

Fletcher Joseph Smith

The Root of All Evil



Joseph Fletcher

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Fletcher J. S. Joseph Smith

The Root of All Evil

Part the First: RISE

CHAPTER I

Applecroft

Half-way along the one straggling street of Savilestowe a narrow lane suddenly opened out between the cottages and turned abruptly towards the uplands which rose on the northern edge of the village. Its first course lay between high grey walls, overhung with ivy and snapdragon. When it emerged from their cool shadowings the church came in view on one hand and the school on the other, each set on its own green knoll and standing high above the meadows. Once past these it became narrower and more tortuous; the banks on either side rose steeply, and were crowned by ancient oaks and elms. In the proper season of the year these banks were thick with celandine and anemone, and the scent of hedge violets rose from the moss among the spreading roots of the trees. Here the ruts of the lane were deep, as if no man had any particular business to repair them. The lane was, in fact, a mere occupation road, and led to nothing but an out-of-the-way farmstead, which stood, isolated and forlorn, half a mile from the village. It bore a picturesque name – Applecroft – and an artist, straying by chance up the lane and coming suddenly upon it would have rejoiced in its queer gables, its twisted chimneys, in the beeches and chestnuts that towered above it, and in the old-world garden and orchard which flanked one side of its brick walls, mellowed by time to the colour of claret. But had such a pilgrim looked closer he would have seen that here were all the marks of ill-fortune and coming ruin – evident, at any rate, to practical eyes in the neglected gates and fences, in the empty fold, in the hingeless, tumble-down doors, in the lack of that stitch in time which by anticipation would have prevented nine more. He would have seen, in short, that this was one of those places, of which there are so many in rural England, whereat a feckless man, short of money, was vainly endeavouring to do what no man can do without brains and capital.

Nevertheless – so powerfully will Nature assert her own wealth in the face of human poverty – the place looked bright and attractive enough on a certain morning, when, it then being May, the trees around it were in the first glory of their leafage, and the orchard was red and white with blossom of apple and plum and cherry. There was a scent of sweetbriar and mignonette around the broken wicket gate which admitted to the garden, and in the garden itself, ill-kept and neglected, a hundred flowers and weeds, growing together unchecked, made patches of vivid colour against the prevalent green. There were other patches of colour, of a different sort, about the place, too. Beyond the garden, and a little to the right of the house, a level sward, open to the full light of the sun, made an excellent drying ground for the family washing, and here, busily hanging out various garments on lines of cord, stretched between rough posts, were two young women, the daughters of William Farnish, the shiftless farmer, whose hold on his house and land was daily becoming increasingly feeble. If any shrewd observer able to render himself invisible had looked all round Applecroft – inside house and hedge, through granary and stable – he would have gone away saying with emphasis, that he had seen nothing worth having there, save the two girls whose print gowns fluttered about their shapely limbs as they raised their bare arms and full bosoms to the cords on which they were pegging out the wet linen.

Farnish's wife had been dead some years, and since her death his two daughters had not only done all the work of the house, but much of what their father managed to carry out on his hundred

acres of land. They bore strange names – selected by Farnish and his wife, after much searching and reflection, from the pages of the family Bible. The elder was named Jecholiah; the younger Jerusha. As time had gone on Jecholiah had become Jeckie; Jerusha had been shortened to Rushie. Everybody in the parish and the neighbourhood knew Jeckie and Rushie Farnish. They had always been inseparable, these sisters, yet it needed little particular observation to see that there was a difference of character and temperament between them. Jeckie, at twenty-five, was a tall, handsome, finely-developed young woman, generous in proportion, with a flashing, determined eye, and a mouth and chin which denoted purpose and obstinacy; she was the sort of woman that could love like fire, but whom it would be dangerous to cross in love. Already many of the young men of the district, catching one flash of her hawk-like eyes, had felt themselves warned, and it had been a matter of astonishment to some discerning folk when it became known that she was going to marry Albert Grice, the only son of old George Grice, the village grocer, a somewhat colourless, tame young man whose vices were non-existent and his virtues commonplace, and who had nothing to recommend him but a good-humoured, weak amiability and a rather good-looking, boyish face. Some said that Jeckie was thinking of Old Grice's money-bags, but the vicar's wife, who studied psychology in purely amateur fashion, said that Jeckie Farnish had taken up Albert Grice in precisely the same spirit which makes a child love a legless and faceless doll, and an old maid a miserable mongrel – just in response to the mothering instinct; whether Jeckie loved him, they said, nobody would ever know, for Jeckie, with her proud, scornful lips and eyes full of sombre passion, was not the sort to tell her heart's secrets to anybody. Not so, however, with her sister Rushie, a soft, pretty, lovable, kissable, cuddlesome slip of a girl, who was all for love, and would have been run after by every lad in the village and half the shop-boys in the neighbouring market town, if it had not been that Jeckie's mothering and grandmothering eye had always been on her. Rushie represented one thing in femininity; her sister typified its very opposite. Rushie was of the tribe of Venus, but Jeckie of the daughters of Minerva.

Something of the circumstances and character of this family might have been gathered from the quality of the garments which the sisters were industriously hanging out to dry in the sun and wind. Most of them were their own, and in the bulk there was nothing of the frill and lace of the fine lady, but rather plain linen and calico. An expert housewife, fingering whatever there was, would have said that each separate article had been worn to thinness. Thus, too, were the sheets and pillow-cases and towels; and of such coarse stuff as belonged to Farnish himself – all represented the underwear and appointments of poor folk. But while there was patching and darning in plenty, there were no rags. If her father allowed a gate to fall off its posts rather than hunt up an old hinge and a few nails, Jeckie took good care that her needle and thread came out on the first sign of a rent; it was harder to replace than to repair, in her experience. And now, as she put the last peg in the last scrap of damp linen, it was with the proud consciousness that if the whole show was poverty-stricken it was at least whole and clean.

"That's the lot, Rushie!" she said, turning to her sister as she picked up the empty linen basket. "A good drying wind, too. We'll be able to get to mangling and ironing by tea-time."

Rushie, who had no such love of labour as her sister, made no answer. She followed Jeckie across the drying-ground and into the house; it was indicative of her nature that she immediately dropped into the nearest chair. The washing had been going on since a very early hour in the morning, broken only by a hastily-snatched breakfast; on the table in the one living-room the dirty cups and plates still lay spread about in confusion. And Jeckie, who had eyes all round her head, glanced at them, and at the old clock in the corner, and at her sister, sitting down, all at once.

"Nay, child!" she exclaimed. "It's over soon for that game! Eleven already, and naught done for dinner. Get those pots washed up, Rushie, and then see to the potatoes. Father'll none be so long before he's home; and there'll be Doadie Bartle and him for their dinners at twelve o'clock. Come on, now!"

"I'm tired," said Rushie, as she slowly rose, and began to clear up the untidy table. "We've never done in this house!"

"So'm I," retorted Jeckie. "But what's that to do with it when there's things to be done? Hurry up now, while I look after those fowls; they've never been seen to this morning."

She caught up a sieve as she spoke, filled it with waste stuff from a tub in the scullery, and, going out through the back of the house, walked into the fold behind, calling as she went to the cocks and hens which were endeavouring to find something for themselves amongst its boulders. None knew better than Jeckie the importance and value of that feathered brood. For three years she had kept things going with her poultry and eggs, and with the milk and butter which she got from the four cows that formed Farnish's chief property. The money that she made in this fashion had found the family in food and clothing, and gone some way towards paying the rent. And as she stood there throwing handfuls of food to the fowls, scurrying and snatching about her feet, she had a curious sense that outside them and the cows feeding in the adjacent meadow there was literally nothing about the whole farmstead but poverty. The fold was destitute of manure; half a stack of straw stood desolate in the adjoining stack-garth; there was no hay in the loft nor corn in the granary; whatever produce he raised Farnish was always obliged to sell at once. The few pigs which he possessed were at that moment rooting in the lane for something to swell out their lank sides; his one horse was standing disconsolate by the trough near the well, mournfully regarding its emptiness. And Jeckie, as she threw away the last contents of her sieve and went over to the pump, had a vision of what other possibilities there were on the farm – certain acres of wheat and barley, of potatoes and turnips, the welfare of which, to be sure, depended upon the weather. She had a pretty keen idea of what they would bring in that coming autumn in the way of money; she had an equally good one of what Farnish would have to do with it.

The horse, a fairly decent animal, drank greedily when Jeckie had pumped water into the trough, and as soon as he had taken his fill of this cheap commodity she opened the gate of the fold and let him out into the lane to pick up whatever he could get – that was an equally cheap way of feeding stock. Then, always with an eye to snatching up the potentialities of profit, she began to go round the farm buildings, looking for eggs. Hens, as all hen-wives know, are aggravating creatures, and will lay their eggs in any nook or corner. Jeckie knew where eggs were to be found – in beds of nettles, or under the stick-cast in the orchard, or behind the worn-out implements in the barn. Twice a day she or Rushie searched the precincts of Applecroft high and low rather than lose one of the precious things which went to make up so many dozen for market every Saturday, and when they had finished their labours it was always with the uneasy feeling that some perverse Black Spanish or Cochin China had successfully hidden away what would have brought in at any rate a few pence. But a few pence meant much. Though there were always eggs by the score in the wicker baskets in Jeckie's dairy, none were ever eaten by the family nor used for cooking purposes. That, indeed, would have been equivalent to eating money. Eggs meant other things – beef, bread, rent.

Jeckie's search after the morning's eggs took her up into the old pigeon-cote of the farm – an octagon building on the roof of the granary – wherein there had been no pigeons for a long time. Approached by a narrow, much-worn stone stairway, set between the walls of barn and granary, this cobwebbed and musty place was honeycombed from the broken floor to the dilapidated roof by nests of pigeon-holes. There were scores upon scores of them, and Jeckie never knew in which she might not find an egg. Consequently, in order to make an exhaustive search, it was necessary to climb all round the place, examining every row and every separate chamber. In doing this she had to pass the broken window, long destitute of the thick glass which had once been there. Looking through it, she saw her father coming up the lane from the village. At this, leaving her search to be resumed later, she went down to the fold again, carefully carrying her eggs before her in her bunched-up apron; for Jeckie knew that Farnish had been into Sicaster, the neighbouring market-town, that morning on a question that had to do with money, and whenever money was concerned her instincts were immediately aroused.

Farnish was riding into the fold as she regained it, and he got off his pony as she went towards him, and silently removing its saddle and bridle, turned it loose in the lane, to keep the horse company and find its dinner for itself. Carrying its furniture, he advanced in the direction of his daughter – a tall, lank, shambling man, with a wisp of yellowish-grey whisker on either side of a thin, weak face – and shook his head as he turned into the stable, where Jackie silently followed him. He flung saddle and bridle into an empty manger, seated himself on a corn-bin, and, swinging his long legs, shook his head again.

"Well?" demanded Jackie.

Farnish, for a long time, had found it difficult to encounter his elder daughter's steady and questioning gaze, and he did not meet it now. His eyes wandered restlessly about the stable, as if wondering out of which particular hole the next rat would look, and he made no show of speech.

"You may as well out with it," said Jackie. "What is it, now?"

