carried her on to the time when Archibald would ask her to be his wife. His father was rich, and they would have a nice, bright little home somewhere, and mamma and the little girls would live with them. Percy would come home during his holidays, and they would be as happy as

the day was long. Certainly, she did shrink a little at the thought of mamma and Archibald; but then she knew he would be as self-denying as herself, and he would do anything for her sake, of course.

She was brought back to the present by her visitor.

"You do not think this so great a trouble, then!" he said.

"Oh, no!" cried Hazel. "It only means going to a humbler house: and of course Percy and I will set to work to make mamma happy and comfortable."

"Of course," said the visitor dryly.

"And Percy is growing into a man, and he must take an office and do something in the City; and I must do something too, Mr Geringer – teach music or painting. You will help me, will you not!"

"In any way. In every way I will devote myself to your service. You will allow me?"

"Indeed I will," she said, placing both her hands in his. "Papa always said you were one of his best friends, and to whom could I look better than to you."

"Trust me, Hazel, and you shall never repent it," he cried warmly – so warmly that he saw a half-alarmed look in the young girl's face; but he succeeded in chasing it away by his after-display of tender regret and reverence; and left her comparatively happy and at rest.

Chapter Four.
A Proposal

All looked so easy and bright in the future that it seemed harsh on the part of Fate to crush out hope after hope. All appeared so promising when Hazel had discussed her position with Mr Geringer, and then during the next few months bit by bit the morsels of blue sky were blotted out of her horizon, till all above her seemed cold grey cloud, and her life a blank.

First then was her mother's health to battle for, and to comfort her when they had to move to furnished lodgings and manage without a servant.

"Yes, it will be better," said Edward Geringer to himself with a smile. "Let it work."

He had thought the matter out thoroughly – for the family, save for a little consideration displayed by the creditors, were absolutely penniless; and he let them go into lodgings, and waited to be asked for help.

The first appeal to him was about Percy, the son; and he responded willingly, advising sensibly and well that the lad should go into some City office and fight his way in the world.

Hazel sighed, for she had hoped for more schooling and then a career at college, in spite of her talk of her brother's working. So Percy went into the office of Suthers, Rubley, and Spark, the

sugar-brokers, and came home grumbling every night.

It was hard to bear, for it upset poor weak Mrs Thorne, who sympathised with her son, and talked of the degradation, and sighed and petted him, calling him her noble boy, inveighing against Fate, and making the lad ten times as discontented with his position as he had been before, and so increased the load on Hazel's shoulders just at a time when she was nearly broken-hearted.

For it was unmistakable: Archibald Graves, the true, the sterling, the handsome, the best of men, had been yielding to home-pressure. Old Graves said it was preposterous. The girl was right enough, but he was not going to see his son throw himself away and set up a home with a penniless girl so as to keep her mother and family as well.

Archibald Graves was indignant at first, then he thought it over. Hazel was the nicest and dearest of girls, but certainly Mrs Thorne only wanted a vowel left out of her name for it to describe her exactly. He did not like Percy either, whom he thought "a spoiled young cub." Then there were more words with his father; introductions to friends of his sisters, especially to one Miss Pettifer, who was reputed rich, and so on, till Archibald Graves, in following his own likings, set it all down to his father's stern orders.

He told himself that he was only doing his duty in ceasing his visits to the Thornes, and after nearly breaking her heart, pride came to Hazel Thorne's help, and she grew pale and sterner

of face as the weeks passed, and no Archibald, while Edward Geringer came regularly, called her his dear child, and went away smiling and praising himself for his self-restraint.

It is needless to go on describing Hazel Thorne's troubles during these months, when, in addition to the suffering produced by the falling away of one to whom she had looked for help, there was the attendance on the querulous, sick, thoughtless mother, always complaining of her fate and the fact that a lady should be brought down to such a life. There was Percy to combat when he talked of throwing up his situation, "appointment" he called it – the children – the little sisters – to teach, and, above all, the battle to fight of finding money, and lowering her pride to accept help from relatives who gave grudgingly when unwillingly appealed to.

Mr Geringer had thoughtfully placed money in her hands twice.

"The result of a little speculation in which I was engaged with poor Thorne, my dear child," he said; but that failed fast, and as Hazel toiled on at her task of giving lessons to three or four pupils she had got together, she looked blankly forward at the future, and wondered what they all would do.

It was nearly six months since her father's death, and she could not conceal the fact from herself that they were rapidly going down-hill. Instead of Percy being a help, he was an expense; and everything depended upon her. Under the circumstances, the only prospect open to her was to start a school; but while the grass

was growing the steed was starving, and she used to look with envy at the smart well-dressed mistress of the national school hard by, with her troop of girls who came pouring out at noon; and at last came like an inspiration the idea – why should not she get a post as mistress?

To think was to act, and she boldly called on the mistress, who sent her away terribly dejected, with the information that at least a year's training in the system, however well educated the would-be teacher might be, was absolutely necessary. Hazel, however, obtained a good deal of information as well, ready to ponder over – how she might either go to Whitelands or to Smith Square, Westminster; what would be the cost; the probabilities of her obtaining a school afterwards; the salary; etcetera, etcetera.

She went back in despair, for how could the money be obtained to pay her expenses and keep house as well, while the idea of obtaining a school at the end of a year's training, with a certain salary and a comfortable home, seemed so Eden-like a prospect that the difficulties to be surmounted appeared to grow.

Like all other difficulties, however, they began to shrink when boldly attacked. Hazel wrote to two or three relatives, as a forlorn hope, and they who had before only doled out a few pounds unwillingly, jumped at the chance of getting the indigent applicant off their hands, and after a consultation, wrote to her saying they were so pleased with her efforts at self-help, that amongst them they would subscribe the funds for paying her fees, at the training institution and for maintaining Mrs Thorne and

the children for a year, or such time as Hazel should get a school.

"Oh, mamma, mamma, sunshine at last," cried the girl, and trembling, weeping, and laughing hysterically, in turn, so great was her joy, she read the letter, which came upon Mrs Thorne as a surprise, her child having kept her quite in ignorance of the plans to prevent disappointment.

"Then, I think it very disgraceful, very disgraceful indeed, Hazel," said the poor woman indignantly. "They ought to be ashamed of themselves."

"Ashamed, dear mother!"

"Now, don't you turn against me in my troubles, Hazel," cried Mrs Thorne. "What have I done that my own child should begin to degrade me?"

"Degrade you? Oh, my own dear mother!"

"There – there again! I don't care how low we are forced by the cruelty of my relatives, and your poor dear papa's. I will never forget that I am a lady."

"Surely not, dear," said Hazel soothingly.

"Then why will you persist in calling me by that low, common, degrading term – Mother?"

"Dear mamma, I thought it better under the circumstances."

"No circumstances could excuse it, Hazel," said Mrs Thorne with dignity. "Percy never speaks to me like that; and by-the-way, my dear, Percy says he must have a new suit: his mourning is getting so shabby, he is quite ashamed of it, and I'm sure my heart bleeds every time I see the poor boy go out."

"Yes, mamma, we will see what can be done," said Hazel, suppressing a sigh.

"And as to that national school business," continued Mrs Thorne, "it is disgraceful. Write and tell cousin Jane and her husband that, however low we may be reduced by poverty, my daughter will never forget that she is a lady."

"But, mamma dear," said Hazel gently; "it was entirely my idea, and I wrote for their help."

"You – you, Hazel – my child – propose to go to a common training school, and then accept a situation to teach a pack of dirty poor people's children? Oh, what have I done – what have I done to be called upon to suffer this new – this pitiful degradation! What have I done?"

It was hard work, but by degrees poor Mrs Thorne was brought round to think that perhaps – perhaps – she would go no farther – it might be less degradation to accept an honourable post and do a great duty therein of helping to make so many girls better women by careful training, than to live in indigence as a kind of respectable pauper, subsisting on the assistance of grudging friends.

So the poor, weak, proud woman at last gave way, and the preliminaries being arranged, Hazel was about to leave home for the training institution full of hope, when there was a change in the state of affairs.

All this had taken place unknown to Mr Geringer, who was quite startled when he heard the plans, for they ran counter to

his own.

It had been quite in keeping with his ideas that the Thornes should taste the bitters of poverty, and know what being impecunious really meant. The poorer they were the easier would be his task. Matters had gone on swimmingly. Their position had had its effect upon the Graves's, and his rival, as he called Archibald Graves, had left the field; six months had passed, and Hazel had grown to look upon him as a very dear friend, though not as a lover, and he had come to the conclusion that the time was now ripe for asking her to be his wife; in fact, he had had thoughts of speaking at their last meeting, but had been put off! Now he had come to find Mrs Thorne alone, and after a certain amount of preliminary, was about to speak, when the lady fired off her views and took him by surprise.

"Go – to a training institution – become a schoolmistress!" he cried. "My dear Mrs Thorne, it is impossible."

"Exactly my words," said the lady. "'Hazel, my dear child,' I said, 'such a degradation is impossible.'"

"Quite impossible," said Geringer; and then he drew nearer and talked for some time in a low voice to Mrs Thorne, who shed tears and sobbed greatly, and said that she had always looked upon him as their best and dearest friend.

