

Barrie James Matthew

When a Man's Single: A Tale of Literary Life



James Barrie

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J. M. Barrie

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CHAPTER I

ROB ANGUS IS NOT A FREE MAN

One still Saturday afternoon some years ago a child pulled herself through a small window into a kitchen in the kirk-wynd of Thrums. She came from the old graveyard, whose only outlet, when the parish church gate is locked, is the windows of the wynd houses that hoop it round. Squatting on a three-legged stool she gazed wistfully at a letter on the chimney-piece, and then, tripping to the door, looked up and down the wynd.

Snecky Hobart, the bellman, hobbled past, and, though Davy was only four years old, she knew that as he had put on his blue top-coat he expected the evening to be fine. Tammas McQuhatty, the farmer of T'nowhead, met him at the corner, and they came to a standstill to say, 'She's hard, Sneck,' and 'She is so, T'nowhead,' referring to the weather. Observing that they had stopped they moved on again.

Women and children and a few men squeezed through their windows into the kirkyard, the women to knit stockings on fallen tombstones, and the men to dander pleasantly from grave to grave reading the inscriptions. All the men were well up in years, for though, with the Auld Lights, the Sabbath began to come on at six o'clock on Saturday evening, the young men were now washing themselves cautiously in tin basins before going into the square to talk about women.

The clatter of more than one loom could still have been heard by Davy had not her ears been too accustomed to the sound to notice it. In the adjoining house Bell Mealmaker was peppering her newly-washed floor with sand, while her lodger, Hender Robb, with a rusty razor in his hand, looked for his chin in a tiny glass that was peeling on the wall. Jinny Tosh had got her husband, Aundra Lunan, who always spoke of her as She, ready, so to speak, for church eighteen hours too soon, and Aundra sat stiffly at the fire, putting his feet on the ribs every minute, to draw them back with a scared look at Her as he remembered that he had on his blacks. In a bandbox beneath the bed was his silk hat, which had been knocked down to him at Jamie Ramsay's roup, and Jinny had already put his red handkerchief, which was also a pictorial history of Scotland, into a pocket of his coat-tails, with a corner hanging gracefully out. Her puckered lips signified that, however much her man might desire to do so, he was not to carry his handkerchief to church in his hat, where no one could see it. On working days Aundra held his own, but at six o'clock on Saturday nights he passed into Her hands.

Across the wynd, in which a few hens wandered, Pete Todd was supping in his shirt-sleeves. His blacks lay ready for him in the coffin-bed, and Pete, glancing at them at intervals, supped as slowly as he could. In one hand he held a saucer, and in the other a chunk of bread, and they were as far apart as Pete's outstretched arms could put them. His chair was a yard from the table, on which, by careful balancing, he rested a shoeless foot, and his face was twisted to the side. Every time Easie Whamond, his wife, passed him she took the saucer from his hand, remarking that when a genteel man sat down to tea he did not turn his back on the table. Pete took this stolidly, like one who had long given up trying to understand the tantrums of women, and who felt that, as a lord of creation, he could afford to let it pass.

Davy sat on her three-legged stool keeping guard over her uncle Rob the saw-miller's letter, and longing for him to come. She screwed up her eyebrows as she had seen him do when he read a letter, and she felt that it would be nice if every one would come and look at her taking care of it. After a time she climbed up on her stool and stretched her dimpled arms toward the mantelpiece.

From a string suspended across this, socks and stockings hung drying at the fire, and clutching one of them Davy drew herself nearer. With a chuckle, quickly suppressed, lest it should bring in Kitty Wilkie, who ought to have been watching her instead of wandering down the wynd to see who was to have salt-fish for supper, the child clutched the letter triumphantly, and, toddling to the door, slipped out of the house.

For a moment Davy faltered at the mouth of the wynd. There was no one there to whom she could show the letter. A bright thought entered her head, and immediately a dimple opened on her face and swallowed all the puckers. Rob had gone to the Whunny muir for wood, and she would take the letter to him. Then when Rob saw her he would look all around him, and if there was no one there to take note he would lift her to his shoulder, when they could read the letter together.