There was an emphasis on the last word that made Farnish look at his daughter for a brief second; he looked away just as quickly, and began to drum his fingers on his bony knees.

"Aye, well, mi lass!" he answered, in a low tone. "As ye say – now! Ye may as well hear now as later. It's just like this here. Things is about at an end! That's the long and that's the short, as the saying goes."

"You'll have to be plainer than that," retorted Jackie. "What is it? Money, of course! But – who's wanting it?"

Farnish made as if he swallowed something with an effort, and he kept his eyes steadily averted.

"I didn't make ye acquainted wi' it at the time," he said, after a brief silence. "But ye see, Jackie, my lass, at t'last back-end I had to borrow money fro' one o' them money-lendin' fellers at Clothford – them 'at advertises, like, i' t'newspapers. I were forced to it! – couldn't ha' gone on, nohow, wi'out it at t'time. And so, course, why, its owin'!"

"How much?" demanded Jackie.

"It were a matter o' two hundred 'at I borrowed," replied Farnish. "But – there's a bit o' interest, of course. It's that there interest –"

"What are they going to do?" asked Jackie. Her whole instinct was to get at the worst – to come to grips. "Let's be knowing!" she said impatiently. "What's the use of keeping it back?"

"They can sell me up," answered Farnish in a low tone. "They can sell aught there is. I signed papers, d'ye see, mi lass. I had to. There were no two ways about it."

Jackie made no answer. She saw the whole of Applecroft and its hundred acres as in a vision. Sold up! There was, indeed, she thought, with bitter and ironic contempt, a lot to sell! Household furniture, live stock, dead stock, growing crops – was the whole lot worth two hundred pounds? Perhaps; but, then there would be nothing left. Now, out of the cows and the poultry a living could be scratched together, but...

"I been into Sicaster to see Mr. Burstlewick, th' bank manager," continued Farnish. "I telled him all t'tale. He said he were very sorry, and he couldn't do naught. Naught at all! So, you see, my lass, that's where it is. An' it's a rare pity," he concluded, with a burst of sentimental self-condolence, "for it's a good year for weather, and I reckon 'at what we have on our land'll be worth three or four hundred pound this back-end. And all for t'want of a hundred pounds, Jackie, mi lass!"

"What do you mean by a hundred pound?" exclaimed Jackie. "You said two!"

"Aye, but ye don't understand, mi lass," answered Farnish. "If I could give 'em half on it d'ye see, and sign a paper to pay t'other half when harvest's been and gone – what?"

"Would that satisfy 'em?" asked Jackie suspiciously.

"So they telled me, t'last time I saw 'em," replied Farnish in apparent sincerity. "'Give us half on it, Mr. Farnish,' they said, 'and t'other half and t'interest can run on.' So they said; but it's three weeks since, is that."

Jeckie meditated for a moment; then she suddenly turned, left the stable, and, crossing the empty fold, got rid of her eggs. She went into the kitchen; took something from its place in the delf-ledge, and, with another admonition to Rushie to see to the dinner, walked out into the garden, and set off down the lane outside. Farnish, from the fold, saw her going, and as her print gown vanished he turned into the house with a sigh of mingled relief and anticipation. But as he came in sight of the delf-ledge the sigh changed to a groan. Jeckie, he saw, had carried away the key of the beer barrel, and whereas he might have had a quart in her certain absence he would now get nothing but a mere glass on her problematical return.

CHAPTER II

The Tight Lip

Ever since her mother's death, ten years before the events of that morning, Jeckie, as responsible manager of household affairs, had cultivated an instinct which had been born in her – the instinct, if a thing had to be done to do it there and then. As soon as Farnish unburdened himself of his difficulty, his daughter's quick brain began to revolve schemes of salvation. There was nothing new in her father's situation; she had helped him out of similar ones more than once. More than once, too, she had borrowed money for him – money to pay an extra-pressing bill; money to make up the rent; money to satisfy the taxes or rates – and she had always taken good care to see that what she had borrowed was punctually repaid when harvest came round – a time of the year when Farnish usually had something to sell. Accordingly, what she had just heard in the stable did not particularly alarm her; she took her father's story in all good faith, and believed that if he could stave off the Clothford money-lender with a hundred pounds on account all would go on in the old way until autumn, when money would be coming in. And her sole idea in setting off to the village was to borrow the necessary sum. Once borrowed, she would see to it that it was at once forwarded to the importunate creditor; she would see to it, too, that it was repaid to whomever it was that she got it from. As to that last particular, she was canvassing certain possibilities as she walked quickly down the lane. There was Mr. Stubbley, the biggest farmer in the place, who was also under steward for the estate. She had more than once borrowed twenty or thirty pounds from him, and he had always had it back. Then there was Mr. Merritt, almost as well-to-do as Mr. Stubbley. The same reflections applied to him, and he was a good natured man. And there was old George Grice, Albert's father, who was as warm a man as any tradesman of the neighbourhood. One or other of these three would surely lend her a hundred pounds; she was, indeed, so certain of it that she felt no doubt on the matter, and her only regret at the moment was that her visit to the village might make her a little late for her dinner – no unimportant matter to her, a healthy young woman of good appetite, who had breakfasted scantily at six o'clock. Jeckie took a short cut across the churchyard and down the church lane, and came out upon the village street a little above the cross roads. There, talking to the landlord of the "Coach-and-Four," who stood in his open doorway holding a tray and a glass, she saw Mr. Stubbley a comfortable man, who spent all his mornings on a fat old pony, ambling about his land. Stubbley saw her coming along the street, and, with a nod to the landlord, touched the pony with his ash-plant switch and steered him in her direction. Jeckie, who had a spice of the sanguine in her temperament, took this as a good omen; she had an idea that in five more minutes she would be with this prosperous elderly farmer in his cozy parlour, close by, watching him laboriously writing out a cheque. And she smiled almost gaily as the pony and its burden came to the side of the road along which she walked.

"Now, mi lass!" said Mr. Stubbley, looking her closely over out of his sharp eyes. "What're you doing down town this time o' day? Going to Grice's, I reckon? I were wanting a word or two wi' you," he went on, before Jeckie could get in a word of her own. "A word or two i' private, you understand. You're aware, of course, mi lass," he continued, bending down from his saddle. "You're aware 'at t'rent day's none so far off? What?"

A sudden sense of fear sent the warm flush out of Jeckie's cheeks, and left her pale. Her dark eyes grew darker as she looked at the man who was regarding her so steadily and inquiringly.

"What about the rent-day Mr. Stubbley?" she asked. "What do you mean?"

"I had a line from t'steward this morning," answered Stubbley. "He just mentioned a matter – 'at he hoped Farnish 'ud be ready with the rent; and t'last half-year's an' all. What?"

The hot blood came back to Jeckie's cheeks in a fierce wave. She felt, somehow, as if some man's hand had smitten her, right and left.

"The last half-year's rent!" she repeated. "Do – do you mean that father didn't pay it?"

Stubley looked at her for an instant with speculation in his shrewd eyes. Then he nodded his head. There was a world of meaning in the nod.

"Paid nowt!" he answered. "Nowt at all. Not a penny piece, mi lass."

Jeckie's hands fell limply to her sides.

"I didn't know," she answered, helplessly. "He – he never told me. I'd no idea of it; Mr. Stubley."

"Dare say not, mi lass," said the farmer. "It 'ud be better for Farnish if he'd to tell a young woman like you more nor what he does, seemin'ly. But, now – is he going to be ready this time?"

Jeckie made no answer. She stood looking up and down the street, seeing all manner of things, real and unreal. And suddenly a look of sullen anger came into her eyes and round her red lips.

"How can I tell?" she said. "He – as you say – he doesn't tell me!"

Stubley bent still lower, and, from sheer force of habit, glanced right and left before he spoke.

"Aye, well, Jeckie, mi lass!" he said in low tones. "Then I'll tell you summat. Look to yourself – you an' yon sister o' yours! There's queer talk about Farnish. I've heard it, time and again, at market and where else. He'll none last so long, my lass – can't! It's my opinion there'll be no rent for t'steward; nowt but excuses and begging off, and such like; he's hard up, is your father! It 'ud be a deal better for him to give up, Jeckie; he'll never carry on! Now, you're a sensible young woman; what say you?"

There was a strong, almost mulish sense of obstinacy in the Farnish blood, and it was particularly developed in Farnish's elder daughter. Jeckie stood for a moment staring across the road. She looked as if she were gazing at the sign of the "Coach-and-Four," which had recently been done up and embellished with a new frame. In reality she saw neither it nor the ancient hostelry behind it. What she did see was a vision of her own!

"I don't know, Mr. Stubley," she answered suddenly. "My father's like all little farmers – no capital and always short o' ready money. But there's money to come in; come harvest and winter! And I know that if I'd that farm on my hands, I'd make it pay. I could make it pay now if I'd all my own way with it. But – "

Then, just as suddenly as she had spoken, she moved off, and went rapidly down the street in the direction of Grice's shop. The conversation with Stubley had given a new turn to her thoughts. What was the use of borrowing a hundred pounds to stave off a money-lender, when the last half-year's rent was owing and another half-year's nearly due? No; she would see if she could not do better than that! Now was the moment; she would try to take things clean into her own hands. Farnish, she knew, was afraid of her – afraid of her superior common sense, her grasp of things, her almost masculine powers of contrivance and management. She could put him on one side as easily as a child can push aside the reeds on the river bank, and then she could have her own way, and pull things round, and ... she paused at that point, remembering that all this could only be done with money.

Noon was just striking from the church clock as Jeckie came up to the front of Grice's shop. She never looked at this establishment without remembering how it had grown within her own recollection. When she was a child of five, and had gone down the street to spend a Saturday penny on sweets, Grice's shop had been housed in one of the rooms of the old timber-fronted house from which the new stores now projected in shameless disregard of the antiquities surrounding them. Nothing, indeed, could be in greater contrast than Grice's shop and Grice's house. The house had stood where it was since the time of Queen Anne; the shop, built out from one corner of it, bore the date 1897, and on its sign – a blue ground with gilt lettering – appeared the significant announcement: "Diamond Jubilee Stores. George Grice & Son." There were fine things about the house, within and without: old furniture in old rooms, and trim hedges and gay flowers on the smooth, velvety lawns; a mere glance at the high, sloping roof was sufficient to make one think of Old England in its days of calm and leisure; but around the shop door and in the shop itself there were the sights and sounds of buying and selling; boxes and packing-cases from Chicago and San Francisco; the scent of spices and of soap; it always seemed to Jeckie, who had highly susceptible nostrils, that Albert Grice, however much he

spruced and scented himself on Sundays, was never free of the curious mingling odours associated with a grocer's apron.

Albert was in the shop when she marched in, busied in taking down an order from Mrs. Aislabie, the curate's wife, who, seated in a chair at the counter, was meditatively examining a price list and wondering how to make thirty shillings go as far as forty. He glanced smilingly but without surprise at Jackie, and inclined his head and the pen behind his large right ear towards a certain door at the back of the shop. Jackie knew precisely what he meant – which was that his father had just gone to dinner. They had a custom there at Grice's – the old man went to dinner at twelve; Albert at one; there was thus always one of them in the shop to look after things in general and the assistant and two shop lads in particular. And Albert, who knew that since Jackie was there in her morning gown and without headgear it must be because she wanted to see his father, added a word or two to his signal.