"I have waited, you see," he continued, "for of course if I had felt that dear Hazel really cared for this young Graves I should have said nothing, and I fully know my deficiencies, my age, and such drawbacks; but I am tolerably wealthy, and I can give her

all she has lost, restore her nearest and dearest to their proper place in society – almost to the position they formerly held in the world's esteem."

Mrs Thorne thought they were words of gold, and at Geringer's request she not only readily promised to prepare Hazel, but that all should be as he wished.

L'homme propose, as the French proverb has it and things do not always turn out as he wishes. Mr Geringer, after the preparation Hazel received from Mrs Thorne, proposed and was refused. Hazel said it was impossible, and such was her obstinacy, as Mrs Thorne called it, she refused to become a rich man's wife, and insisted upon going to the Whitelands training institution, condemning her unfortunate mother to a life of poverty and degradation, her brother to toil, and blasting her young sisters' prospects, when she might have married, had her carriage, and all would have gone as merry as a marriage bell.

That was Mrs Thorne's view of the case, and she kept up her protests with tears and repining, winning Percy to her side till he was always ready to reproach his sister. Hazel bore all, worked with all the energy in her nature for the year of training, was fortunate in getting a school after a few months' waiting, and was, as we found her, duly installed in the little schoolhouse, her brother being boarded with some humble friends in town.

Chapter Five.
Disturbing Influences

Hazel Thorne felt giddy as she took her seat in the front of the gallery, the seat with a little square patchy cushion close to the red curtains in front of the organist's pew. Beside and behind her the school children sat in rows, with ample room for three times the number; but the seats were never filled save upon the two Sundays before the annual school feast when somehow the Wesleyan and Congregational Sunday-schools were almost empty, and the church school thronged.

It was precisely the same on Mr Chute's side of the organ, with his boys beside and behind, and so situated that he could lean a little forward and get a glimpse of Hazel's profile, and also so that he could leave his seat, go round by the back of the organ, and give the new mistress the hymn-book, and the music used, with all the hymns, chants, and tunes carefully turned down.

It was a pleasant little attention to a stranger, and Hazel turned and thanked him with a smile that was not at all necessary, as Miss Rebecca who played the organ, and saw this through an opening in the red curtains, afterwards said to her brother the Reverend Henry Lambent, while at the time she said: —

"Sh! sh!" For Ann Straggalls was fighting down a desire to laugh, consequent upon Feelier Potts whining sharply: —

"Oh, Goody, me!"

"Like her impudence," Mr Chute said to himself, in allusion to Miss Rebecca's interference with the duties of the new mistress. "She'd better not try it on with my boys," and he went back to think of Hazel Thorne's sweet sad smile.

And all the time the object of his thoughts felt giddy.

Archibald Graves down there, when she had believed that he had forgotten her; and the more she thought, the more agitated and indignant she grew. At times she felt as if she must leave the church, for there, plainly in view, sat the disturber of her peace, one whom she had put behind her with the past; and when at last they stood up to sing the first hymn, to her horror she found that it was the custom in the old country church for the audience all to turn and face the organ, when Archibald Graves stood gazing up at her, and, strive how she would, she could not help once or twice meeting his eyes.

"It is cruel and unmanly," she thought, as she resumed her seat, feeling half distracted by the flood of emotion that seemed to sweep away the present.

Fortunately there was an audible "Sh! sh!" from behind the red curtains just then; and this drew Hazel's attention to the fact that Feelier Potts was, if not "tiddling," at all events making Ann Straggalls laugh, just when, in a high-pitched drawl, the Reverend Henry Lambent was going on with the service, as if he felt it a great act of condescension to make appeals on behalf of such a lower order of beings as the Plumtonites. What time

the round smooth face of Mr William Forth Burge was looking over the edge of his pew, where he always knelt down standing up as Feelier Potts said, and always smelt his hat inside when he came into church. And while this gentleman forgot all about the prayers in his thoughtful meditation upon the face of one who he told himself had the face of an angel, Mr Chute kept forgetting the litany, and let the boys straggle in the responses, for he felt impelled to glance round the front of the organ pew at the soft white forehead he could just contrive to see.

"Those girls never behaved worse," said Miss Rebecca to herself. "If this is to be the way they are kept in order she will never do."

Miss Rebecca Lambent felt more sore than usual, for she was at heart aggrieved that the new schoolmistress should be so good-looking and ladylike – matters not at all in accordance with what was right for "a young person in her station in life;" and, to make matters worse, Jem Chubb, who blew the bellows, let the wind fail in the middle of the second hymn.

It was fortunate, then, that the girls did behave so badly, and that Feelier Potts would keep spreading out her hands, and saying, "Oh, Goody me!" in imitation of the vicar's tones, for it took Hazel's attention, and her task of keeping the girls quiet stayed her thoughts from wandering away.

There was no avoiding the meeting, and when at last – the service being over and the congregation going – the school children, evidently smelling dinner, having rushed off in spite of

all efforts to detain them – Hazel slowly descended, it was to find Archibald Graves waiting at the foot of the stairs, and he stepped in front of Mr Chute, who, as he was so near a neighbour, aimed at walking with the new mistress home.

"Let us go off along the road here somewhere, Hazel," said Archibald Graves abruptly, "I have come down on purpose to see you. Never mind these people; come along."

What should she do? Miss Rebecca was staring – nay, glowering; the Burges were coming up, and this terrible interview, which she would have given worlds to avoid, was apparently inevitable: for, unlike some young ladies she did not feel disposed to faint. What then, should she do?

The knot was untied, for just then there was a rustle of silk, and Miss Beatrice swept up over the chiselled slabs, to say, in a stern, uncompromising voice —

"Miss Thorne, my brother, the vicar, wishes to speak with you in the vestry."

Chapter Six.
The Reverend Henry Lambent

"I beg your pardon," said Archibald Graves, rather abruptly; "I spoke to Miss Thorne before church. I think she is engaged to me."

The eyes of Beatrice Lambent opened with astonishment and she stared at this daring young man, who had the presumption to talk of interposing between the new schoolmistress and the head of the parish. She was evidently about to speak, for her lips moved, but no words came.

It was Hazel who put an end to the unpleasant dilemma.

"I will come at once. Miss Lambent, if you please," she said respectfully.

"Miss Beatrice Lambent, if you please," said the lady haughtily; "Miss Lambent is now descending from the organ-loft."

"I beg your pardon," exclaimed Hazel. Then, glancing with quiet dignity at the intruder and back to Miss Beatrice: "Mr Graves was a friend of our family a year or two back. Mr Graves, my mother is at the schoolhouse; if you wish to see me, I must ask you to call there."

She followed Miss Beatrice up between the rows of pews that lady seeming to take her into moral custody; while, seeing

himself the aim of several pairs of eyes, including those of Mr Chute, Mr William Forth Burge, Miss Burge, and above all, those of Miss Lambent, which literally flashed at him, Archibald Graves nodded shortly, turned upon his heel, and tried to march carelessly out of church; but his easy motions were terribly full of restraint.

"I was not aware that Miss Thorne would be so soon having friends," said Miss Lambent; but her remark elicited no reply, for Mr William Forth Burge and his sister both felt troubled, the schoolmaster angry, and all too much preoccupied with the appearance of Hazel Thorne as she passed into the chancel, and through a bar of brilliant colour cast by the sun from the new stained-glass window, which had been placed in the south end of the chancel in memory of the late vicar, the effect being very strange, seeming to etherealise Hazel; though for the matter of that the same effect would have been seen, had it been noticed, in connection with Miss Beatrice, who had led the way, drawing aside the curtain that hung in front of the vestry door, and tapping softly with her knuckles.

"Come in!"

Very simple words, but they set Hazel's heart beating, as, in a whisper full of awe, but at the same time very distant and cold, Miss Beatrice said:

"You may go in now."

As she spoke she drew back, holding the curtain for Hazel to pass; and trying to master her emotion, the latter raised the latch

and entered the vestry.

The vicar was standing with his hat in hand, gazing out of the little window at the cheerful prospect of a piece of blank old stone wall, surmounted by a large waterspout, and though he must have heard the door open and close, he did not turn, but stood there as stiff and uncompromising of aspect as his sisters.

He had seen Hazel Thorne twice before, but in a gloomy room in London; and being of rather a preoccupied turn of mind, he had paid so little heed to her personal appearance that he would hardly have recognised her again. A new mistress had been required, and the customary correspondence had taken place; he had called at the institution, asked a few questions, and there was an end of the matter, the strong recommendations of the lady-principal being sufficient for the engagement to be decided on.

Hazel stood waiting for him to turn round, but the Reverend Henry Lambent remained gazing at the water-pipe for some few moments before coughing slightly to clear his throat. Then, in a voice full of haughty condescension, he began:

"I am glad to find that you arrived punctually. Miss Thorne, in accordance with the arrangements that were made; and I take this opportunity of saying a few words to you at this commencement of your career in Plumton."

Here he stopped, and faced slowly round, allowing his half-closed eyes to rest indifferently upon the new mistress, who was standing facing the window, and upon whose rather pale care-worn face the light fell strongly as he turned.

Very plainly dressed in her well-fitting mourning, Hazel Thorne was one who could have claimed a second look from the sternest of mortals.