Davy ran out of the wynd into the square, thinking she heard Kitty's Sabbath voice, which reminded the child of the little squeaking saw that Rob used for soft wood. On week-days Kitty's voice was the big saw that puled and rasped, and Mag Wilkie shivered at it. Except to her husband Mag spoke with her teeth closed, so politely that no one knew what she said.

Davy stumbled up the steep brae down which men are blown in winter to their work, until she reached the rim of the hollow in which Thrums lies. Here the road stops short, as if frightened to cross the common of whin that bars the way to the north. On this common there are many cart-tracks over bumpy sward and slippery roots, that might be the ribs of the earth showing, and Davy, with a dazed look in her eyes, ran down one of them, the whins catching her frock to stop her, and then letting go, as if, after all, one child more or less in the world was nothing to them.

By and by she found herself on another road, along which Rob had trudged earlier in the day with a saw on his shoulder, but he had gone east, and the child's face was turned westward. It is a muddy road even in summer, and those who use it frequently get into the habit of lifting their legs high as they walk, like men picking their way through beds of rotting leaves. The light had faded from her baby face now, but her mouth was firm-set, and her bewildered eyes were fixed straight ahead.

The last person to see Davy was Tammas Haggart, who, with his waistcoat buttoned over his jacket, and garters of yarn round his trousers, was slowly breaking stones, though the road swallowed them quicker than he could feed it. Tammas heard the child approaching, for his hearing had become very acute, owing to his practice when at home of listening through the floor to what the folks below were saying, and of sometimes joining in. He leant on his hammer and watched her trot past.

The strength went gradually from Tammas's old arms, and again resting on his hammer he removed his spectacles and wiped them on his waistcoat. He took a comprehensive glance around at the fields, as if he now had an opportunity of seeing them for the first time during his sixty years' pilgrimage in these parts, and his eyes wandered aimlessly from the sombre firs and laughing beeches to the white farms that dot the strath. In the foreground two lazy colts surveyed him critically across a dyke. To the north the frowning Whunny hill had a white scarf round its neck.

Something troubled Tammas. It was the vision of a child in a draggled pinafore, and stepping into the middle of the road he looked down it in the direction in which Davy had passed.

'Chirsty Angus's lassieky,' he murmured.

Tammas sat down cautiously on the dyke and untied the red handkerchief that contained the remnants of his dinner. When he had smacked his lips over his flagon of cold kail, and seen the last of his crumbling oatmeal and cheese, his uneasiness returned, and he again looked down the road.

'I maun turn the bairn,' was his reflection.

It was now, however, half an hour since Davy had passed Tammas Haggart's cairn.

To Haggart, pondering between the strokes of his hammer, came a mole-catcher who climbed the dyke and sat down beside him.

'Ay, ay,' said the new-comer; to which Tammas replied abstractedly —

'Jamie.'

'Hae ye seen Davy Dundas?' the stone-breaker asked, after the pause that followed this conversation.

The mole-catcher stared heavily at his corduroys.

'I dinna ken him,' he said at last, 'but I hae seen naebody this twa 'oors.'

'It's no a him, it's a her. Ye canna hae been a' winter here without kennin' Rob Angus.'

'Ay, the saw-miller. He was i' the wud the day. I saw his cart gae hame. Ou, in coorse I ken Rob. He's an amazin' crittur.'

Tammas broke another stone as carefully as if it were a nut.

'I dinna deny,' he said, 'but what Rob's a curiosity. So was his faither afore 'im.'

'I've heard auld Rob was a queer body,' said Jamie, adding incredulously, 'they say he shaved twice i' the week an' wore a clean dickey ilka day.'

'No what ye wad say ilka day, but oftener than was called for. Rob wasna naturally ostentatious; na, it was the wife 'at insisit on't. Nanny was a terrible tid for cleanness. Ay, an' it's a guid thing in moderation, but she juist overdid it; yes, she overdid it. Man, it had sic a hand on her 'at even on her deathbed they had to bring a basin to her to wash her hands in.'