"Only just gone in," he said. "Go forward."

Jackie went down the shop to the door, tapped at the glass of the upper panel, pushed aside a heavy curtain that hung behind, and entered upon old Grice as he sat down to his dinner. He was a biggish, round-faced, bald-headed man, bearded, save for his upper lip, which was very large and very tight – folk who knew George Grice well, and went to him seeking favours, watched that tight lip, and knew from it whether he was going to accede or not. He was a prosperous-looking man, too; plump and well-fed; and there was a fine round of cold beef and a bowl of smoking potatoes before him, to say nothing of a freshly-cut salad, a big piece of prime Cheddar and a tankard of foaming ale. The buxom servant-lass who attended to the wants of the widowed father and the bachelor son, was just going out of the room by one door as Jackie entered by the other. She glanced wonderingly at the visitor, but George Grice, picking up the carving knife and fork, showed no surprise. He had long since graduated in the school of life, and well knew the signs when man or woman came wanting something.

"Hallo!" he said in sharp, businesslike tones. "Queer time o' day to come visiting, mi lass! What's in the wind, now?"

Jackie, uninvited, sat down in one of the two easy chairs which flanked the hearth, and went straight to her subject.

"Mr. Grice!" she said, having ascertained by a glance that the door leading to the kitchen was safely closed. "I came down to see you. Now, look here, Mr. Grice; you know me, and you know I'm going to marry your Albert."

"Humph!" muttered Grice, busied in carving thin slices of beef for himself. "Aye, and what then?"

"And you know I shall make him a rare good wife, too," continued Jackie. "The best wife he could find anywhere in these parts!"

"When I were a lad," remarked Grice, with the ghost of a thin smile about his top lip, "we used to write a certain saying in the copybook – 'Self-praise is no recommendation.' I'm not so certain of it myself, though. Some folks knows the value of their own goods better than anybody."

"I know the value of mine!" asserted Jackie solemnly. "You couldn't find a better wife for Albert than I shall make him if you went all through Yorkshire with a small-tooth comb! And you know it, Mr. Grice!"

"Well, mi lass," said Grice, "and what then?"

"I want you to do something for me," answered Jackie. She pulled the chair nearer to the table, and went on talking while the grocer steadily ate and drank. "I'll be plain with you, Mr. Grice. There's nobody knows I've come here, nor why. But it's this – I've come to the conclusion that it's no use my father going on any longer. He isn't fit; he's no good. I've found things out. He's been borrowing money from some, or one, o' them money-lenders at Clothford. He owes half a year's rent, and there's another nearly due. There's others wanting money. I think you want a bit, yourself. Well, it's all got to stop. I'm going to stop it! And as I'm going to be your daughter-in-law, I want you to help me!"

Grice, carefully selecting the ripest of some conservatory-grown tomatoes from the bowl in front of him, stuck a fork into it, and began to peel it with a small silver knife which he picked up from beside his plate. His tight lip pursed itself while he was engaged; it was not until he had put the peeled tomato on his plate, and added the heart of a lettuce to it, that he looked at his caller.

"What d'ye want, mi lass?" he asked.

"I want you to lend me – me! – five or six hundred pounds, just now," replied Jeckie readily. "Me, mind, Mr. Grice – not him. Me!"

"What for?" demanded Grice, stolidly and with no sign of surprise. "What for, now?"

"I'll tell you," answered Jeckie, gaining in courage. "I want to pay off every penny he owes. Then I'll be master! I shall have him under my thumb, and I'll make him do. I'll see to every penny that comes in and goes out; and you mark my words, Mr. Grice, I can make that farm pay! If you'll lend me what I want I'll pay you back in three years, and it'll be then a good going concern. I know what I'm saying."

"In less nor three years you and my son Albert'll be wed," remarked Grice.

"I can keep an eye on it, and on my father and Rushie when we are wed," retorted Jeckie.

"And there's another thing," said Grice. "When I gave my consent to your weddin' my son, it were an agreed thing between me an' Farnish, a bargain, that you should have five hundred pound from him as a portion. Where's that?"

Jeckie gave him a swift meaning look.

"I might have yet, if I took hold o' things," she answered. "But it 'ud be me 'at would find it, Mr. Grice. My father – Lord bless you – he'd never find five hundred pence! But – trust me!"

Grice carved himself some more cold beef, and as he seemed to be considering her proposal, Jeckie resumed her arguments.

"There'll be a good bit of money to come in this back-end," she said. "And if we'd more cows, as I'd have, we should do better. And pigs – I'd go in for pigs. Let me only clear off what debt he's got into, and –"

Grice suddenly laughed quietly, and, seizing his tankard, looked knowingly at her as he lifted it to his lips.

"The question is, mi lass," he said, "the question is – how deep has he got? You don't know that, you know!"

"Most of it, at any rate," said Jeckie. "I'll lay four or five hundred 'ud clear it all off, Mr. Grice."

"Five hundred pound," observed Grice, "is a big, a very big sum o' money. It were a long time," he added reflectively, "before I could truly say that I were worth it!"

"You're worth a lot more now, anyway," remarked Jeckie. "And you'll be doing a good deed if you help me. After all, I want to set things going right; they're my own flesh and blood up yonder. Now, come, Mr. Grice!"

Grice pushed away the remains of the more solid portion of his dinner, and thoroughly dug into the prime old cheese. After eating a little and nibbling at a radish he turned to his visitor.

"I'll not say 'at I will, and I'll not say 'at I willn't," he announced. "It's a matter to be considered about. But I'll say this here – I'll take a ride up Applecroft way this afternoon, and just see how things stands, like. And then –"

He waved Jeckie towards the door, and she, knowing his moods and temperament, took the hint, and with no more than a word of thanks, hastened to leave him. In the shop Albert was still busily engaged with Mrs. Aislabie, who found it hard to determine on Irish roll or Wiltshire. With him Jeckie exchanged no more than a glance. She felt a sense of relief when she got out into the street; and when, five minutes later, she was crossing the churchyard she muttered to herself certain words which showed that her conversation with Stubley was still in her mind.

"Yes, that's the only way – to clear him out altogether, and let me take hold! I'll put things to rights if only George Grice'll find the money!"

At that moment George Grice, having finished his dinner, was taking out of a cupboard certain of his account books. Before he did anything for anybody, he wanted to know precisely how much was owing to him at Applecroft.

CHAPTER III

The Broken Man

While Jackie was busied in the village and Farnish, sighing after the key of the beer barrel, was aimlessly wandering about the farm buildings, there came into the kitchen, where Rushie was making ready the dinner, a tall, blue-eyed, broadly-built youngster, whose first action was to glance inquiringly at the clock and whose second was to go to the sink in the corner to wash his brown hands. This was Joe, or Doadie Bartle, about whom nobody in those parts knew more than that he had turned up as a lad of fifteen at Applecroft some six or seven years previously; had been taken in by Farnish to do a bit of work for his meat, drink and lodging, and had remained there ever since. According to his own account, he was an orphan, from Lincolnshire, who had run away from his last place and gone wandering about the country in search of a better. Something in the atmosphere of Applecroft had suited him, and there he had stayed, and was now, in fact, Farnish's sole help on the farm outside the occasional assistance of the two girls. There were folk in the village who said that Farnish got his labour for naught, but Jackie knew that he had had twenty pounds a year ever since he was eighteen, and had regularly put by one-half of his wages under her supervision. Doadie Bartle, chiefly conspicuous for his air of simple good nature, had come to be a fixture. Without him and Jackie the place would have gone to wrack and ruin long since, for Farnish had a trick of sitting down when he should have been afoot, and gossiping in public-houses when his presence was wanted elsewhere. It was because of this – a significant indication, had there been anyone to notice it – that Doadie was always treated to a pint of ale at dinner and supper, while his master was rigorously restricted to a glass.

Doadie Bartle looked again at the clock as he finished wiping his hands on the rough towel which hung from its roller behind the door. His glance ended at Rushie, who was sticking a fork into the potatoes on the hob.

"By gow, it's a warm 'un, this mornin'!" he said. "Where's Jackie, like? I could do wi' my pint now better nor later."

"You'll have to wait," answered Rushie, who had seen her father's despairing glance at the delf-ledge. "She's gone out, and taken the key with her."

Doadie looked disappointedly in the direction of the beer barrel, which stood on its gantry just within the open door of the larder. Resigning himself to the unavoidable, he walked out into the fold, where Farnish leaned against the wall of the pig-stye, hands in pockets.

"I shall have to do a bit o' mendin' up this afternoon," said Doadie. "Merritt's cows has been i' our clover; there's a bad place i' t'hedge."

"Aye!" assented Farnish. There was no interest in his tone, and little more seemed to be awakened when Rushie appeared at the kitchen window and announced that dinner was ready. He shambled indoors, and, without removing his hat, sat down at the head of his table, and began to cut slices off the big lump of cold bacon, which, with boiled potatoes and greens, made up the dinner. "Jackie's no reight to run off wi' t'key o' t'ale barrel," he grumbled. "Them 'at tews hes a reight to sup!"

"It's not much tewin' 'at you've been doin', I'll lay!" retorted Rushie, who had long since learned the art of homely repartee from her elder sister. "Ridin' about like a lord!"

"Now then, never mind!" growled Farnish. "Happen I done more tewin' nor ye're aware on, mi lass! There's more sorts o' hard work than one."

Then, all three being liberally supplied, the three pairs of jaws set to work, and the steady eating went on in silence until the sheep-cur, chained outside the door to a dilapidated kennel, gave a short, sharp bark. Rushie, who knew this to be a declaration of friendliness rather than of enmity, ran and put the potatoes and greens on the hob to warm up.

"Jackie!" she said. "None been so long, after all."

Jeckie came bustling into the kitchen as Farnish, who knew her appetite, pushed a well-filled plate towards her place. Without a word she took a big earthenware jug from its hook, went to the larder, and rummaged in her pocket for the key of the beer barrel. Presently the sound of the gurgling ale was heard in the kitchen. Doadie Bartle's big blue eyes glistened as he went on steadily munching. Farnish looked down at the cloth, wondering if his elder daughter meant to be generous. The roseate hopes set up in Jeckie's mind by her interview with George Grice inclined her for once to laxity. When she came back with the ale she gave her father a pint instead of a glass, and Farnish made an involuntary mutter of appreciation. He and his man seized their measures and drank deep. Jeckie, pouring out glasses for herself and her sister, gave them a half-whimsical look; she had been obliged to tilt the barrel a little to draw that ale, and she knew that its contents were running low, and that the brewer's man was not due for two days yet.

The dinner went on to its silent end; the bacon, greens, and potatoes finished. Rushie cleared the plates in a heap, and, setting clean ones before each diner, produced a huge jam tart, hot and smoking from the oven. Jeckie cut this into great strips and distributed them. Bartle, still hungry, took a mouthful of his, turned scarlet, and reached for his pot of beer.