It was not that she was surpassing beautiful, and could boast of finely-chiselled nostrils, Juno-like brow, or any of the wonderfully entrancing features with which some novelists endow their heroines; Hazel was simply a sweet-faced, thoroughly English girl, but there was an expression in her eyes, a touching look so full of appeal that it even affected the cold, unimpassioned vicar, who remained silent for some moments as if wondering, and then hastily said:

"I beg your pardon. Miss Thorne, will you sit down!"

He placed a chair for her, and drew another forward from where it was half hidden behind the folds of the surplice but lately hung upon its proper peg, and, astonished at himself waited till Hazel had seated herself before following suit.

"That young man" seemed to have vanished from his thoughts, and the lecture he had intended to read the young schoolmistress upon the bad appearance of such meetings as those which had taken place that morning dropped from his memory, and his lips formed words that surprised him as much as his acts.

"I trust that you have found everything correct at – at the schoolhouse, Miss Thorne?"

"Quite, I thank you," replied Hazel, with quiet dignity, and she entirely forgot that she was addressing her superior, and left out the "sir."

"Of course everything is very strange and new to you at first; but er – er, you will soon feel quite at home with us, I hope."

"Indeed, I hope so," said Hazel earnestly. "The time has been so short as yet."

"Yes – of course – so very short," replied the vicar. "My sisters will call to-morrow, I have no doubt and see Mrs Thorne. I shall be down at the school in the afternoon. You saw Miss Burge, of course, this morning?"

"Oh yes. Miss Burge walked up to church with me."

"And Mr William Forth Burge too, if I mistake not. Most admirable people, Miss Thorne. Great patrons of our schools. I trust that you will – er – er – try to – er – that is, endeavour to meet them in little matters, connected with the management of the children."

"You may rely upon my trying to thoroughly fulfil my duties, Mr Lambent," said Hazel quietly.

"Of course – to be sure, Miss Thorne, no doubt," he said hastily; and as he spoke he wondered at himself more and more; "but I must not detain you, Miss Thorne. Er – allow me one moment, the curtain is rather awkward to one unaccustomed to the place."

And, to the astonishment – the utter astonishment – of his sisters, who were standing as stiffly in the chancel as if they were a couple of monumental effigies, the Reverend Henry Lambent opened the door, passed out first, and then stood holding the curtain aside for Hazel to pass, which she did, bowing gravely

and with quiet dignity to the two ladies before gliding along the nave and out of the door.

Neither of the sisters spoke, but stood, like the vicar, watching the new mistress leave the church.

At last Miss Beatrice turned.

"What excuse did she make, Henry?" she said.

"I – er – I beg your pardon, Beatrice?"

"I say, what excuse did she make? Really, her conduct is very, strange."

"Excuse? Oh, of course, about her visitor," said the vicar absently. "I er – I – on second consideration thought it would be better to ignore the matter. Perhaps she was not to blame."

"Henry!"

"Beatrice, my dear," said the vicar quietly, "I always abstain from having refreshments in the vestry, but the morning service is long and I feel faint. Let us go home to lunch."

Miss Beatrice had the first rule over the vicarage, her elder sister the second rule, and generally speaking, the vicar let them have matters entirely their own way; still, there were times when he took the reins in his own hands, and then it was dangerous to interfere.

This was one of the times when the vicar showed that he had a will of his own, and consequently the sisters exchanged glances and said no more.

Chapter Seven.
"What did I see in this Boy?"

Hazel was not destined to reach home without adventure, for before she had gone far she could see Mr Chute walking along very slowly, right at the bottom of the street, and evidently hoping that she would overtake him. But this was not the cause of the palpitation from which Hazel suffered, for, about halfway between the church and the schools, she saw Archibald Graves coming to meet her, walking very fast; and she had to prepare herself for the encounter that was now inevitable.

"At last!" he cried, eagerly, as he came up. "My dear Hazel, I thought I was never to see you."

She took no notice of the proffered hand, but walked quietly on.

"Won't you take my arm, Hazel?" he exclaimed. "Oh, don't be so hard on a fellow. What have I done?"

Hazel turned her large earnest eyes upon him, and seemed to look him through and through, as, instead of answering his question, she put one to herself.

"What did I see in Archibald Graves, this thoughtless boy, who can come and ask me such a question after the agony I have suffered? What did I see in this boy to make me think I loved him with all my heart?"

Poor Hazel! It did not occur to her that a short two years since she was a light-hearted girl; and that since then she had grown into a deep, earnest woman, who had been baptised by sorrow, and who could only share the riches of her love with one who was all that was manly and true, and to whom she could look up with respect, even with reverence; whereas now, with his petulant boyish, injured air, Archibald Graves only filled her with something akin to disgust.

"I say, you know, Hazel," he went on, "don't be so hard on a fellow. The governor was dead against my keeping it up, you know, and he wanted me to give him my word not to see you any more; but at last I thought I must see you again, so I found out all about what you were doing, and where you were, and followed you down here; and 'pon my soul, when I saw you leading that string of scrubs of school children to church, I did not know whether to laugh or cry."

"Then Mr Graves is not aware of your visit down here, Archibald?" said Hazel quietly.

"By Jove, no! he would be in a wax if he knew."

"Then why did you come?"

"Why did I come? Oh, I say Hazel," he cried reproachfully, "I didn't think you could be so hard upon me. You don't know how I've been upset all about it. 'Pon my word, there were times when I felt almost ill."

"Has he altered?" Hazel's heart cried out within her, "or have I become worldly and cold, and, as he says, hard?"

"I say, you know, Hazel, you must give up all this wretched business. I shall tell the governor that I mean to keep to our old engagement, and he'll come round some day; but you must give up the school teaching, as he'd never stand that, for he's as proud as Lucifer. Come, I say, it's all right again, isn't it?"

"What did I see in this boy?" thought Hazel, as the indignant blood flushed into her cheeks, and then flowed back painfully to her heart. "Was he always as weak and thoughtless as this?"

"Oh, I say, mother, look here," cried a shrill voice as they were passing an open cottage door; "that's new teacher, and that's her young man."

"There, you hear," whispered Hazel's companion, laughing; "it was vulgarly put, but very true."

"Archibald Graves," said Hazel quietly, "have you not the common-sense to see that your visit here is putting me in a false position?"

"I know you are in a false position here," he retorted angrily. "Who's that fellow, and why does he take off his hat to you, and glare at me?"

"That is Mr Chute, the master of the boys' school, and my fellow-teacher. This is my house, and I cannot ask you to come in. Do you wish me to think with a little less pain of our old acquaintanceship?"

"*Our* old love, you mean," he cried.

"Our old acquaintanceship, Archibald Graves," she replied firmly. "Love is too holy a word to be spoken of in connection

with our past."

"I – I don't understand you," he cried.

"You will when you have grown older and more thoughtful," she replied. "Now good-bye."

"Thoughtful? Older?" he blurted out. "I am old enough and thoughtful enough to know what I mean, and I won't part like this."

"Your presence here is liable to be seriously misconstrued," said Hazel; "do you wish to do me a serious injury in the eyes of those with whom it is of vital importance that I should stand well?"

"Why, of course not. How can you ask me?"

"Then say 'good-bye' at once, and leave this place."

"But I tell you I have come down on purpose to – "

"All that is dead," she said, in a tone that startled him.

"Then you never loved me!" he cried angrily.

"Heaven knows how well!" she said softly. "But you killed that love, Archibald Graves, and it can never be revived."

She had held out her hand in token of farewell, but he had not taken it; now she let it fall, and before he could frame a fresh appeal she had turned, entered the little house, and the door closed behind her.

Archibald Graves remained standing gazing blankly at the closed door for a few moments, till he heard the click of a latch, and, turning sharply, he saw that the schoolmaster was leisurely walking his garden some fifty yards away. He was not watching

the visitor – nothing of the kind; but the flowers in the little bed required looking to, and he remained there picking off withered leaves with his new gloves, and making himself very busy, in spite of a reminder from his mother that dinner was getting cold; and it was not until he had seen the stranger stride away that he entered his own place and sat thoughtfully down.

"If she thinks I am going to be thrown over like this," said Archibald Graves to himself, "she is mistaken. She shall give way, and she shall leave this wretched place, or I'll know the reason why. I wonder who that round-faced fellow was, and where I can get something to eat? By Jove, though, how she has altered! she quite touches a fellow like. Here, boy, where's the principal inn?"

"Say?"

"Where's the principal inn?" cried the visitor again, as the boy addressed stared at him wonderingly, his London speech being somewhat incomprehensible to juveniles at Plumton All Saints.

"Dunno."

"Where can I get something to eat, then?" said the visitor, feeling half amused, his difficulty with Hazel passing rapidly away.

"Somut to ee-yut. Why don't yer go ho-um?"

"Hang the boy! Oh, here's the round-faced chap. I beg your pardon, can you direct me to the best hotel?"

"Straight past the church, sir, and round into the market-place."

"Thanks; I can get some lunch or dinner there, I suppose?"

"Ye-es," said Mr William Forth Burge. "I should think so."

"I came down from town by the mail last night, and walked over from Burtwick this morning. Strange in the place, you see."

"May I offer you a bit of dinner, sir? I know London well, though I'm a native here, and as a friend of our new schoolmistress – "

"Oh, I should hardly like to intrude," cried the young man apologetically.