'Ay, ay? When there was sic a pride in her I wonder she didna lat young Rob to the college, an' him sae keen on't.'

'Ou, he was gaen, but ye see auld Rob got gey dottle after Nanny's death, an' so young Rob stuck to the saw-mill. It's curious hoo a body misses his wife when she's gone. Ay, it's like the clock stoppin'.'

'Weel, Rob's no gettin' to the college hasna made 'im humble.'

'Ye dinna like Rob?'

'Hoo did ye find that oot?' asked Jamie, a little taken aback. 'Man, Tammas,' he added admiringly, 'ye're mighty quick i' the uptak.'

Tammas handed his snuff-mull to the mole-catcher, and then helped himself.

'I daursay, I daursay,' he said thoughtfully.

'I've naething to say agin the saw-miller,' continued Jamie, after thinking it out, 'but there's something in's face at's no sociable. He looks as if he was takkin ye aff in's inside.'

'Ay, auld Rob was a sarcectic stock too. It rins i' the blood.'

'I prefer a mair common kind o' man, bein' o' the common kind mysel.'

'Ay, there's naething sarcectic about you, Jamie,' admitted the stone-breaker.

'I'm an ord'nar man, Tammas.'

'Ye are, Jamie, ye are.'

'Maybe no sae oncommon ord'nar either.'

'Middlin' ord'nar, middlin' ord'nar.'

'I'm thinkin' ye're braw an' sarcectic yersel, Tammas?'

'I'd aye that repootation, Jeames. 'Am no an everyday sarcecticist, but juist noos an' nans. There was ae time I was speakin' tae Easie Webster, an' I said a terrible sarcectic thing. Ay, I dinna mind what it was, but it was mighty sarcectic.'

'It's a gift,' said the mole-catcher.

'A gift it is,' said Tammas.

The stone-breaker took his flagon to a spring near at hand and rinsed it out. Several times while pulling it up and down the little pool an uneasy expression crossed his face as he remembered something about a child, but in washing his hands, using sand for soap, Davy slipped his memory, and he returned cheerfully to the cairn. Here Jamie was wagging his head from side to side like a man who had caught himself thinking.

'I'll warrant, Tammas,' he said, 'ye cudna tell's what set's on to speak about Rob Angus?'

'Na, it's a thing as has often puzzled me hoo we select wan topic mair than anither. I suppose it's like shootin'; ye juist blaze awa at the first bird 'at rises.'

'Ye was sayin', had I seen a lass wi' a lad's name. That began it, I'm thinkin'.'

'A lass wi' a lad's name? Ay, noo, that's oncommon. But mebbe ye mean Davy Dundas?'

'That's the name.'

Tammas paused in the act of buttoning his trouser pocket.

'Did ye say ye'd seen Davy?' he asked.

'Na, it was you as said 'at ye had seen her.'

'Ay, ay, Jamie, ye're richt. Man, I fully meant to turn the bairn, but she ran by at sic a steek 'at there was nae stoppin' her. Rob'll mak an awfu' ring-ding if onything comes ower Davy.'

'Is't the litlin 'at's aye wi' Rob?'

'Ay, it's Chirsty Angus's bairn, her 'at was Rob's sister. A' her fowk's deid but Rob.'

'I've seen them i' the saw-mill thegither. It didna strick me 'at Rob cared muckle for the crittury.'

'Ou, Rob's a reserved stock, but he's mighty fond o' her when naebody's lookin'. It doesna do, ye ken, to lat on afore company at ye've a kind o' regaird for yere ain fowk. Na, it's lowerin'. But if it wasna afore your time, ye'd seen the cradle i' the saw-mill.'

'I never saw ony cradle, Tammas.'