"Gum! that's a hot 'un!" he said drinking heartily. "Like to take t'skin offen your tongue, is that!" Then, with an apologetic glance in Rushie's direction, and, as if to excuse his manners, he murmured, "Jam's allus hotter nor owt 'at iver comes out o' t'oven, I think, and I allus forget it; you mun excuse me!"

"Save toffee," remarked Farnish, with the air of superior knowledge. "There's nowt as hot as what toffee is. I rek'lect 'at I once burnt t'roof o' my mouth varry bad wi' some toffee 'at mi mother made; they hed to oil my mouth same as they oil machines – wi' a feather."

When the last of the jam tart had vanished the two girls put their elbows on the table, propped their chins on their interlaced fingers, and seemed to study the pattern of the coarse linen cloth. Farnish got up slowly; took down his pipe from the corner of the mantelpiece, and, drawing some loose tobacco from his waistcoat pocket, began to smoke. Bartle, after rising and stretching himself, went over to a drawer in the delf-ledge, and presently came back from it with a paper packet, which he began to unfold. An odour of peppermint rose above the lingering smell of the bacon and greens.

"Humbugs!" he said, with a broad grin, as he offered the packet to the two girls. "I bowt three-pennorth t'last time I were i' Sicaster, and I'd forgotten all about 'em. They're t'reight sort, these is – tasty 'uns."

Munching the brown and white bull's eyes, the sisters began to clear away the dinner things into the scullery. Presently Rushie called to Bartle to bring her the kettle and help her to wash up. When he had gone into the scullery Jeckie, who was folding up the cloth, turned to her father.

"About what you told me this morning," she said, in low tones. "Something's got to be done, and, of course, as usual, I've got to do it. I've been down to see George Grice."

Farnish started, and his thin face flushed a little. He was mortally afraid of George Grice, who represented money and power and will force.

"Aye, well, mi lass!" he muttered slowly. "Of course there's no doubt 'at Mr. George Grice has what they call th' ability to help a body – no doubt at all. But as to whether he's gotten the will, you know, why –"

"Less talk!" commanded Jeckie. "If he helps anybody it'll be me! And you listen here; we're not going on as we have done. You're letting things go from bad to worse. And you don't tell me t'truth, neither. I met Stuble, and he says you never paid t'last half-year's rent. Now, then!"

"I arranged it wi' t'steward," protested Farnish. "Him an' me understand each other; Mr. Stuble's nowt to do wi' it."

"You had the money," asserted Jeckie. "What did you do with it?"

"It went to them money-lendin' fellers," answered Farnish. "That's where it went; they would have it, choose how! Ye see mi lass –"

"I'll tell you what it is," interrupted Jackie. "You'll have to let me take hold! I can pull things round. Now, you listen! Mr. George Grice is coming up here this very afternoon, and him and me's going to get at a right idea of how matters stand. And if he helps me to pay all off and get a fresh start I'm going to be master, d'ye see? You'll just have to do all 'at I say in future. You can be master in name if you like, but I shall be t'real one. If you don't agree to that, I shall do no more! If I put you right, in future I shall manage things; I shall take all that comes in, and pay all that goes out. Do you understand that?"

Farnish accepted this ultimatum with an almost tipsy gravity. He continued to puff at his pipe while his daughter talked, and when she had finished he bowed solemnly, as if he had been a judge assenting to an arrangement made between contending litigants.

"Now then," he said, in almost unctuous accents, "owt 'at suits you'll suit me! If so be as you can put me on my legs again, Jecholiah, mi lass, I'm agreeable to any arrangement as you're good enough to mak'. You can tek' t'reins o' office, as the sayin' is, wi' pleasure, and do all t'paying out and takin' in. Of course," he added, with a covert glance in his daughter's direction, "you'll not be against givin' your poor father a few o' shillin's a week to buy a bit o' 'bacca wi? – it 'ud be again Nature, and religion, an' all, if I were left – "

"You've never been without beer or 'bacca yet, that I know of," retorted Jackie, with a flash of her eye. "Trust you! But now, when George Grice comes, mind there's no keeping aught back. We shall want to know – "

Just then Rushie called from the scullery that the grocer was at the garden gate in his trap, and Farnish immediately got out of his easy chair, ill at ease.

"Happen I'd better go walk i' t'croft a bit while you hev your talk to him, Jackie?" he suggested. "Two's company, and three's – "

"And happen you'd better do naught o' t'sort!" retorted Jackie. "You bide where you are till you're wanted."

She went out to the gate to meet Grice, who, being one of those men who never walk where they can ride, had driven up to Applecroft in one of his grocery carts, and was now hitching his pony to a ring in the outer wall. He nodded silently to Jackie as he moved heavily towards her.

"Much obliged to you for coming, Mr. Grice," she said eagerly. "I take it very kind of you. I've spoken to him," she went on, lowering her voice and nodding in the direction of the kitchen. "I've told him, straight, that if you and me help him out o' this mess that he's got into, I shall be master, so – "

"Take your time, mi lass, take your time!" said the grocer. "Before I think o' helping anybody I want to know where I am! Now," he continued, as they walked into the fold and he looked round him with appraising eyes, "it may seem a queer thing me living in t'same place, my lass, but I've never been near this house o' yours for many a long year – never sin' you were a bairn, I should think – it's out o' t'way, d'ye see! And dear, dear, I see a difference! What! – there's naught about t'place! No straw – no manure – no cattle – a pig or two – a few o' fowls! – Why, there's nowt! Looks bad, my lass, looks very, very bad. Farnish has nowt – nowt!"

Jackie's heart sank like lead in a well, and a sickened feeling came over her. "I know it looks pretty bad, Mr. Grice," she admitted, almost humbly. "But it's not so bad as it looks. There's four right good cows, and over a hundred and fifty head o' poultry. I know what the butter and milk and eggs bring in! – and there's more pigs nor what you see, and there's the crops. Come through the croft, and look at 'em. If there's no manure in the fold, it's on the land, anyway – we've never sold neither straw nor manure off this place. Come this way."

It was mainly owing to Jackie, Rushie, and Doadie Bartle that what arable land Farnish held was clear and free of weeds. The grocer was bound to admit that the crops looked well; his long acquaintance with a farming district had taught him how to estimate values; he agreed with Jackie that, granted the right sort of weather for the rest of the summer and part of autumn, there was money in what he was shown.

"But then, you know, mi lass," he said as they returned to the house, "it all depends on what Farnish is owing. This here money-lender 'at you spoke of – he ought to be cleared off, neck and crop! Then there's a year's rent. And there'll be other things. There's forty pounds due to me. Before ever I take into consideration doing aught at all for you – 'cause I wouldn't do it for Farnish, were it ever so! – I shall want to know how matters stands, d'ye see? I must know of every penny 'at's owing – otherwise it 'ud be throwin' good money after bad. I'll none deny that if what he owes is nowt much – two or three hundred or so – things might be pulled round under your management. But, there it is! What does he owe? – that's what we want to be getting at."

"I'll make him tell," said Jeckie. "We'll have it put down on paper. Come in, Mr. Grice." Then, as they went towards the door of the house, she added in confidential, hospitable tones, "I've a bottle o' good old whisky put away, that nobody knows naught about – you shall have a glass."

Grice muttered something about no need for his prospective daughter-in-law to trouble herself, but he followed her into the kitchen, where Farnish stood nervously awaiting them. The grocer, who felt that he could afford to be facetious as well as magnanimous, gave Farnish a sly look.

"Now then, mi lad!" he said. "We've come to hear a bit about what you've been doing o' late! You seem to ha' let things run down, Farnish – there's nowt much to show outside. How is it, like?"

"Why, you see, Mr. Grice," answered Farnish with a weak smile, "there's times, as you'll allow, sir, when a man gets a bit behindhand, and –"

He suddenly paused, and his worn face turned white, and Grice, following his gaze, which was fixed on the garden outside, saw what had checked his speech. Two men were coming to the front door; in one of them Grice recognised a Sicaster auctioneer who was also a sheriff's officer. He let out a sharp exclamation which made Jeckie, who was unlocking a corner cupboard, swing herself round in an agony of fear.

"Good God!" he said. "Bailiffs!"

The door was open to the sunshine and the scent of the garden, and the sheriff's officer, after a glance within, stepped across the threshold and pulled out a paper.

"Afternoon, Mr. Grice!" he said cheerfully. "Fine day, sir. Now, Mr. Farnish, sorry to come on an unpleasant business, but I dare say you've been expecting me any time this last ten days, eh? Levinstein's suit, Mr. Farnish – execution. Four hundred and eighty-three pounds, five shillings, and sixpence. Not convenient to settle, I dare say, so I'll have to leave my man."

Jeckie, who had grown as white as the linen on the lines outside, stood motionless for a moment. Then she turned on her father.

"You said it was only two hundred!" she exclaimed hoarsely. "You said –" She paused, hearing Grice laugh, and turned to see him clap his hat on his head and stride out by the back door. In an instant she was after him, her hand, trembling like a leaf, on his arm.

"Mr. Grice! You're not going? Stand by us – by me! Before God, I'll see you're right!" she cried. "Mr. Grice!"

But Grice strode on towards his trap; the tight lip tighter than ever.

"Nay!" he said. "Nay! It's no good, my lass. It's done wi'."

"Mr. Grice!" she cried again. "Why – I'm promised to your Albert! Mr. Grice!"

But Mr. Grice made no answer; another moment and he had climbed into his cart and was driving away, and Jeckie, after one look at his broad back, muttered something to herself and went back into the house.

An hour later she and Rushie were mangling and ironing, in dead silence. They went on working, still in silence, far into the evening, and Doadie Bartle, after supper, turned the mangle for them. Towards dark Farnish, who had already become fast friends with the man in possession, stole up to his elder daughter, and whispered to her. Jeckie pulled the key of the beer barrel from her pocket, and flung it at him.

"Tek it, and drink t'barrel dry!" she said, fiercely. "It's t'last 'at'll ever be tapped i' this place – by you at any rate!"

CHAPTER IV

The Diplomatic Father

Grice drove away down the lane in a curious temper. He was angry with himself for wasting a couple of hours of his valuable time; angry with Jeckie for having induced him to do so; angry with Farnish for his incapacity and idleness; still more angry to find that it was hopeless to do what he might have done. He knew well enough that Jeckie had been right when she said that he would never find a better wife for Albert; he also knew that after what he had just witnessed he would never allow Albert to marry her. Jeckie alone would have been all right, but Jeckie, saddled with an incompetent parent, was impossible. "And if you can't get t'best," he muttered to himself, "you must take what comes nearest to t'best! There's more young women i' t'world than Jecholiah Farnish, and I mun consider about findin' one. That 'at I've left behind yonder'll never do!"

Half-way down the lane he came across Doadie Bartle, busily engaged in mending the fence. Grice's shrewd eyes saw how the youngster was working; here, at any rate, was no slacker. He pulled up his pony and gave Doadie a friendly nod.

"Now, mi lad!" he said. "Doin' a bit o' repairing, like?"

"Merritt's cows were in there this mornin'," answered Bartle. "They come up t'lane and got in to our clover, Mr. Grice."