"Pray come," said the ex-butcher eagerly, for he longed to get the young man under his roof. He did not know why: in fact he felt almost hurt at his coming there that morning; and again, he did not know why, but he knew one thing, and that was that he would have given ten pounds that moment to know why Archibald Graves had come down that day, and what he said to Miss Thorne, and – yes, he would have given twenty pounds to know what Hazel Thorne said to him.

The result was, that he carried off the stranger to his handsome house, just outside the town, and soon after Archibald Graves was making himself quite at home, drinking the school-patron's sherry, smoking his cigars, and getting moment by moment more fluent of tongue, and ready to lay bare the secrets of his heart, if secrets the facts could be called that he was prepared to make known to any one who would talk.

"Has he gone, Bill?" said Miss Burge, entering the drawing-room about eight o'clock that evening, and finding her brother

standing before a glass and sprinkling himself with scent.

"Yes, he went a good hour ago." And the speaker looked very solemn, and uttered a deep sigh.

"I wouldn't disturb you, dear, at church time, as you had company; but, Bill dear – oh, how nice you smell!" and she rested her hands on his shoulders and reached up to kiss him.

"Do I, Betsey?"

"Lovely, dear; but do tell me what he said about Miss Thorne."

Her brother's forehead seemed to have gone suddenly into the corrugated iron business, as he turned his eyes upon his sister.

"He said – he said – "

"Yes, dear; please go on."

"He said he had been engaged to her for two or three years, and that as soon as his father left off cutting up rough – "

"Cutting up rough, Bill? Did he say cutting up rough?"

"Yes, Betsey. I never cut up rough in my business, never. I always made a point of having the best Sheffield knives and steels, and my steaks and chops and joints was always pictures."

"Yes, dear; but tell me: Miss Thorne is engaged to be married to this gentleman?"

"I suppose so," said Mr William Forth Burge drearily. "It was always so, Betsey. I could get on in trade, and I could save money, and I always dressed well, and I defy the world to say I wasn't always clean shaved; but I never did see a young lady that I thought was nice, but somebody else had seen her before and thought the same."

"Oh, but we never know what might happen, Bill."

"What's the good of being rich? What's the good of having a fine house? What's the good of everything, if everything's always going to turn out disappointment? Betsey," he continued fiercely, "that chap thinks of nothing but hisself. He's one of your cigar-smoking, glass-o'-sherry chaps, and he ain't got a good 'art. Why, if you'd got a young man, Betsey, and he come and sit down here and talked about you as that chap did about our young schoolmistress, I'd ha' punched his head!"

Miss Burge pressed her brother softly back into a chair, and patted his face, and smoothed his hair, and kissed him first on one cheek and then upon the other.

"You're tired, Bill dear," she said, "and didn't get your nap after dinner. Where's your handkerchief? Here, let me do it dear;" and taking her brother's flaming handkerchief from his pocket, she softly opened it over his head and face as if she were about to perform a conjuring trick and bring out bowls of gold fish or something of the kind from beneath, but she did not: she merely left it on his head and went away on tiptoe, saying to herself:

"Poor Bill! he has got it again, and badly, too."

Chapter Eight.
Mr Chute's Visit

It was a busy morning with Hazel Thorne as she took her place in the large schoolroom, feeling that her responsibilities had now commenced in earnest. For there were no ladies to take classes now, the assistance coming from a pupil-teacher and four or five girls as monitors, against one and all of whom Feelier Potts entertained a deadly hatred, for the simple reason that she had been passed over, and they had all been chosen in her stead.

The discipline of the school had been fairly maintained, but Hazel was not long in finding out that there were plenty of young revolutionary spirits waiting their opportunity to test the strength of the new mistress, nor in seeing that Miss Feelier Potts would be one of the leaders in any small insurrectionary movement that might take place.

There was plenty to do that first morning – to feel the way, as it were; to find out what had been going on; how it was done; what the girls knew, and the hundred other little difficulties that a strange mistress would have to deal with on taking possession of a new post.

Monday morning too, and there were the school pence to be paid – hot, moist, sticky pennies, that had been carried generally in hot, moist, sticky hands. These had to be received and noted,

and the excuses listened to as well.

"Mother hadn't got no change's morning, teacher" – "Pay next week, teacher" – "Mother says, teacher, as there's four on us, she oughtn't to pay more'n thruppens" – "Mother 'll call and pay when she comes by." Then there was Sarah Ann Simms' case. Sarah Ann had not brought her penny, and the book showed that she had not brought it the week before, nor the month before; in fact, it seemed as if Sarah Ann was in debt for her schooling from the time she had commenced.

Upon Sarah Ann being questioned, she didn't know nothink, only that mother – who appeared to be ready to set all school rules, regulations, and laws at defiance – said she shouldn't pay.

Hazel Thorne was pondering upon this crux, when there was a tap at the door, and Mr Samuel Chute entered, smiling to say "Good morning."

"I thought I'd just drop in, and see if there was anything I could do," he said, upon shaking hands, after which he wiped the hand he had used upon his fair hair. "It's very awkward coming first to a school," he went on, "and if you'll only send for me, or ask for anything, you shall have it directly. I hope you've got plenty of chalk."

Hazel believed there was plenty, and promised to send and ask for assistance if any was required, wishing heartily the while that her visitor would go; but although it was evident through the thin partition that the boys were enjoying themselves in their master's absence, Mr Chute seemed in no hurry to depart.

"You'll have some trouble, I daresay," he continued, rubbing his hands together, and looking contemplatively at Hazel. "Some of the girls are like their brothers in my school. The young Potts' are a terrible nuisance."

"I daresay I shall be able to manage them by degrees," replied Hazel —

"Are you sure you have plenty of chalk?"

"I think there is an abundance of school necessaries."

"Oh, no! Oh dear, no!" said Mr Chute, with a pitying smile. "You'll find lots of things wanting. They're very stingy over them; and if it wasn't for old Burge, I don't know what we should do. You are sure you have plenty of chalk?"

"Please, teacher, there's a whole boxful in the cupboard," said Miss Potts.

"Silence! How dare you speak when you are not asked?" said Mr Chute fiercely; and Miss Potts began to hurry away, terribly alarmed, back to her place, but watched her opportunity to turn and squint horribly at the visitor, to the great delight of the other girls – especially of Ann Straggalls the fat, who, poor girl, seemed to suffer from an infirmity; for no sooner did she see anything mirth-provoking than she exploded loudly, no matter where she was, into a boisterous laugh – a laugh that was a constant source of trouble to her; for which she had suffered endless punishments, besides having been ordered three times out of church by Miss Rebecca Lambent, who would rise spectrally above the red curtains of the organ-loft, and stand

pointing at the door till the trembling girl had gone.

Ann Straggalls horrified Hazel upon this occasion by giving vent to one of her explosions, and then turning purple as she tried to hide her face.

"Ah, you'll have to punish her," said Mr Chute. "Oh, by-the-way, Miss Thorne – "

"If he would only go!" thought Hazel, for the girls were getting very lively and boisterous, seeing their teacher's attention taken off, and catching a little of the infection from beyond the partition shutters.

"I say, you'll have a deal of trouble over the school pence" – Mr Chute was a prophet in this case, though he did not know it – "they'll try all sorts of plans to get out of paying – a few of them will; but don't you be imposed upon by their excuses. It's only a penny a week, you know. There's the Simms's never will pay, and they ought to be turned out of the schools, for it isn't fair for some children to pay and some not, is it?"

"Of course not," replied Hazel. "Oh, why won't he go? Surely he must see that my time is wanted."

Just then the noise in the boys' school became furious, and Mr Chute made an effort to let his rebellious subjects know that, though invisible in body, he was present with them in spirit, by going on tiptoe across the school and rapping on one of the sliding shutters sharply with his knuckles.

The effect was magical, and he came back triumphant.

"That's how I serve them," he said, with a self-satisfied

smirk. “They know I won’t stand any nonsense; and, I say, Miss Thorne, if you hear me using the cane, don’t you take any notice, you know. It’s good for them sometimes. You’ll have to use it yourself.”

“I hope not,” said Hazel quietly; and she glanced towards the door.

“Ah, but you will,” he said, laughing, and in profound ignorance of the fact that Feelier Potts was imitating his every action for the benefit of her class, even to going across and pretending to tap at the partition.

“I believe in kindness and firmness combined, Mr Chute.”

“So do I,” he said, as if lost in admiration. “That’s exactly what I said to Lambent; and I say, Miss Thorne, just a friendly word, you know. You back me up and I’ll back you up; don’t you stand any nonsense from Lambent and those two. They’re always meddling and interfering.”

“Those two?” said Hazel, thinking of Ophelia Potts and Ann Straggalls.

“Yes; Rebecca and Beatrice, Lambent’s sisters, you know. Rebel and Tricks we call them down here. They’re as smooth as can be to your face, and they go and make mischief to Lambent. You must have your eyes open, for they’re always telling tales. Beatrice is going to marry the young squire at Ardley, at least she wants to, and Rebecca wants old Burge, but he can’t see it.”

“You really must excuse me now, Mr Chute,” said Hazel. “I have so much to do.”

"Yes, so have I," he said pleasantly; but he did not stir. "You are sure you have plenty of chalk?"