'Weel, it was unco ingenious o' Rob. The bairn's father an' mither was baith gone when Davy was nae age, an' auld Rob passed awa sune efter. Rob had it all arranged to ging to the college – ay, he'd been workin' far on into the nicht the hale year to save up siller to keep 'imself at Edinbory, but ye see he promised Chirsty to look after Davy an' no send her to the parish. He took her to the saw-mill an' brocht her up 'imself. It was a terrible disappointment to Rob, his mind bein' bent on becomin' a great leeterary genius, but he's been mighty guid to the bairn. Ay, she's an extr'or'nar takkin dawty, Davy, an' though I wudna like it kent, I've a fell notion o' her myself. I mind ance gaen in to Rob's, an', wud ye believe, there was the bit lassieky sitting in the airm-chair wi' ane o' Rob's books open on her knees, an' her pertendin' to be readin' oot in't to Rob. The tiddy had watched him readin', ye un'erstan', an', man, she was mimickin' 'im to the life. There's nae accountin' for thae things, but ondootedly it was attractive.'

'But what about a cradle?'

'Ou, as I was sayin', Rob didna like to lat the bairn oot o' his sicht, so he made a queer cradle 'imself, an' put it ower the burn. Ye'll mind the burn rins through the saw-mill? Ay, weel, Davie's cradle was put across't wi' the paddles sae arranged 'at the watter rocked the cradle. Man, the burn was juist like a mither to Davy, for no only did it rock her to sleep, but it sang to the bairn the hale time.'

'That was an ingenious contrivance, Tammas; but it was juist like Rob Angus's ind'pendence. The crittur aye perseests in doin' a' thing for 'imself. I mind ae day seein' Cree Deuchars puttin' in a window into the saw-mill hoose, an' Rob's fingers was fair itchin' to do't quick 'imself; ye ken Cree's fell slow? "See haud o' the potty," cries Rob, an' losh, he had the window in afore Cree cud hae cut the glass. Ay, ye canna deny but what Rob's fearfu' independent.'

'So was his faither. I call to mind auld Rob an' the minister ha'en a termendous debate about justification by faith, an' says Rob i' the tail o' the day, gettin' passionate-like, "I tell ye flat, Mester Byars," he says, "if I dinna ging to heaven in my ain wy, I dinna ging ava!"'

'Losh, losh! he wudna hae said that, though, to oor minister; na, he wudna hae daured.'

'Ye're a U.P., Jamie?' asked the stone-breaker.

'I was born U.P.,' replied the mole-catcher firmly, 'an' U.P. I'll die.'

'I say naething agin yer releegion,' replied Tammas, a little contemptuously, 'but to compare yer minister to oors is a haver. Man, when Mester Byars was oor minister, Sanders Dobie, the wricht, had a standin' engagement to mend the poopit ilka month.'

'We'll no speak o' releegion, Tammas, or we'll be quarrellin'. Ye micht tell's, though, hoo they cam to gie a lassieky sic a man's name as Davy.'

'It was an accident at the christenin'. Ye see, Hendry Dundas an' Chirsty was both vary young, an' when the bairn was born, they were shy-like about makkin the affair public; ay, Hendry cud hardly

tak courage to tell the minister. When he was haddin' up the bit tid in the kirk to be baptized he was remarkable egitated. Weel, the minister – it was Mester Dishart – somehow had a notion 'at the litlin was a laddie, an' when he reads the name on the paper, "Margaret Dundas," he looks at Hendry wi' the bairny in 's airms, an' says he, stern-like, "The child's a boy, is he not?"

'Sal, that was a predeecament for Hendry.'

'Ay, an' Hendry was confused, as a man often is wi' his first; so says he, all trem'lin', "Yes, Mr. Dishart." "Then," says the minister, "I cannot christen him Margaret, so I will call him David." An' Davit the litlin was baptized, sure enouch.'

'The mither wud be in a mighty wy at that?'

'She was so, but as Hendry said, when she challenged him on the subject, says Hendry, "I dauredna conterdick the minister."'