"Aye, why," remarked Grice. "It'll none matter much to you how oft Merritt's cows or anybody else's gets in to Farnish's clover in a day or two, my lad. It's over and done wi' up yonder at Applecroft."

Bartle's blue eyes looked a question, and Grice laughed as he answered it.

"T'bailiffs is in!" he said. "Come in just now. It's all up, lad. Farnish'll be selled up – lock, stock, and barrel – within a week."

Bartle drove the fork with which he had been gathering thorns together into the ground at his feet, and leaning on its handle, stared fixedly at Grice.

"Aw!" he said. "Why, I knew things were bad, but I didn't know they were as bad as that, mister. Selled up, now! Come!"

"There'll be nowt left, mi lad, neither in house nor barn, sty nor stable, in another week!" affirmed Grice. Then, waiting until he saw that his announcement had gone home with due effect, he added, "So you'll be out of a place, d'ye see?"

Bartle let his gaze wander from the old grocer's face up the lane. From where he stood he could see Applecroft, and at that moment he saw Jeckie and Rushie standing together in the orchard, evidently in close and deep conversation.

"Aye," he said slowly. "If it's as you say, I reckon I shall. And I been there six or seven year, an' all!"

"And for next to nowt, no doubt," remarked Grice, with a sly look. "Now, look here, mi lad, I'm wanting a young feller like you to go out wi' my cart – 'liverin' goods, d'ye understand? If you like to take t'job on ye can start next Monday. I'll gi' you thirty shillin' a week."

He was quick to see the sudden sparkle in Bartle's eyes, and he went on to deepen the impression.

"And there's pickin's an' all," he said. "Ye can buy owt you like out o' my shop at cost price, and t'job's none a heavy 'un. Two horses to look after and this here pony, and go round wi' t'goods. What do you say, now, Bartle?"

"Much obliged to you, mister; I'll consider on it, and tell you to-morrow," answered Bartle. "But" – he looked doubtfully at Grice, and then nodded towards the farm – "these here folks, what's goin' to become o' them? I've been, as it were, one o' t'family, d'ye see, Mr. Grice?"

"There's no fear about t'lasses," declared Grice, emphatically. "They're both capable o' doin' well for theirsens, and I've no doubt Jeckie's gotten a bit o' brass put away safe, somewhere or other."

As for Farnish, he mun turn to, and do summat 'at he hasn't done for years – he mun work. What ha' ye to do with that, Bartle? Look to yersen, mi lad! Come and see me to-morrow."

He shook up his pony's reins and drove on. The encounter with Farnish's man had improved his temper; he had been wanting a stout young fellow like Bartle for some time, a fellow that would lift heavy packing cases and make himself useful. Bartle was just the man. So he had, after all, got or was likely to get, something out of his afternoon's excursion – satisfactory, that, for he was a man who objected to doing anything without profit.

But now there was Albert to consider. Of one thing George Grice was certain – there was going to be no marriage between Albert and Jecholiah Farnish. True, they were engaged; true, Albert, following the fashion of his betters, had, despite his father's sneers, given her an engagement ring. But that was neither here nor there. Despite the fact that Albert's name appeared in company with his father's on the powder-blue and gold sign above the Diamond Jubilee Stores, Albert had no legal share in the business – there was no partnership; Albert was as much a paid servant as the shop-boy. Now, in old Grice's opinion, the man who holds the purse-strings is master of the situation, and he had the pull over Albert in more ways than one. Moreover, a shrewd and astute man himself, he believed Albert to be a bit of a fool; a good-natured, amiable, weak sort of chap, easily come round. He had half a suspicion that Jackie had come round him at some time or other. And now he would have to come round him himself, and at once.

"There'll have to be no chance of her gettin' at him," he mused as he drove slowly down the village street. "He's that soft and sentimental, is our Albert, 'at if she had five minutes wi' him, he'd be givin' way to her. I mun use a bit of statesmanship."

Occasion was never far to seek where George Grice was concerned, and before he had passed the "Coach-and-Four" he had conceived a plan of getting Albert out of the way until nightfall. As soon as he arrived at the shop he bustled in, went straight to his desk, and drawing out a letter, turned to his son.

"Albert, mi lad!" he said, as if the matter was of urgent importance, "there's this letter here fro' yon man at Cornchester about that horse 'at he has to sell. Now, we could do wi' a third horse – get yourself ready, and drive over there, and take a look at it. If it's all right, buy it – you can go up to forty pounds for it, and tell him we'll send t'cheque on to-morrow. Go now – t'trap's outside there, and you can give t'pony a feed at Cornchester while you get your tea. Here, take t'letter wi' you, and then you'll have t'man's address – somewhere i' Beechgate. It's nigh on to three o'clock now, so be off."

Albert, who had no objection to a pleasant drive through the country lanes, was ready and gone within ten minutes, and old Grice was glad to think that he was safely absent until bed-time. During the afternoon and early evening various customers of the better sort, farmers and farmers' wives, dropped in at the shop, and to each he assiduously broke the news of the day – Farnish had gone smash. One of these callers was Stubble, and Stubble, when he heard the news, looked at the grocer with a speculative eye.

"Then I reckon you'll not be for Farnish's lass weddin' yon lad o' yours?" he suggested. "Wouldn't suit your ticket, that, Grice, what?"

"Now, then, what would you do if it were your case, Mr. Stubble?" demanded Grice. "Would you be for tying flesh and blood o' yours up to owt 'at belonged to Farnish?"

"She's a fine lass, all t'same," said Stubble. "I've kept an eye on her this last year or two. Strikes me 'at things 'ud ha' come to an end sooner if it hadn't been for her. She's a grafter, Grice, and no waster, neither. She'd make a rare good wife for your Albert – where he'd make a penny she'd make a pound. I should think twice, mi lad, before I said owt."

But Grice's upper lip grew tighter than before when Stubble had gone, and by the time of his son's return, with the new horse tied up behind the pony cart, he was ready for him. He waited until Albert had eaten his supper; then, when father and son were alone in the parlour, and each had got a tumbler of gin and water at his elbow, he opened his campaign.

"Albert, mi lad!" he said, suavely, "there's been a fine to-do sin' you set off Cornchester way this afternoon. Yon man Farnish has gone clean broke!"

Albert started and stared in surprise.

"It's right, mi lad," continued Grice. "He's gotten t'bailiffs in – he'll be sold up i' less nor a week. Seems 'at he's been goin' to t'money-lenders, yonder i' Clothford – one feller's issued an execution again him. Four hundred and eighty-three pound, five shillings, and sixpence! Did ye ever hear t'like o' that? Him?"

Albert began to twiddle his thumbs.

"Nay!" he said, wonderingly. "I knew he were in a bad way, but I'd no idea it were as bad as that. Then he's nought to pay with, I reckon?"

"Nowt – so to speak," declared Grice. "Nowt 'at 'll settle things, anyway. And I hear fro' Stubble 'at t'last half-year's rent were never paid, and now here's another just about due. And there's other folk. He owes me forty pound odd. If I'd ha' known o' this yesterday, I'd ha' had summat out o' Farnish for my brass – I'd ha' had a cow, or summat. Now, it's too late; I mun take my chance wi' t'rest o' t'creditors. And when t'landlord's been satisfied for t'rent, I lay there'll be nowt much for nobody, money-lender nor anybody else."

"It's a bad job," remarked Albert.

Grice turned to a shelf at the side of his easy chair, opened the lid of a cigar box, selected two cigars, and passed one to his son.

"Aye!" he assented presently, "it is a bad job, mi lad. Farnish promised 'at he'd gi' five hundred pound wi' Jecholiah. I think we mun ha' been soft i' wor heads, Albert, to believe 'at he'd ever do owt o' t'sort. He wor havin' us, as they say – havin' us for mugs!"

Albert made no answer. He began to puff his cigar, watching his father through the blue smoke.

"Every man for his-self!" said old Grice after a while. "It were an understood thing, were that, Albert, and now 'at there's no chance o' Farnish redeemin' his word, there's no need for you to stand by yours. There's plenty o' fine young women i' t'world beside yon lass o' Farnish's. My advice to you, mi lad, is to cast your eyes elsewhere."

Albert began to wriggle in his chair. His experience of Jackie Farnish was that she had a will of her own; he possessed sufficient mother-wit to know that she was cleverer than he was.

"I don't know what Jecholiah 'ud say to that," he murmured. "We been keeping company this twelve-month, and – "

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Grice. "What bi that! I'll tell you what it is, mi lad – yon lass were never after you. I'll lay owt there's never been much o' what they call love-makin' between you! She were after my brass, d'yer see? Now, if it had been me 'at had gone broke, i'stead o' Farnish, what then? D'ye think she'd ha' stucken to you? Nowt o' t'sort!"

Albert sat reflecting. It was quite true that there had been little love-making between him and Jackie. Jackie was neither sentimental nor amorous. She and Albert had gone to church together; occasionally he had spent the evening at Farnish's fireside; once or twice he had taken her for an outing, to a statutes-hiring fair, or a travelling circus. And he was beginning to wonder.

"I know she's very keen on money, is Jecholiah," he said at last.

"Aye, well, she's goin' to have none o' mine!" affirmed old Grice. He was quick to see that Albert was as wax in his hands, and he accordingly brought matters to a climax. "I'll tell you what it is, mi lad!" he continued, replenishing his son's glass, and refilling his own. "We mun have done wi' that lot – it 'ud never do for you, a rising young feller, to wed into a broken man's family. It mun end, Albert!"

"She'll have a deal to say," murmured Albert. "She's an awful temper, has Jecholiah, if things doesn't suit her, and – "

"Now then, you listen to me," interrupted Grice. "We'll give her no chance o' sayin' – leastways, not to you, and what she says to me's neither here nor there. Now it's high time you were wed, mi

lad, but you mun get t'right sort o' lass. And I'll tell you what – you know 'at I went last year to see mi brother John, 'at lives i' Nottingham – keep's a draper's shop there, does John, and he's a warm man an' all, as warm as what I am, and that's sayin' a bit! Now John has three rare fine lasses – your cousins, mi lad, though you've never seen 'em – and he'll give a nice bit wi' each o' 'em when they wed. I'll tell you what you shall do, mi lad – you shall take a fortnight's holiday, and go over there and see 'em; I'll write a letter to John to-night 'at you can take wi' you. And if you can't pick a wife o' t'three – why, it'll be a pity! – a good-lookin' young feller like you, wi' money behind you. Get your best things packed up to-night, and you shall drive into Sicester first thing i' t'mornin' and be off to Nottingham. I'll see 'at you have plenty o' spendin' brass wi' you, and you can go and have your fling and make your choice. I tell yer there's three on 'em – fine, good-looking, healthy lasses – choose which you like, and me and her father'll settle all t'rest. And Nottingham's a fine place for a bit of holidayin'."

Old Grice sat up two hours later than usual that night, writing to his brother, the Nottingham draper, and Albert went away before seven o'clock next morning with all his best clothes and with fifty pounds in his pocket. His father told him to do it like a gentleman, and Albert departed in the best of spirits. After all, he had no tender memories of Jackie, and he remembered that once, when he had taken her to Cornchester Fair, and wanted to have lunch at the "Angel," she had chided him quite sharply for his extravagance and had made him satisfy his appetite on buns and cocoa at a cheap coffee-shop. It was a small thing, but he had smarted under it, for like all weak folk he had a vein of mulish contrariness in him, and it vexed him to know that Jackie, when she was about, was stronger than he was.