"Oh yes, plenty."

"And slate-pencil? I believe the little wretches eat the slate-pencil, so much of it goes."

"I will send for some if I want it," said Hazel; "I must go now to those classes."

"Yes, of course, but one minute. My mother wants to be introduced to your mother, as we are to be neighbours, you know, and if there's anything household you want, mind you send for it."

"Yes, certainly, Mr Chute." – Oh, I wish he would go!

"May I bring my mother in to-night to see you?"

"Not to-night, please, Mr Chute; we are hardly settled yet."

"No, of course not. Well, good-bye; I *must* go now."

He held out his hand.

For some time past Miss Lambent and her sister had been waiting. They had entered the boys' school to leave a message, and for a while their presence had acted as a brake upon the spirits of the young gentlemen; but waves of noise soon began to rise and fall, growing louder as the time went on.

"Master's in the girls' school," one of the boys had said. "Should he fetch him?"

"No, boy; go on with your lessons," said Miss Beatrice; and she exchanged glances with her sister. Then they settled themselves to wait, standing like a pair of martyrs to circumstances, listening to the increasing noise, and at last marching together out of the

boys' school and towards the girls'.

"Henry had better send for Mr Chute, and give him a good talking to," said Miss Lambent.

"I formed my own impressions yesterday," said Miss Beatrice. "These proceedings only endorse them. She will never do for Plumton."

"Never!" said Miss Rebecca; and after an inquiring look, given and taken, the sisters entered the girls' school, to find Miss Feelier Potts standing up, gazing pensively at Ann Straggalls, as she held and pressed her hand in perfect imitation of the action of Mr Samuel Chute, who was taking a farewell of the new mistress as if he were going on a long voyage – never to return.

Chapter Nine.
Excitement at Plumton

"I don't know what has come to Henry," said Miss Lambent. "If I had been in his place I should have immediately called a meeting of the governors of the school, paid Miss Thorne, and let her seek for an engagement elsewhere."

"I quite agree with you, Rebecca," replied Miss Beatrice. "Henry is behaving weakly and foolishly in all these matters. But we cannot be surprised. He is so profound a thinker and so deeply immersed in his studies that these little matters escape him."

"I think it unpardonable. Here is a strange girl – for she is a mere girl, and far too young, in my estimation – appointed to the school, and just because she has rather a genteel appearance, everybody is paying her deference. Henry is really absurd. He says that Miss Thorne is quite a lady, and that allowances should be made. No allowances are made for me."

"Don't be angry, Rebecca."

"I am not angry, Beatrice. I never am angry: but in a case like this I feel bound to speak. There is that absurd Miss Burge ready to praise her to one's very face, and Mr William Forth Burge actually told me yesterday, when I went up to him to talk about the preparations, that we ought to congratulate ourselves upon having found so excellent a mistress. I haven't patience with

him."

"Are the Canninges coming?" said Miss Beatrice, changing the conversation; and as she spoke, standing in the vicarage drawing-room, with her eyes half-closed, a faint flush came into her cheeks, and she looked for the moment a very handsome, graceful woman. A connoisseur would have said that she was too thin, but granted that it showed breeding and refinement while her dress was in perfect taste.

"Yes; Mrs Canninge told me yesterday that she should certainly drive over, and that she would persuade George Canninge to come. He ought not to want any persuasion, Beatrice," and Rebecca accompanied her words with a very meaning look.

"Nonsense, dear! What attraction can a school-treat have to a gentleman like George Canninge?"

"He might find pleasure in proceedings that are watched over by his friends. And now look here, Beatrice, I am never angry, I never quarrel, and I never say cruel things, but I must say that I do not think George Canninge is so attentive to you as he used to be."

"Hush, Rebecca," cried Beatrice; "how can you speak like that? There is no engagement between us."

"But there ought to be," said Miss Lambent tartly. "Marriage is a subject upon which I have never thought for myself."

"Rebecca!"

"Well, not directly," replied the lady. "I may perhaps have

given such a matter a thought indirectly, but in your case I have thought about it a great deal."

"Pray say no more, Rebecca."

"I must say more, Beatrice, for in a case like this, your welfare is at stake, and for my part, I do not see how George Canninge could do better than by making you mistress of Ardley."

"My dear Rebecca!"

"It would be rather stooping on our side, for the Canninges are little better than traders; but Mrs Canninge is very nice, and I said to her, yesterday – "

"Surely, Rebecca, you did not allude to – to – "

"George Canninge and yourself? Indeed, I did, my dear. Mrs Canninge and I thoroughly understand one another, and I feel sure that nothing would please her better than for George Canninge to propose to you."

Miss Beatrice sighed softly, and soon after the sisters went up to dress.

For it was a festival day at Plumton All Saints, being that of the annual school feast.

This school feast or treat was rather an ancient institution, and was coeval with the schools, but it had altered very much in its proportions since its earlier days, when the schoolmaster invested in a penny memorandum-book, and went round to all the principal inhabitants for subscriptions, which rarely exceeded a shilling, and had to be lectured by each donor upon the best way of teaching the children under his charge. Those treats first

consisted of a ride in one of the farmers' waggons as far as a field, where the children were regaled with very thin milk and water, and slices of large loaves spotted with currants, which slices were duly baptised in the milk and water, and called by the children – "cake."

Then there was a great advance to a real tea in a barn, and again a more generous affair through the generosity of one vicar, who had the children all up to the vicarage, and after they had done no little mischief to his flower-beds, sent them home loaded with fruity cakes, and toys.

Then there was a decadence with a tendency towards thin milk and water and country buns, followed by a tremendous rise when Mr William Forth Burge came upon the scene; and the present was the second feast over which he had been presiding genius.

In preparation for this festival, probably for reasons of his own, the patron had gone about smiling a great deal, and rubbing his hands. He had obtained *carte blanche* from the vicar to do as he pleased, and it had pleased him to say to Miss Burge:

"Betsy, we'll do the thing 'andsome this time, and no mistake. Money shan't stand in the way, and I want Miss Thorne – and Mr Chute," he added hastily, "to see that we know how to do things at Plumton."

The result was that for a whole week the children nearly ran mad, and attention to object, or any other lessons, was a thing impossible to secure; and once every day – sometimes twice – Mr Chute was obliged to go into the girls' school and confide to

Miss Thorne the fact that he should be heartily glad when it was all over.

Hazel Thorne participated in his feelings, but she did not feel bound to go to the boys' school to impart her troubles, having terrible work to keep her scholars to their tasks.

For to a little place like Plumton the preparations were tremendously exciting, and between school hours, and afterwards, the entrance to Mr William Forth Burge's garden was besieged with anxious sightseers, the wildest rumours getting abroad amongst the children, who were ready to believe a great deal more than they saw, though they had ocular demonstration that a large marquee was being erected, that ropes were stretched between the trees for flags, that four large swings had been made; and as for the contents of that marquee the most extravagant rumours were afloat.

One thing was notable in spite of the inattention, and that was the fact that the schools were wonderfully well filled by children, who came in good time, and who duly paid their pence, many of the scholars having been absentees for months, some since the last school-treat, but who were coming "regular now, please, teacher."

The morning had arrived when, after receiving strict orders to be at the schools punctually at eleven, fully half the expected number were at the gates by nine, clamouring for admittance; and at last the noise grew so loud that Mrs Thorne cast an appealing look at her daughter, and sighed.

"Ah, Hazel," she murmured, "if you had only listened to poor Mr Geringer, we should have been spared this degradation."

"Oh, hush, dear," whispered Hazel. "Pray say no more. Indeed I don't mind, and the poor children seem so happy."

"But I mind it, Hazel," sighed Mrs Thorne. "It is a degradation indeed. Of course you will not be expected to walk with the children as far as those people's?"

"Oh, yes," said Hazel, trying to speak lightly. "They are all going in procession with flags and banners."

"Flags *and* banners, Hazel?" exclaimed Mrs Thorne, with a horrified look.

"Yes, dear. Mr Burge wants to give the children a great treat, and there is to be a brass band that he has engaged on purpose. I have just had a note from Miss Burge. She says her brother wished to keep it a secret to the last."

"But not a regular brass band, Hazel?"

"Yes, dear. It will be at the head of the procession, and the children are to be marched all round the town."

"But not a brass band with a big drum, my dear? Surely not. Don't say with a big drum?"

"Really, mother, dear, I don't know," replied Hazel, bending down and kissing her. "I suppose so."

"Thank Heaven, that my poor husband was spared all this!"

"Oh, hush, dear," whispered Hazel piteously.

"But you will not stoop to walk round the town with them, Hazel? And surely you are never going to put that ridiculous

bunch of cowslips in your dress?"

"Mother, dear," said Hazel quietly, "I am the mistress of the girls' school, and it is my duty to walk with them. I am going to wear the bunch of spring flowers, for they were brought for me by the girls, who will all wear a bunch like it. Here is a bouquet, though, that Mr Burge has sent for the mistress out of his greenhouse. I suppose I must carry that in my hand."

"Oh, my poor girl! my poor girl!"

"Now, mother, dear mother, do not be so foolish," said Hazel. "Why should I be ashamed to walk with my girls? Are we not living an honourable and independent life, and is it not ten thousand times better than eating the bread of charity?"