Haggart's work being now over for the day, he sat down beside Jamie to await some other stone-breakers who generally caught him up on their way home. Strange figures began to emerge from the woods, a dumb man with a barrowful of roots for firewood, several women in men's coats, one smoking a cutty-pipe. A farm-labourer pulled his heavy legs in their rustling corduroys alongside a field of swedes, a ragged potato-bogle brandished its arms in a sudden puff of wind. Several men and women reached Haggart's cairn about the same time, and said, 'It is so,' or 'Ay, ay,' to him, according as they were loquacious or merely polite.

'We was speakin' about matermony,' the mole-catcher remarked, as the back-bent little party straggled toward Thrums.

'It's a caution,' murmured the farm-labourer, who had heard the observation from the other side of the dyke. 'Ay, ye may say so,' he added thoughtfully, addressing himself.

With the mole-catcher's companions, however, the talk passed into another rut. Nevertheless Haggart was thinking matrimony over, and by and by he saw his way to a joke, for one of the other stone-breakers had recently married a very small woman, and in Thrums, where women have to work, the far-seeing men prefer their wives big.

'Ye drew a sma' prize yersel, Sam'l,' said Tammas, with the gleam in his eye which showed that he was now in sarcastic fettle.

'Ay,' said the mole-catcher, 'Sam'l's Kitty is sma'. I suppose Sam'l thocht it wud be prudent-like to begin in a modest wy.'

'If Kitty hadna haen sae sma' hands,' said another stone-breaker, 'I wud hae haen a bid for her mysel.'

The women smiled; they had very large hands.

'They say,' said the youngest of them, who had a load of firewood on her back, "at there's places whaur little hands is thocht muckle o'."

There was an incredulous laugh at this.

'I wudna wonder, though,' said the mole-catcher, who had travelled; 'there's some mighty queer ideas i' the big toons.'

'Ye'd better ging to the big toons, then, Sam'l,' suggested the merciless Tammas.

Sam'l woke up.

'Kitty's sma',' he said, with a chuckle, 'but she's an auld tid.'

'What made ye think o' speirin' her, Sam'l?'

'I cudna say for sartin,' answered Sam'l reflectively. 'I had nae intention o't till I saw Pete Proctor after her, an' syne, thinks I, I'll hae her. Ay, ye might say as Pete was the instrument o' Providence in that case.'

'Man, man,' murmured Jamie, who knew Pete, 'Providence sometimes maks use o' strange instruments.'

'Ye was lang in gettin' a man yersel, Jinny,' said Tammas to an elderly woman.

'Fower-an'-forty year,' replied Jinny. 'It was like a stockin', lang i' the futin', but turned at last.'

'Lasses nooadays,' said the old woman who smoked, 'is partikler by what they used to be. I mind when Jeames Gowrie speired me: "Ye wud raither hae Davit Curly, I ken," he says. "I dinna deny 't," I says, for the thing was well kent, "but ye'll do vara weel, Jeames," says I, an' mairly him I did.'

'He was a harmless crittur, Jeames,' said Haggart, 'but queer. Ay, he was full o' maggots.'

'Ay,' said Jeames's widow, 'but though it's no for me to say 't, he deid a deacon.'

'There's some rale queer wys o' speirin' a wuman,' began the mole-catcher.

'Vary true, Jamie,' said a stone-breaker. 'I mind hoo –'

'There was a chappy ower by Blair,' continued Jamie, raising his voice, "at nicht hae been a single man to this day if it hadna been for the toothache.'

'Ay, man?'

'Joey Fergus was the stock's name. He was oncommon troubled wi' the toothache till he found a cure.'

'I didna ken o' ony cure for sair teeth?'