Grice, left to run the business with the aid of his small staff, was kept to the shop during Albert's absence. But he had compensations. The first came in the shape of a letter from his brother, the draper, the contents of which caused George Grice to chuckle and to congratulate himself on his diplomacy; he was, in fact, so pleased by it that he there and then put up £25 in Bank of England notes, enclosed them in a letter to Albert, bidding him to stay in Nottingham a week longer, and went out to register the missive himself. The second was that Bartle came to him and took charge of the horses and carts and lost no time in proving himself useful beyond expectation. And the third lay in knowing that the Farnish Family had gone out of the village. Just as the grocer had prophesied, Farnish had been sold up within a week of the execution which the money-lenders had levied on his effects. Not a stick had been left to him of his household goods, not even a chicken of his live stock, and on the morning of the sale he and his daughters had risen early, and carrying their bundles in their hands had gone into Sicester and taken lodgings.

"And none such cheap uns, neither!" said the blacksmith, who gave Grice all this news, and to whom Farnish owed several pounds and odd shillings. "Gone to lodge i' a very good house i' Finkle Street, where they'll be paying no less nor a pound a week for t'rooms. Don't tell me! I'll lay owt yon theer Jecholiah has a bit o' brass put by. What! She used to sell a sight o' eggs and a vast o' butter, Mestur Grice! And them owin' me ower nine pounds 'at I shall niver see! Such like i' lodgins at a pound a week! They owt to be i' t'poorhouse!"

Old Grice laughed and said nothing; it mattered nothing to him whether the Farnishes were lodged in rooms or in the wards of the workhouse, so long as Jackie kept away from Savilestowe until all was safely settled about Albert. He exchanged more letters with John, the draper; John's replies yielded him infinite delight. As he sat alone of an evening, amusing himself with his cigars and his gin and water, he chuckled as he gloated over his own state-craft; once or twice, when he had made his drink rather stronger than usual, he was so impressed by his own cleverness that he assured himself solemnly that he had missed his true vocation, and ought to have been a Member of Parliament. He thought so again in a quite sober moment, when, at the end of three weeks, Albert returned, wearing lemon-coloured kid gloves, and spats over his shoes. There was a new atmosphere about Albert, and old George almost decided to take him into partnership there and then when he announced that he had become engaged to his cousin Lucilla, and that her father would give her two

thousand pounds on the day of the wedding. Instead, he signalised his gratification by furnishing and decorating, regardless of cost, two rooms for the use of the expected bride.

CHAPTER V

The Shakespeare Line

The Savilestowe blacksmith had been right when he said to George Grice that Jeckie Farnish had probably put money by. Jeckie had for some time foreseen the coming of an evil day, and for three years she had set aside a certain amount of the takings from her milk, butter, and eggs sales, and had lodged it safely in the Penny Bank at Sicaster in her own name. Her father knew nothing of this nest-egg; no one, indeed, except Rushie, knew that she had it; not even Rushie knew its precise amount. And when Jeckie turned away from watching George Grice's broad back disappear down the lane, and knew that her father's downfall was at last inevitable, she at once made up her mind what to do. She knew a widow woman in Sicaster who had a roomy house in one of the oldest thoroughfares, Finkle Street; to her she repaired on the day following the levying of the Clothford money-lender's execution, and bargained with her for the letting of three rooms. On the morning of the forced sale she routed Farnish and Rushie out of their beds as soon as the sun rose; before six o'clock all three, carrying their personal effects in bundles, were making their way across the fields towards Sicaster; by breakfast time they were settled in their lodgings. And within an hour Jeckie had found her father a job, and had told him that unless he stuck to it there would be neither bite nor sup for him at her expense. It was not a grand job, and Jeckie had come across it by accident – Collindale, the greengrocer and fruit merchant in the Market Place, with whom she had done business in the past, selling to him the produce of the Applecroft orchard in good years, happened to want an odd-job man about his shop, and offered a pound a week. Jeckie led her father to Collindale and handed him over, with a few clearly-expressed words to master and man; by noon Farnish was carrying potatoes to one and cauliflowers to another of the greengrocer's customers. Nor was Jeckie less arduous in finding work for her sister and herself. They were both good needlewomen, and she went round the town seeking employment in that direction, and got it. Before she went to her bed that first night in the hired lodgings, she was assured of a livelihood, and of no need to break into the small hoard in the Penny Bank.

Over the interminable stitching which went on in the living-room of this new abode, Jeckie brooded long and heavily over the defection of Albert Grice. She had believed that Albert would hasten up to Applecroft when he heard the bad news, and while her father and the man in possession drank up the last beer in the barrel, and Rushie and Doadie Bartle finished the mangling of the linen, she went out into the gloom of the falling night and listened for his footsteps coming up the lane. Hard enough though her nature was, it was unbelievable to her that the man she had promised to marry could leave her alone at this time of trouble. But Albert had never come, and next day, she heard that he had gone away for a holiday. She knew then what had happened – this was all part of old Grice's plans; old Grice meant that everything was to be broken off between her and his son. She registered a solemn vow when the full realisation came to her, and if George Grice had heard it he would probably have been inclined to take Stubley's advice and think a little before treating Jeckie so cavalierly. She would have her revenge on Grice! – never mind how long it took, nor of what nature it was, she would have it. And she was meditating on the beginnings and foundations of it when Bartle came to her, wanting advice as to his own course of proceeding.

"I reckon it's all over and done wi', as far as this here's concerned," he said, with a deprecating glance round the empty fold. "And I mun do summat for misen. Now, grocer Grice, he offered me a job yesterday – when he were drivin' down t'lane there, after he'd been here. Wants a man to look after his horses, and go round wi' his cart, 'liverin' t'groceries. Thirty shillin' a week. What mun I do about it?"

Jeckie's eyes lighted up.

"Take it, lad!" she answered, with unusual alacrity. "Take it! And while you're at it, keep your eyes and ears open, and learn all you can about t'business. It'll happen stand you in good stead some day. Take it, by all means."

"All reight," said Bartle. "I'll stan' by what you say, Jeckie. But – there's another matter. What?" he continued, almost shamefacedly. "What about – yoursens? I know it's a reight smash up, is this – what's going to be done? I'm never going to see you and Rushie i' a fix, you know. If it's any use, there's that bit o' money 'at you made me put i' t'bank – ye're welcome to it. What were you thinkin' o' doin' like?"

Jeckie took him into her confidence. Her plans were already laid, and she was not afraid. So Bartle went into Grice's service when Jeckie and Rushie started stitching in Sicaster, and thenceforward he turned up in Finkle Street every Sunday afternoon, to see how things were going on with his old employers. It was characteristic of him that he never came empty-handed – now it was a piece of boiling bacon that he brought as an offering; now a pound of tea; now a lump of cheese. And he also brought news of the village, and particularly of his new place. But for four Sundays in succession he had nothing to tell of Albert Grice but that he was away, still holidaying.

On the fifth Sunday, when Bartle came, laden with a fowl (bought, a bargain, from his village landlady) in one hand, and an enormous bunch of flowers (carefully picked to represent every variety of colour) in the other, Jeckie and her father were away, gone to a neighbouring village to see a relation who was ill, and Rushie was all alone. Bartle sat down in the easiest chair which the place afforded, spread his big hands over his Sunday waistcoat, and nodded solemnly at her.

"There's news at our place, Rushie, mi lass!" he said gravely. "I misdoubt how Jeckie'll tak' it when she comes to hear on't. About yon theer Albert."

"What about him?" demanded Rushie, whom Bartle had found lolling on the sofa, reading a penny novelette, and who still remained there, yawning. "Has he come back home?"

"Come back t'other day, lookin' like a duke," answered Bartle. "Yaller gloves on his hands, and a fancy walkin' stick, and things on his feet like t'squire wears. An' it's all out now i' Savilestowe – he's goin' to be wed, is Albert. T'owd chap's fair mad wi' glory about it."

"Who's he goin' to wed?" asked Rushie.

"A lass 'at's his cousin, wi' no end o' money," replied Bartle. "Owd George is tellin' t'tale all ower t'place. She's to hev two thasand pound, down on t'nail, t'day at they're wed, and there'll be more to come, later on. And Grice is hevin' a bedroom and a sittin'-room done up for 'em, in reight grand style – t'paperhangers starts on to-morrow, and there's to be a pianner, and I don't know what else. They're to be wed in a fortnight."

"She can have him!" said Rushie contemptuously. "He's nowt, is Albert Grice! – I never could think however our Jeckie could look at him."

"Well – but that's how it's to be," remarked Bartle. Then, with a solemn look, he added, twiddling his thumbs, "He's treated Jeckie very bad, has Albert."

Rushie said nothing. She gave Bartle his tea, and later went for a walk with him round the old town; in his Sunday suit of blue serge he was a fine-looking young fellow, and Rushie saw many other girls cast admiring looks at him. He had gone homewards when Jeckie and her father returned, and it was accordingly left to Rushie to break the news of Albert's defection to her sister.

Jeckie heard all of it without saying a word, or allowing a sign to show itself in her hard, handsome face. She went on with her work in the usual fashion the next morning, and continued at it all the week, and when Bartle came again on the following Sunday, with more news of the preparation at Grice's, she still remained silent. But on the next Saturday she went out before breakfast to the nearest newsagent's shop and bought a copy of the *Yorkshire Post* of that morning. She opened it in the shop, and turned to the marriage announcements. When she had assured herself that Albert Grice had been duly married to his cousin Lucilla at Nottingham two days previously, she put the paper in her pocket, went back to Finkle Street, and ate an unusually hearty breakfast. She had made it a

principle from the beginning of the new order of things to see that Farnish, Rushie, and herself never wanted good food in plenty – folk who work hard, in Jeckie's opinion, must live well, and her own country-bred appetite was still with her.

But she was going to do no work that Saturday morning. As soon as she and Rushie had breakfasted she went upstairs to her room and put on her best clothes. That done, she unlocked a tin box in which she kept certain private belongings and took from it the engagement-ring which Albert Grice had given her and a small packet of letters. These all went into a hand-bag with the *Yorkshire Post*; clutching it in her right hand, with an intensity which would have signified a good deal to any careful observer, she marched downstairs to her sister.

"Rushie," she said, "I shall be out for an hour or two – get on with those things for Mrs. Blenkinsop: you know we promised to let her have 'em to-day. Do as much as you can, there's a good lass – I'll set to as soon as ever I'm back. Never mind the dinner till we've finished."

Then she went out and along the big Market Place and into Ropergate, the street wherein the Sicaster solicitors, a keen and shrewd lot, congregated together, in company with auctioneers, accountants, and debt-collectors. There were at least a dozen firms of solicitors in that street, but Jeckie, though she had never employed legal help in her life, knew to which of them she was bound before ever she crossed the threshold of her lodgings. She was a steady reader of the local newspapers, especially of the police and county court news, and so had become aware that Palethorpe & Overthwaite were the men for her money. And into their office she walked, firm and resolute, as St. Sitha's clock struck ten, and demanded of a yawning clerk to see one or other of the principals.