"Ah me! ah me!" sighed Mrs Thorne.

"Now, dear, you will dress and come up to the treaty and I will see that you are comfortable."

"I come? No, no, no!"

"Yes, dear, Mr Burge begs that you will. Come, girls."

This was called up the stairs to her little sisters, who came running down, dressed in white with blue sashes for the first time since their father's death.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed Mrs Thorne.

"They are coming with me, dear, each carrying a great bouquet."

"Never! I forbid it!" cried the poor woman.

"It was Mr Burge's particular request," said Hazel gently; "and, mother dear, you will nearly break their hearts if you forbid

them now."

"There, there, there," sobbed Mrs Thorne; "it's time I died and was taken out of your way. I'm only a nuisance and a burden to you."

"Mother!"

Only that one word, but the way in which it was uttered, and the graceful form that went down upon its knees before her to draw the head she kept rocking to and fro down upon her breast proved sufficient to calm the weak woman. Her sobs grew less frequent, and she at last began to wipe her eyes, after kissing Hazel again and again.

"I suppose we must accept our fate, my dear," she said at last. "I'm sure I do mine. And now mind this. Cissy – Mabel!"

"Yes, mamma! Oh, sister Hazel, isn't it time to go?"

"I say you will mind this. Cissy – Mabel, you are to – But must they walk in procession with those terrible children, Hazel?"

"Why not, dear? They will be with me, and what can be more innocent and pleasant than this treat to the poor girls? There, there, I know, for my sake, you will come up and lend your countenance to their sports."

"Well, well," sighed Mrs Thorne. "I'll try. But mind me, Hazel," she exclaimed sharply, "I'm not coming up with that dreadful woman, Mrs Chute. I am coming by myself."

"Yes, dear, I would," said Hazel.

"And mind this. Cissy and Mabel, though you are going to walk behind the school children and carry flowers, you are not

to forget that you are young ladies. Mind that."

"No, mamma!" in duet.

"And – Oh dear me, Hazel, there is some one at the front door, and I've only got on my old cap. I really cannot be seen; I – Good gracious *me*, Hazel, don't let any one in."

Too late. Hazel had already opened the door and admitted little Miss Burge, who came trotting in with her face all smiles.

"I thought I should never get through the children," she panted; "and ain't it 'ot? How well you do look, my dear! Lavender muslin suits you exactly. And how are you, my bonny little ones?" she cried, kissing the two girls. "But there, I've no time to lose. The band will be here directly, and my brother is with the boys; and, Mrs Thorne, he sends his compliments to you."

Mrs Thorne had drawn herself up very stiffly in her chair, and was preserving a dignified silence, feeling offended at their visitor's want of recognition; but Mr Burge's compliments taught her that this patron of the school acknowledged her status in society, and she smiled and bowed.

"And he said that he hoped you would excuse his not calling to invite you himself, but – now, bless my heart, what was the rest of it?"

She looked in a perplexed way at Hazel, and then at the ceiling, as if expecting to read it there.

"Oh, I know – but he had been so busy over the preparations, and he hoped you would come and look on; and the pony carriage will be here to fetch you at twelve."

"I'm sure – really – I am greatly obliged to Mr Burge – "

"Mr William Forth Burge," said Miss Burge correctively.

"To Mr William Forth Burge for his kindness, and of course I shall be most happy."

Hazel's eyes had filled with tears at the quiet unassuming kindness of these people, and she looked her gratitude at their visitor.

"My brother's in such spirits, my dear, and he's next door; and he said at breakfast that he was proud to say he came to Plumton Schools himself when he was a boy, and nobody should say he was too proud to march round the town with them to-day."

"And – and is he going to walk in the procession. Miss Burge?" asked Mrs Thorne.

"That he is, ma'am," said the little lady. "So I said to him at breakfast, 'well, Bill,' I said – you see I always call him 'Bill,' Mrs Thorne, though he has grown to be such a rich and great man. It seems more natural so – 'well, Bill,' I said, 'if with all your money and position you're not too proud to walk with the boys, I won't be too proud to walk with the girls.'"

"And – and are you going to walk with them, Miss Burge?" said Mrs Thorne, with trembling eagerness.

"That I am, ma'am," cried Miss Burge, rustling her voluminous blue silk dress, "and I've come down to ask Miss Thorne if she would allow me to walk with her, and – Oh, my gracious! How it did make me jump!"

The cause of Miss Burge's start was the preliminary *boom*

boom, boom of Mrs Thorne's horror, the big drum, for the band had been marched up silently to the front of the schools, and the next moment the place was echoing with the brazen strains.

Chapter Ten.
Mr Canninge Assists

Mr William Forth Burge was gorgeous in the newest of frock-coats and the whitest of waistcoats, as he stood outside the schools watching the marshalling of the little forces, and then, glossy hat in one hand, orange handkerchief in the other, he gave the signal to start; and, with the excellent brass band playing its loudest, and the children for the most part bearing flowers or flags, the long procession started, to march up the High Street, round the market-place, past the church, and in and out of Bush Lane and Padley's Road, the boys cheering, the girls firing off a shrill "hurrah" now and then; and whenever the band ceased, either the boys or the girls were started in some simple school chorus, such as poor George W. Martin or Hullah wrote, to be sung ere long through the length and breadth of the land.

It was a simple affair, but well worth seeing, if only to watch the faces of the mothers and fathers of the children, ready at their doors to smile at "our Mary," or "little Jack," or "the bairns."

Mr William Forth Burge was perspiring everywhere – now in the front to stimulate the band, now standing still on a doorstep, hat in one hand, orange handkerchief in the other, till the whole procession, boys and girls, had passed, with a word for every one in turn, and looking thoroughly happy in the simplicity of his

heart.

Mr Chute, on the contrary, was very dignified and stern, but ready to raise his best hat to Hazel whenever he had a chance.

At last the vicarage was reached, a halt called, and the children gave a hearty cheer, which brought out the vicar, now ready to join Mr William Forth Burge and walk with the schools, the town being passed.

There needed no fugleman to bring forth cheers from the children as they reached the gates of the garden, for here was a wonderful archway of evergreens and flowers, the work of the two gardeners, and beneath this they had hardly filed before numbers of the townspeople began to arrive. Then there was a carriage or two, and, assisted by the vicar's sisters, little Miss Burge had quite a reception on the green terrace in front of the drawing-room, the wives and daughters of the neighbouring clergy, who all wished they had a William Forth Burge in their own parishes, arriving to do honour to the event.

The grounds were very pretty, and only separated by a light wire fence from a large paddock, which, having been fed off by sheep, was as smooth as a lawn; and here, for the hour before dinner, the children were marched, and sang at intervals, the band taking its turn, playing popular airs.

Miss Lambent and Miss Beatrice had noticed the new schoolmistress with a couple of chilly bows, and then devoted themselves to the assistance of "dear Miss Burge;" while the giver of the feast was busy in conference with Mr Chute about certain

sports that were afterwards to take place.

"I don't see the Canninges carriage yet Beatrice," said Miss Lambent, in a whisper to her sister, as the ladies were strolling about the grounds and admiring the flower-beds, the conservatory, and grape-houses in turn.

"Do you think they will come?" whispered Beatrice, who looked rather flushed; but certainly the day was hot.

"She said they would. Dear me, how strange of Henry!"

The vicar had gone into the paddock, and, after raising his hat politely, was standing talking to Hazel at intervals between saying a few words to the boys and girls – words, by the way, which they did not wish to hear, for every eye was turned as if by a magnet towards the great tent, and the man and maidservants and assistants constantly going to and fro.

"Here they are at last," exclaimed Miss Lambent. "I told you so. Now, Beatrice, what do you say?"

"Nothing," replied her sister quietly.

"Then I say something. George Canninge wouldn't have come here to a children's school feast unless he had expected to meet some one particular."

The object of their conversation had just helped a tall, handsome lady, with perfectly white hair, to descend from a phaeton drawn by a splendid pair of bays. He was a broad-shouldered, sparely-made man of about thirty, with dark, closely-cut whiskers – beards were an abomination then – and keen grey eyes, which took in the whole scene at a glance, and, what was

more, to find satisfaction as he took off and replaced his grey felt hat, and then, from habit, took out a white handkerchief and dusted his glossy boots.

"How absurd, mother! Thought I'd been walking," he said. "Bravo, Burge! He's doing it well. Hang it mother! I like that fellow."

"It's a pity, dear, that he is so vulgar."

"Oh, I don't know. He's frank and honesty and don't pretend to be anything more that what he is – a successful tradesman. Never saw a man less of a snob. Oh, there are the Lambents. I say, who's the lady talking to the parson?"

"I don't know, my dear," said Mrs Canninge, "unless it is the new schoolmistress."

"Nonsense: can't be. Oh, here's Burge! How are you, Burge? Glad you've got such a fine day for your treat."

"So am I, Mr Canninge, so am I. Thank you for coming, sir. Thank you for coming too, ma'am. My sister is up by the house, and there's lunch in the dining-room, and you'll excuse me, won't you! I have such heaps to do."

"Excuse you, of course. And I say, Burge, your going to give the youngsters some fun, I hope?"

"Fun, sir? I mean to let them have a jolly good lark."

"Don't let Lambent get them together and preach at the poor little beggars."