When Jeckie was admitted into the inner regions she found herself in the presence of both partners. Palethorpe, a sharp, keen-faced fellow sat at one table, and Overthwaite, somewhat younger, but no less keen, at another; both recognised Jeckie as the handsome young woman sometimes seen in the town; both saw the look of determination in her eyes and about her lips.

"Well, Miss Farnish," said Palethorpe, who scented business. "What can we do for you, ma'am?"

He drew forward a chair, conveniently placed between his own and his partner's desk, and Jeckie, seating herself, immediately drew out from her hand-bag the various things which she had carefully placed in it.

"I dare say you gentlemen know well enough who I am," she said calmly. "Elder daughter of William Farnish, as was lately farming at Savilestowe. Father, he did badly this last year or two, and everybody knows he was sold up a few weeks since by a Clothford money-lender. But between you and me, Mr. Palethorpe and Mr. Overthwaite, I've a bit of money put by, and I brought him and my sister into lodgings here in Sicaster – I've got him a job, and made him stick to it. And me and my sister's got good work and plenty of it. I'm telling you this so that you'll know that aught that you like to charge me, you'll get – I'm not in the habit of owing money to anybody! And I want, not so much your advice as to give you orders to do something."

The two partners exchanged smileless glances. Here, at any rate, was a client who possessed courage and decision.

"Everybody in Savilestowe knows that for some time before my father was sold up I was engaged to be married to Albert Grice, only son of George Grice, the grocer," continued Jeckie. "It was all regularly arranged. We were to have been married next year, when Albert'll be twenty-five. Here's the engagement ring he gave me. I was with him when he bought it, here in Sicaster, at Mr Pilbrow's jeweller's shop; he paid four pound fifteen and nine for it, and they gave me half-a-dozen of electroplated spoons in with it as a sort of discount. Here's some letters; there's eight of 'em altogether, and I've numbered and marked 'em, that Albert wrote me from time to time; marriage is referred to in every one of 'em. There's no doubt whatever about our engagement; it was agreed to by his father and my father, and, as I said, everybody knew of it."

"To be sure!" said Overthwaite. "I've heard of it, Miss Farnish. Local gossip, you know. Small world, this!"

"Well," continued Jackie, "all that went on up to the day that the bailiff came to our place. George Grice was there when he came; he went straight away home, and next day he sent Albert off to Nottingham, where they have relations. He kept him away until we were out of the village; he took good care that Albert never came near me nor wrote one single line to me. He got him engaged to his cousin at Nottingham, and now," she concluded, laying her newspaper on Palethorpe's desk and pointing to the marriage announcements, "now you see, they're wed! Wed two days ago; there it is, in the paper."

"I saw it this morning," said Palethorpe. He looked inquisitively at his visitor. "And now," he added, "now, Miss Farnish, you want –"

"Now," answered Jackie, in curiously quiet tones, "now I'll make Albert Grice and his father pay! You'll sue Albert for breach of promise of marriage, and he shall pay through the nose, too! I'll let George Grice see that no man's going to trifle with me; he shall have a lesson that'll last him his life. I want you to start on with it at once; don't lose a moment!"

"There was never any talk about breaking it off, I suppose?" asked Overthwaite. "I mean between you and Albert?"

"Talk!" exclaimed Jackie. "How could there be talk? I've never even set eyes on him since the time I'm telling you about. George Grice took care of that!"

Palethorpe picked up the letters. In silence he read through them, noting how Jackie had marked certain passages with a blue pencil, and as he finished each he passed it to his partner.

"Clear case!" he said when he had handed over the last. "No possible defence! He'll have to pay. Now, Miss Farnish, how much do you want in the way of damages? Have you thought it out?"

"As much as ever I can get," answered Jackie, promptly. "Yes, I have thought it out. The damage to me's more nor what folk could think at first thoughts. George Grice is a very warm man. I've heard him say, myself, more than once, that he was the warmest man in Savilestowe, and that's saying a good deal, for both Mr. Stubley and Mr. Merritt are well-to-do men. And Albert is an only child: he'd ha' come in – he will come in! – for all his father's money. I reckon that if I'd married Albert Grice I should have been a very well-off woman. So the damages ought to be –"

"Substantial – substantial!" said Palethorpe. "Very substantial, indeed, Miss Farnish." He glanced at his partner, who was just laying aside the last of the letters. "It's well known that George Grice is a rich man," he remarked. "But, now, here's a question – is this son of his in partnership with him?"

Jackie was ready with an answer to that.

"No, but he will be before a week's out," she said. "In fact, he may be now, for aught that I know. I've certain means of knowing what goes on at Grice's. George has promised to make Albert a partner as soon as he married. Well, now he is married, so it may have come off. He hadn't been a partner up to now."

"We'll soon find that out," said Palethorpe. "Now, then, Miss Farnish, leave it to us. Don't say a word to anybody, not even to your father or sister. Just wait till we find out how things are about the partnership, and then we'll move. What you want is to make these people pay – what?"

Jackie rose, and from her commanding height looked down on the two men, who, both insignificant in size, gazed up at her as if she had been an Amazon.

"Money's like heart's blood to George Grice!" she muttered. "I want to wring it out of him. He flung me away like an old clout! He shall see! Do what you like; do what you think best; but make him suffer! I haven't done with him yet." Then, without another word, she marched out of the office, and Palethorpe smiled to his partner.

"What's that line of Shakespeare's?" he said. "Um – 'A woman moved is like a fountain troubled.' This one's pretty badly moved to vengeance, I think, eh?"

"Aye!" agreed Overthwaite. "But she isn't, as the quotation goes on, 'bereft of beauty.' Egad, what a face and figure! Albert Grice must be a doubly damned fool!"

CHAPTER VI

The Gloves Off

The old grocer was not the man to do things by halves, and as soon as he found that Albert's engagement to his cousin Lucilla was an accomplished fact, duly approved by the young woman's father and to be determined by a speedy marriage, he made up his mind to put his son out of the mouse stage and make a man of him. Albert should come into full partnership, with a half-share in the business; he should also have a domicile of his own under the old roof. There were two big, accommodating rooms on the first floor of the house, which hitherto had been used as receptacles for lumber and rubbish. Grice had Bartle and a couple of boys to clear them of boxes and crates, and that done, handed them over to a painter and decorator from Sicaster, with full license to do his pleasure on them. The painter and decorator set his wits to work, and achieved a mighty bill; and when he had completed his labours he remarked sagely to old George that the rooms ought to be furnished according-ly, with emphasis on the last syllable. George rose to the bait, and called in the best upholsterer available, with the result that when Albert and his bride came home they found themselves in possession of two brand-new suites of furniture, solid mahogany in the parlour, and rosewood in the bedroom, with carpets and hangings in due sympathy with the rest of the grandeur. The bride also found a new piano, and delighted her father-in-law by immediately sitting down to it and playing a few show pieces, with variations. In her new clothes and smart hat she went well with the rest of the room, and the next morning George took Albert into town and signed the deed of partnership.

"You're a very different man now, mi lad, fro' what ye were two months since, remember," observed George, as he and his son sat together in the "Red Lion" at Sicaster, taking a glass of refreshment before jogging home again. "You were naught but a paid man then; now you're a full partner i' George Grice & Son, grocers, wholesale and retail, and Italian warehousemen, dealers in hay, straw, and horse corn. An' you're a wed man, too, and wi' brass behind and before, and there's no young feller i' t'county has better prospects. Foller my example, Albert, and you'll cut up a good 'un i' t'end!"

Albert grinned weakly, and said that he'd do his best to look after number one, and George went home well satisfied. It seemed to him that having steered his ship safely past that perilous reef called Jecholiah Farnish he would now have plain and comfortable sailing. Instead of being saddled with a poverty-stricken daughter-in-law and her undesirable family, he had got his son a wife who had already brought him a couple of thousand pounds in ready money, and would have more when death laid hands on the Nottingham draper. So there was now nothing to do but attend to business during the day, look over the account books in the evening, and approach sleep by way of gin and water and the tinkle of Lucilla's piano.

"I were allus a man for doing things i' the right way," mused George that evening as he smoked his cigar and listened to his new daughter-in-law singing the latest music-hall songs, "and I done 'em again this time. Now, if I'd let yon lass o' Farnish's wed our Albert there'd ha' been nowt wi' her, and I should never ha' had Farnish his-self off t'doorstep. It 'ud ha' been five pound here, and five pound there. I should ha' had to keep all t'lot on 'em. An' if there is a curse i' this here vale o' tears, it's poor relations!"

It was no poor relation who was tinkling the new piano in the fine new parlour, nor a useless one, either, George thanked Heaven and himself. Mrs. Albert had already proved an acquisition. She was a capable housekeeper; she possessed a good deal of the family characteristic as regards money, and she could keep books and attend to letters. Moreover, she was no idler. Every morning, as soon as she had settled the household affairs for the day, she appeared in the shop and took up her position at the desk. This saved both George and Albert a good deal of clerical work, for the Grice trade,

which was largely with the gentry and farmers of the district, involved a considerable amount of book-keeping. Now, George was painfully slow as a scribe, and Albert had no great genius for figures, though he was an expert at wrapping up parcels. The bride, therefore, was valuable as a help as well as advantageous as an ornament. And a certain gentleman who walked into the shop one afternoon, after leaving a smart cob outside in charge of a village lad who happened to be hanging about, looked at her with considerable interest, as if pretty bookkeepers were strange in that part of the country. Old Grice at that moment was busy down the yard, examining a cartload of goods with which Bartle was about to set off to a neighbouring hamlet: Albert was in the warehouse outside, superintending the opening of a cask of sugar. Mrs. Albert went forward; the caller greeted her with marked politeness.

"Mr. Albert Grice?" said the caller, with an interrogatory smile. "Is he in?"

"I can call him in a minute, sir," replied Mrs. Albert. "He's only just outside. Who shall I say?"

"If you'd be kind enough to ask him if he'd see Mr. Palethorpe of Sicaster, for a moment," answered the visitor. "He'll know who I am."

Mrs. Albert opened the door at the back of the shop, and ushered Palethorpe into the room in which Jackie Farnish had found George Grice eating his cold beef. She passed out through another door into the yard, came back in a moment, saying that her husband would be there presently, and returned to the shop. And upon her heels came Albert, wiping his sugary hands on his apron and looking very much astonished.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Albert," said Palethorpe, in his pleasantest manner. "I called to see you on a little matter of business. I would have sent one of my clerks, but as the business is of a confidential sort I thought I'd just drive over myself. The fact of the case is I've got a writ for you – and there it is!"

Before Albert had comprehended matters, Palethorpe had put a folded, oblong piece of paper into his hand, and had nodded his head, as much as to imply that now, the writ having slipped into Albert's unresisting fingers, something had been effected which could never be undone.

"Thought it would be more considerate to serve you with it myself," he added, with another smile.

"I dare say you prefer that."

Albert looked from Palethorpe to the writ, and from the writ to Palethorpe. His face flushed and his jaw, a weak and purposeless one, dropped.