Mr William Forth Burge's face expanded, and he showed all his white teeth.

"That's what I like sir. That's the genuine old English squire said that."

"Nonsense, Burge."

"Oh, but it is, Mr Canninge. I know what's what as well as most men; and, look here, sir, I mean them to thoroughly enjoy themselves to-day."

"That's right, and I'll help you."

"You will, sir?" cried the giver of the feast.

"To be sure I will; get up some races and that sort of thing."

"I've got it all down on a piece of paper here, sir; only you wait. Now, I must go."

"He is really very vulgar, George," said the lady; "but there is a bluffness about him that I do like after all. But hadn't we better go and speak to Miss Burge?"

"Come along then. Oh, there are the Lambents with her now."

The Canninges went up to little Miss Burge, the lady saluting her graciously, and the young squire very heartily; and then salutations were being exchanged with the Misses Lambent, Beatrice looking bright and handsome as George Canninge shook hands in a frank gentlemanly way, as a deafening clamour arose behind them, and, turning, there was the host wielding a great dinner-bell with all his might.

As he ceased, the children cheered, the band struck up, and the little processions were marched past the company on the terrace, the boys to one end of the marquee, the girls to the other, Hazel now at the head of her troop, looking bright and animated,

excited slightly by the scene, and being admired more than she knew by those whom she passed.

As she came abreast of the group, she involuntarily raised her eyes, and they encountered a grave, earnest gaze from one whom she had never before seen; and in that brief moment she was aware that she was the object of a very scrutinising examination.

The next minute she had passed between the folds of the tent door, and was busy getting her girls seated at the long table on one side, the boys occupying a second long table on the other side, both being covered with well-cooked hot joints, steaming potatoes, and, dear to all children's hearts, plenty of pies and puddings.

"Well, ladies," said Mr Canninge, "shall we adjourn to the tent?"

"Did you think of going in?" said Beatrice.

"To be sure," he said gaily. "I am going to help."

"Going to help!" said Miss Lambent.

"To be sure: I promised Mr Burge. Let me take you in. Miss Lambent."

Rebecca took a long breath and the squire's arm. She liked it, but she knew that Beatrice would be out of temper for hours after.

There was no cause for temper, though – for the squire, as he was always called in the neighbourhood, had no sooner led the elder Miss Lambent within the canvas walls, then he coolly forsook her, and went and placed himself behind a great sirloin

of beef at one end of the girls' table, facing Mr William Forth Burge, who had the twin joint before him, over which his round red face was smiling pleasantly. The vicar had gone to one end of the boys' table, the master being at the other, while several of the principal tradesmen took their places in front of other joints.

"Now, boys and girls," cried the host, "are you all ready?"

The chorus of "yes!" was startling.

"Then silence for grace," roared the host; and then, rapidly, "What we're going to receive make us truly thankful. Amen. Lots of plates here!"

Before he finished, his great carving-knife was playing a tune in that skilful way peculiar to butchers, upon a silver-mounted steel, while the vicar looked aghast and George Canninge stooped down to hide a smile.

It was quite an insult when the vicar was present but in the innocency of his heart, Mr William Forth Burge was hoping the joints were done, and eager to begin.

"Now, gentlemen, carve away, please," he shouted. "Other ladies and gentlemen and servants, please pass the plates and 'taters. I want the youngsters to have a good dinner to-day. Now, Thomas," he cried to his coachman, who had just set down a pile of plates, "you lay hold of that – that spoon, and do nothing but ladle out gravy to every plate."

As he spoke, he was slicing off in the most skilful way prime sirloin of beef, and, smiling with delight, he said that it was done to a turn, as he called it.

"I chose every joint myself," he said to one. "Pass the plates quick. See that they have plenty of 'taters, ladies. Eat away, girls."

The visitors, after a few moments' awkward hesitation, turned themselves into waiters, and the carvers had a tremendous time, for quite two hundred hearty girls and boys were eating with all the enjoyment of their young healthy appetites.

"More! That's right!" cried the young squire. "I beg your pardon, Miss – I really don't know your name; I'm afraid I've splashed your dress."

"Pray don't mention it," said Hazel quietly, for she had been busily handing plates, looking brighter and happier than she had appeared for months.

"I'm quite envious of our host," said Canninge the next time Hazel brought a plate. "He carves beautifully, and I've hacked my joint to pieces."

"Send your knife up here, Mr Canninge," roared Mr W.F.B. from the other end of the table. "I'll give it a touch on my steel."

"Will you allow me?" said Hazel, who was the only waiter near.

"No, really, I could not think of – Well, if you will – "

"There."

He had paused to wipe the rather greasy handle upon his white handkerchief, and then, in passing the knife, their hands just touched – a mere touch, and Hazel had gone.

The meat had disappeared, the puddings and pies had followed, and, turned waiter now, the young squire had merrily

passed along the plates, till the time for rising had nearly arrived, when accident once more placed him beside Hazel.

"Your girls have thoroughly enjoyed themselves, Miss Thorne," he said, for he had learned her name now from one of the elder children – Feelier Potts, to wit.

"Oh, most thoroughly," said Hazel, smiling brightly and with genuine pleasure. "It is delightful to see them so happy."

"Do you see that Beatrice?" whispered Miss Lambent from the other end of the tent.

"Yes."

"Grace next I suppose? Oh, there is my mother beckoning to me, Miss Thorne," said the squire hastily, "it is a pity to have so pleasant an affair spoiled. Would you mind hinting to Mr Burge that he should ask the vicar to say grace!"

"Oh, yes, I will," said Hazel, nodding to him.

"As if he were her equal," said Miss Lambent indignantly; while, hurrying to the end of the table. Hazel was just in time to whisper to the host.

"Why, of course," he said. "What a stupid! Thank you. Miss Thorne. Mr Lambent!" he cried aloud, "would you be kind enough to say grace?"

Out in the field then, with the sun shining, the band playing, and plenty of enjoyment for the schools, which were separated by a rope stretched from one end to the other. Races were run for prizes of all kinds, and, full of animation, while the vicar stood with his hands behind him patronisingly looking on, the young

squire was the life and soul of the affair, and ready with a dozen fresh ideas to suggest to the host. There were prizes for the fastest runners, prizes for the slowest, for the first in and the last in, for jumps and hops, and the best singers, and the worst singers, scramblings, blindfold-walking, sports galore.

Hazel forgot her troubles, and with Miss Burge's help she was always the centre, of some new sport or game; Cissy and Mabel being like a pair of attendant fairies, ready to be seized upon by Mr Canninge as the bearers of the prizes that were to be won.

"I never saw George so full of spirits before," said Mrs Canninge to Rebecca Lambent as they sat in a garden-chair looking on.

"I should say he will have a bad headache afterwards," replied that lady.

"Oh, no, he is fond of athletics and that sort of thing. Charming young person, your new schoolmistress, Beatrice dear," she continued. "Very ladylike and well-spoken."

"Yes, a very well educated person," said Beatrice coldly.

"The squire's a brick, that's what he is, Betsey," said the host, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief, about five o'clock. "I tell you what, I'm about tired out. Now, look here, you go in and get yourself a cup of tea, or you'll be done up, and if you're as wise as I take you to be, you'll put just a pinch of ody-wee in the cup. It'll be all over at six, and then well have a comfortable dinner."

"But what are you going to do, Bill!"

"To do? I'm going to fetch that girl in to have a cup of tea with you. Bless her, she's worked like a slave. No, I won't it's all right, I'll take in her mother. Poor old lady, no one seemed to speak to her. Look at that now. That's what I call a genuine English gentleman, Betsey. Here, hi! Mr Chute, that'll do; now come up to the house, let them play by themselves. I say, Betsey, this has been a day!"

A day to be remembered, for Mr Chute was tightening his fists and scowling at one of the young Potts, wishing the while that he had a cane. Not that young Potts had been behaving so very badly, but his schoolmaster was annoyed, and some people when hurt look round at once for some one as a spleen-vent. He was suffering from the same pain that had sent a sting through Beatrice Lambent, and made her sister frown.

For just as Mr William Forth Burge had told his sister his determination, George Canninge, the principal landholder and personage of those parts, the newly-elected magistrate on the county bench, had gone up to Hazel Thorne, raised his hat and said quietly:

"Miss Thorne, you look tired out. Will you allow me to take you into the house and get you some tea?"

"And she forgot herself," cried Beatrice Lambent passionately, as she paced her room that night Hazel Thorne's self-forgetfulness consisted in acting, like any unconscious girl would under the circumstances. She gave the speaker a grateful look full of innocency, and, taking his proffered arm, walked

with him into Miss Burge's drawing-room, where she was received with smiles.

Chapter Eleven.
Touching the Sensitive Plant

It was Burns who wrote his wish that some power would give us the ability to see ourselves from other people's point of view. If Hazel Thorne had received this gift she would not have remained so steeped in ignorance, but gazing at herself through Beatrice Lambent's eyes, have seen that she had been guilty of an almost deadly sin.

For what could have been more heinous than for "a young person in her station in life," as Miss Beatrice afterwards said, to presume to take the squire's arm, an arm that Beatrice looked upon as sacred, and thought quite polluted by the touch of one who was only a schoolmistress, and consequently not likely to possess feelings similar to her own?

All the same, though, Hazel did touch the sacred limb, and allowed herself to be taken into the drawing-room, which Mrs Canninge had just entered, and was now presiding at a tea-table.

"You'll let me do that for you, Miss Burge," she had said. "You must be tired out."

"Well, really and truly, Mrs Canninge, my poor legs do ache to such an extent," said Miss Burge confidentially, "that I feel a'most ready to drop."

"That you must, indeed," said Mrs Canninge, smiling, as the

little body toddled to a large cane arm-chair, and plumped herself down so vigorously that the cane chair uttered a loud protest, and after giving way in an elastic manner, kept on uttering little squeaks and creaks, somewhat after the fashion of Miss Feelier Potts, as it made efforts to recover itself.

Meanwhile little Miss Burge sat there smiling gratefully, and enjoying her rest, as she gently rocked herself to and fro rubbing her hands in regular twin motion backwards and forwards along her aching legs.

"You see, Mrs Canninge – and sugar, please – three lumps. Yes, I always take cream, it do improve the tea so – you see my brother takes so much interest in the schools, and he'd set his mind upon the boys and girls enjoying themselves, that it would have been a sin and a shame not to have done one's best to help him; but, oh my! It has been a job."

"I'm sure you must have worked like a slave, Miss Burge," said Mrs Canninge, handing the tea, "and we ought all to be very grateful to you and your brother."

"Oh, it isn't me, my dear," said Miss Burge (fortunately neither Miss Lambent nor Beatrice was at hand to hear Mrs Canninge addressed as "my dear") – "it is all my brother. He hasn't a bit of pride in him. He says, you know, Mrs Canninge, he first learned to read and write at Plumton School, and it's been so useful to him that – "

"Excuse me. Miss Burge, I have not my best glasses with me, is not this Miss – Miss – ?"

"Thorne, yes, Mrs Canninge, and it's very kind of your son to bring the poor dear in to have some tea."

Mrs Canninge looked rather curiously at Hazel Thorne, as her son brought her into the drawing-room. If she had been plain and ordinary looking, Mrs Canninge would have thought nothing of the incident; but then Hazel Thorne was neither plain nor ordinary, and, what was more, she did not seem in the slightest degree oppressed by the novelty of the situation, but chatted quietly to her companion, who was the more conscious of the two.

"Oh, here is my mother," he said. "Mother dear, I have brought you an exhausted slave; pray feed and rest her, or she will be throwing off the Plumton chains, and escaping to some place where they will treat her better. Miss Thorne, this is my mother, Mrs Canninge."

"I am very glad to know you, Miss Thorne," said Mrs Canninge quietly; and Hazel looked her full in the eyes before lowering her own, and bending slightly, for there was a something in Mrs Canninge's way that was different to her son's. George Canninge had spoken to her as if she were his equal, while his mother had smiled, spoken kindly, and hastened to pour out some tea; but Hazel felt and knew that it was not in the same way as she would have spoken and acted towards one of her own set.

The shade of difference was very slight, but it was marked, and George Canninge noted it as well, though it was lost upon little Miss Burge, who turned to Hazel, and began to prattle away

directly.

"Ah, that's right, Mr Canninge, I am glad you have brought Miss Thorne in. She has been regularly fagged to death. I never did see any one work so."

"Miss Thorne has been indefatigable," said the squire; "and, by-the-way, Miss Thorne, I think your mamma is somewhere here. I'll go and find her."

Hazel was growing cold, but this little gentlemanly attention made her smile again as she bowed her thanks, and George Canninge was just leaving the room, when a familiar voice was heard, and Mr William Forth Burge appeared with Mrs Thorne, handing her in very carefully, and talking loudly all the while, as he brought her into a place where he was sure there would be no draught, and then fetched her some tea and cake.

"Well, Mr Burge," cried George Canninge, for he felt conscious that his mother was freezing the current of conversation, "what are we to call it, a success or a failure?"

Mr William Forth Burge opened his mouth and stared, but for a few moments no words came.

"I – thought it was a big success, Mr Canninge, sir," he said at last. "I meant it to be, you know."

"And so it is. It is the grandest and the jolliest school-treat I ever saw, and if the young dogs and doggesses are not – "

"Har – ha – ha – ha – ha – ha!"

"Why, what are you laughing at?"

"That's a good one, sir. Young doggesses, sir," roared Mr

William Forth Burge; but only to become preternaturally solemn directly, as he saw that no one else even smiled.

"I was only going to say that if they don't feel grateful for all this kindness, they – "

"Oh, there's Mr Chute outside, I told him to come in and get a cup. You won't mind for once, Mrs Canninge, and your son, will you? It's a holiday-time, and I want everybody to be pleased."

"Oh, certainly not, pray ask him in, Mr Burge," said Mrs Canninge. "My son and I both wish the school people to thoroughly enjoy themselves. Miss Thorne, your cup is empty, pray let me get you some more tea."

Hazel was about to decline, for Mrs Canninge's words made her heart sink. She had felt so happy during the past two hours, and a warm feeling of gratitude had sprung up in her breast towards George Canninge for his gentlemanly courtesy and attention; but Mrs Canninge was, in that quiet way that some ladies can adopt, showing her that she belonged to a different grade of society, towards whom she was acting the part of lady patroness.

For the moment a feeling of resentment sprang up in her breast. She felt that Mrs Canninge was trying to give her a lesson – a lesson that she did not need.

The sensation of humiliation was, however, but momentary, and smiling to herself, she quietly made up her mind to show the lady patroness that she had not forgotten her position, and did not need the lesson.

The opportunity came instantly, for Mr William Forth Burge returned, bringing in poor Mr Chute, who had been gnashing his teeth, this time with the teeth themselves, and growing more and more wroth at having been neglected. He had worked as hard as any one, but he was not taken into the drawing-room by young squires, and petted and made much of.

Neither of the Misses Lambent came and took his arm, for they were holding aloof altogether, and pretending to be deeply interested in the prizes won by Feelier Potts and Ann Straggalls. Taken altogether, Mr Chute was fast getting up to the point when people's indignation boils over. He was hungry, thirsty, tired, and suffering besides from a sudden attack of longing such as he had never felt before. He wanted to be beside Hazel Thorne, to talk to her, though had he been by her side not a word would have come. He wanted to look at her, and hear her talk. He wanted to breathe the same air that she was breathing, and to see her every act and look, and she had been carried off by young Mr George Canninge, while he, Samuel Chute, who was spoken of as such a clever master, and had been so strongly recommended, was left out in the cold.

Mr Samuel Chute felt in that disposition of mind which comes over most young men some time in their vealy stage, when the whole world is looked upon as going dead against them, because they cannot possess some one particular object; when they rapidly run over the various courses that seem alone open to them, and which embrace enlisting, going to sea, to the dogs,

or plunging into a river or canal – at a time when a man is handy with a boat-hook to fish them out.

Mr Chute, then, was not happy, and although he had been asked to go up to the house to partake of some refreshment he would not go, but stalked off into the shrubbery, and gnashed his teeth for a whole minute amongst the rhododendrons, after which he went into a deeper shade where it was all laurels, and as there was no one looking, gave such a stamp upon the ground as hurt his foot in his new boot.

It was in vain that the band, invigorated by Mr William Forth Burge's beer, was playing its happiest air, and the big drum had run wild, the trombone following suit to such an extent that it was cutting and slashing about in a way that was dangerous to the boys, while the leading comet was leading indeed – half a bar ahead. It was in vain that sweet music sought to woo Mr Chute back to the lawn; for a whole five minutes he would not stir, preferring to suffer in solitude.

But Mr Samuel Chute was after all human, and in spite of himself he found that he was gradually drawn to the drawing-room window. Here he was seen by Mr William Forth Burge, who came out, seized and softened him; and as the schoolmaster was marched in he felt decidedly better, and began to think of condescending to live.

"May I give you some tea, Mr Chute?" said Mrs Canninge politely.

"If you please, ma'am," said Chute, who felt better still on

noting that young Mr George Canninge was not seated at Hazel Thorne's side.

"Let's see: we must find you a seat, Mr Chute," said Mr William Forth Burge heartily, as he glanced round.

"There is room here, Mr Burge," said Hazel, moving a little farther along the settee, and Mr Chute's ease was complete, for the tea he drank was the most delicious he had ever tasted in his life, and he could have gone on eating bread-and-butter for an hour.

He said very little, and Hazel Thorne had to make up for it by chatting pleasantly about the proceedings, till a message came by one of the boys, and Mr Chute was fetched away, leaving the new mistress to the tender mercies of the young squire – at least that is how he put it; but he felt as he told himself, quite a new man.

George Canninge came to Hazel's side as soon as Chute had gone, and stood talking to her quietly, and in a way that would have satisfied the most exacting; but he had been dealing with a sensitive plant. At first she had seemed to rejoice in the warmth of his social sunshine, but Mrs Canninge had metaphorically stretched forth a rude hand and touched her leaves, with the result that they shrank and looked withered; and, try as he would, he found her quiet, distant and constrained.

"But she can be different," he said to himself as at last Hazel rose, and, crossing to Miss Burge, asked her permission to go.

"Oh lor', yes, my dear, go when you think best; for you must be terribly tired."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.