"What's it all about?" he asked, feebly. "I – I don't owe nobody aught, Mr. Palethorpe. A writ! – for me?"

"Suit of Jecholiah Farnish – breach of promise – damages claimed, two thousand pounds," answered Palethorpe, promptly. "That's what it is! Lord, bless me! – do you mean to say you haven't been expecting it!"

He laughed, half sneeringly, and suddenly broke his laughter short. George Grice had come in, softly, by the back door of the room, and had evidently heard the solicitor's announcement of the reason of his visit. Palethorpe composed his face, and made the grocer a polite bow. It was his policy, on all occasions, to do honour to money, and he knew George to be a well-to-do man.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Grice!" he said. "Fine day, isn't it – splendid weather for – " Grice cut him short with a scowl.

"What did I hear you say?" he demanded, angrily. "Summat about yon Farnish woman, and breach o' promise, and damages? What d'yer mean?"

"Just about what you've said," retorted Palethorpe. "I've served your son with a writ on Miss Farnish's behalf – you'd better read it together."

Grice glanced nervously at the curtained door which led into the shop. Then he beckoned Palethorpe and Albert to follow him, and led them out of the room and across a passage to a small apartment at the rear of the house, a dismal nook in which his account books and papers of the last thirty years had been stored. He carefully closed the door and turned on the solicitor.

"Do you mean to tell me 'at yon there hussy has had the impudence to start proceedin's for breach o' promise again my son?" he said. "I never knew such boldness or brazenness i' my born days! Go your ways back, young man, and tell her 'at sent you 'at she'll get nowt out o' me!"

Palethorpe laughed – something in his laugh made the grocer look at him. And he saw decision and confidence in Palethorpe's face, and suddenly realised that here was trouble which he had never anticipated.

"Nonsense, Mr. Grice!" exclaimed Palethorpe. "I'm surprised at you! – such a keen and sharp man of business as you're known to be. We want nothing out of you – we want what we do want out of your son!"

"He has nowt!" growled the grocer. "He's nowt but what I – "

"Nonsense again, Mr. Grice," interrupted Palethorpe. "He's your partner, with a half-share in the business, as you've announced to a good many of your neighbours and cronies during the last week or so, and he's also got two thousand pounds with his wife. Come, now, what's the good of pretending? Your son's treated my client very badly, very badly indeed, and he'll have to pay. That's flat!"

Grice suddenly stretched out a hand towards his son.

"Gim'me that paper!" he said.

Albert handed over the writ and his father put on a pair of spectacles and carefully read it through from beginning to end. Then he flung it on the desk at which the three men were standing.

"It's nowt but what they call blackmail!" he growled. "I'll none deny 'at there were an arrangement between my son and Farnish's lass. But it were this here – Farnish were to give five hundred pounds wi' her. Now, Farnish went brok' – he had no five hundred pound, nor five hundred pence! So, of course, t'arrangement fell through. That's where it is."

Palethorpe laughed again – and old Grice feared that laugh more than the other.

"I'm more surprised than before, Mr. Grice," said Palethorpe. "My client has nothing whatever to do with any arrangement – if there was any – between you and her father. Her affair is with your son Mr. Albert Grice. He asked her to marry him – she consented. He gave her an engagement ring – it was well known all round the neighbourhood that they were to marry. He wrote her letters, in which marriage is mentioned – "

Grice turned on his son in a sudden paroxysm of fury.

"Ye gre't damned softhead!" he burst out. "Ye don't mean to say 'at you were fool enough to write letters! Letters!"

"I wrote some," replied Albert sullenly. "Now and then, when I was away, like. It's t'usual thing when you're engaged to a young woman."

"Quite the usual thing – when you're engaged to a young woman," said Palethorpe, with a quiet sneer. "And we have the letters – all of 'em. And the engagement ring, too. Mr. Grice, it's no good blustering. This is as clear a case as ever I heard of, and your son'll have to pay. It's no concern of mine whether you take my advice or not, but if you do take it, you'll come to terms with my client. If this case goes before a judge and jury – and it certainly will, if you don't settle it in the meantime – you won't have a leg to stand on, and Miss Farnish will get heavy damages – heavy! – and you'll have all the costs. And between you and me, Mr. Grice, you'll not come out of the matter with very clean hands yourself. We know quite well, for you're a bit talkative, you know – how you engineered the breaking-off of this engagement and contrived the marriage of your son to his cousin, and we shall put you in the witness-box, and ask you some very unpleasant questions. And you're a churchwarden, eh?" concluded Palethorpe, as he turned to the door. "Come now – you know my client's been abominably treated by you and your son – you'd better do the proper thing, and compensate her handsomely."

Grice had become scarlet with anger during the solicitor's last words, and now he picked up the writ and thrust it into his pocket.

"I'll say nowt no more to you!" he exclaimed. "I'll see my lawyer in t'morning, and hear what he's gotten to say to such a piece o' impidence!"

"That's the first sensible thing I've heard you say," remarked Palethorpe. "See him by all means – and he'll say to you just what I've said. You'll see!"

The calm confidence of Palethorpe's tone, and the nonchalant way in which he left father and son, cost Grice a sleepless night. He lay turning in his bed, alternately cursing Jeckie for her insolence and Albert for his foolishness in writing those letters. He had sufficient knowledge of the world to know that Palethorpe was probably right – yet it had never once occurred to him that a country lass could have sufficient sense to invoke the law.

"She's too damned clever i' all ways is that there Jecholiah!" he groaned. "Very like I should ha' done better if I'd kept in wi' her, and let her wed our Albert. It's like to cost a pretty penny afore I've done wi' it if I have to pay her an' all. There were a hundred pounds for Albert's trip to Nottingham and another hundred for t'weddin' and t'honeymoon, and I laid out a good three hundred i' doin' up them rooms and buyin' t'pianner, and now then, there's this here! An' I'd rayther go and fling my brass into t'sea nor have it go into t'hands o' that there Jezebel! I wish I'd never ta'en our Albert into partnership, nor said owt about his wife's two thousand pound – then, when this came on he could ha' pleaded 'at he wor nowt but a paid man, and she'd ha' got next to nowt i' t'way o' damages. Damages! – to that there! – it's enough to mak' me shed tears o' blood!"

Grice was with his solicitor, Mr. Camberley, in Sicaster, by ten o'clock next morning. He had left Albert at home, judging him to be worse than an encumbrance in matters of this sort. He himself had sufficient acumen to keep nothing back from his man of law; he told him all about the ring and the letters, and his face grew heavier as Mr. Camberley's face grew longer.

"You'll have to settle, Grice," said the solicitor, an oldish, experienced man. "It's precisely as Palethorpe said – you haven't a leg to stand on! You know, I'm a bit surprised at you; you might have foreseen this."

Grice pulled out a big bandanna handkerchief, and mopped his high forehead.

"It never crossed my mind 'at she'd be for owt o' this sort!" he groaned. "I never thowt 'at she'd have as much sense as all that. She's gotten a spice o' t'devil in her! – that's where it is. And you think it's no use fightin' t'case?"

"Not a scrap of use!" said the lawyer. "Stop here while I go round to Palethorpe's and see for myself how things are. They'll show me those letters."

Grice sat grunting and muttering in Camberley's office until Camberley returned. One glance at the solicitor's face showed him that there was no hope.

"Well?" he asked anxiously as Camberley sat down to his desk. "Well, now?"

"It's just as I expected," said Camberley. "Of course they've a perfectly good case; they couldn't have a better. I've seen your son's letters. Excellent evidence – for the plaintiff! Marriage is mentioned in every one of them – when it was to be, what arrangements were to be made afterwards, and so on. There's no use beating about the bush, Grice; you haven't a chance!"

"Then, there's naught for it but payin'?" said the grocer with a deep sigh. "No way o' gettin' out of it?"

"There's no way of getting out of it," answered Camberley. "Nobody and nothing can get you out of it. Here's a perfectly blameless, well-behaved, hard-working young woman, whom you had willingly accepted as your son's future wife, suddenly flung off like an old glove, for no cause whatever! What do you suppose a jury would say to that? You'll have to settle, Grice – and I've done my best for you. They'll take fifteen hundred pounds and their costs."

Grice's big face turned white, and the sweat burst out on his forehead and rolled down his cheeks, and over the tight lip and into his beard.

"It's either that, or the case'll go on to trial," said Camberley. "My own opinion," he added, dryly, "is that if it goes to trial, she'd get two thousand. You'd far better write out a cheque and have done with it. It's your own fault, you know."

Grice pulled out his cheque-book and wrote slowly at Camberley's dictation. When he had attached his signature he handed over the cheque with trembling fingers, and, without another word, went out, climbed heavily into his trap, and drove home. He maintained a strange and curious silence all the rest of that day, and that evening the strains of the new piano failed to charm him. More than once his cigar went out unnoticed; once or twice he shed tears into his gin-and-water.

CHAPTER VII

The Golden Teapot

While George Grice was driving out of Sicaster, groaning and grumbling at his ill-luck, Jeckie Farnish, in the Finkle Street lodging, was contemplating a pile of linen which had just been sent in to her for stitching. Rushie contemplated it, too, and made a face at it.

"Looks as if we should never get through it!" she said mournfully, "And it's such dull work, sewing all day long."

"Don't you quarrel with your bread-and-butter, miss!" answered Jeckie, with ready sharpness. "You'd ought to be thankful we've got work to do rather than grumble at it."

"There's other work nor this that a body can do," retorted Rushie. "And a deal pleasanter!"

"Aye, and what, miss, I should like to know?" demanded Jeckie as she thrust a length of linen into her sister's hands. "What is there that you could do, pray?"

"Herbert Binks says Mr. Fryer wants one or two young women in his shop," answered Rushie, diffidently. "I could try for that if I was only let. And it's far more respectable learning the drapery and millinery than sewing sheets and things all day long."

"Is it?" said Jeckie. "Well, I know naught about respectability, and I do know 'at Mr. Fryer 'ud want a nice bit o' money paying to him if he took you as apprentice. And you mind what you're doing with that Herbert Binks! I've no opinion o' these town fellers; he'll be turning your head with soft talk. You be thankful 'at we've got work to do that keeps us out o' the workhouse. Where should we all ha' been now, I should like to know, if it hadn't been for me?"

Then she sat down in her usual place by the window, and began to sew as if for dear life, while Rushie, taking refuge in poutings and silence, set to work in languid fashion. Already Jeckie was having trouble with her and with Farnish. The younger sister openly revolted against the interminable sewing. Farnish, whose pocket-money had been fixed at five shillings, found eightpence-halfpenny a day all too little for his beer, and sulked every night when he came home from the greengrocer's. Moreover, Jeckie found it impossible to keep Rushie to heel; she could not always be watching her, and as soon as her back was turned of an evening Rushie was out and away about the town, always with some shop-boy or other in attendance. It was not easy work to manage her or Farnish, and Jeckie foresaw a day in which both would strike. Some folk, she knew, would have said let them strike and see to themselves, but Jeckie was one of those unfortunate mortals who are cursed with an exaggerated sense of personal responsibility, and she worried much more about her father and sister than about herself.

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