'Joey's cure was to pour cauld watter strecht on into his mooth for the maiter o' twa 'oors, an' ae day he cam into Blair an' found Jess McTaggart (a speerity bit thingy she was – ou, she was so) fair greetin' wi' sair teeth. Joey advised the crittur to try his cure, an' when he left she was pourin' the watter into her mooth ower the sink. Weel, it so happened 'at Joey was in Blair again about twa month after, an' he gies a cry in at Willie's – that's Jess's father's, as ye'll un'erstan'. Ay, then, Jess had haen anither fit o' the toothache, an' she was hingin' ower the sink wi' a tanker o' watter in her han', just as she'd been when he saw her last. "What!" says Joey, wi' rale consairn, "nae better yet?" The stock thocht she had been haddin' gaen at the watter a' thae twa month.'

'I call to mind,' the stone-breaker broke in again, 'hoo a body –'

'So,' continued Jamie, 'Joey cudna help but admire the patience o' the lassie, an' says he, "Jess," he says, "come oot by to Mortar Pits, an' try oor well." That's hoo Joey Fergus speired's wife, an' if ye dinna believe's, ye've nae mair to do but ging to Mortar Pits an' see the well yersels.'

'I recall,' said the stone-breaker, 'a vary neat case o' speirin'. It was Jocky Wilkie, him 'at's brither was grieve to Broken Busses, an' the lass was Leeby Lunan. She was aye puttin' Jocky aff when he was on the point o' speirin' her, keepin' 'im hingin' on the hook like a trout, as ye may say, an' takkin her fling wi' ither lads at the same time.'

'Ay, I've kent them do that.'

'Weel, it fair maddened Jocky, so ae nicht he gings to her father's hoose wi' a present o' a grand thimble to her in his pooch, an' afore the hale hoousehold he perdooces't an' flings't wi' a bang on the dresser:

"Tak it," he says to Leeby, "or leave't." In coorse the thing's bein' done sae public-like, Leeby kent she had to mak up her mind there an' then. Ay, she took it.'

'But hoo did ye speir Chirsty yersel, Dan'l?' asked Jinny of the speaker.

There was a laugh at this, for, as was well known, Dan'l had jilted Chirsty.

'I never kent I had speired,' replied the stone-breaker, 'till Chirsty told me.'

'Ye'll no say ye wasna fond o' her?'

'Sometimes I was, an' syne at other times I was indifferent-like. The mair I thocht o't the mair risky I saw it was, so i' the tail o' the day I says to Chirsty, says I, "Na, na, Chirsty, lat's be as I am."'

'They say she took on terrible, Dan'l.'

'Ay, nae doot, but a man has 'imself to conseeder.'

By this time they had crossed the moor of whins. It was a cold, still evening, and as they paused before climbing down into the town they heard the tinkle of a bell.

'That's Snecky's bell,' said the mole-catcher; 'what can he be cryin' at this time o' nicht?'

'There's something far wrang,' said one of the women. 'Look, a'body's rinnin' to the square.'

The troubled look returned to Tammagart's face, and he stopped to look back across the fast-darkening moor.

'Did ony o' ye see little Davy Dundas, the saw-miller's bairny?' he began.
At that moment a young man swept by. His teeth were clenched, his eyes glaring.
'Speak o' the deil,' said the mole-catcher; 'that was Rob Angus.'

CHAPTER II

ROB BECOMES FREE

As Haggart hobbled down into the square, in the mole-catcher's rear, Hobart's cracked bell tinkled up the back-wynd, and immediately afterwards the bellman took his stand by the side of Tam Peter's fish-cart. Snecky gave his audience time to gather, for not every day was it given to him to cry a lost bairn. The words fell slowly from his reluctant lips. Before he flung back his head and ejected his proclamation in a series of puffs he was the possessor of exclusive news, but his tongue had hardly ceased to roll round the concluding sentence when the crowd took up the cry themselves. Wives flinging open their windows shouted their fears across the wynds. Davy Dundas had wandered from the kirkyard, where Rob had left her in Kitty Wilkie's charge till he returned from the woods. What had Kitty been about? It was believed that the litlin had taken with her a letter that had come for Rob. Was Rob back from the woods yet? Ay, he had scoured the whole countryside already for her.

Men gathered on the saw-mill brig, looking perplexedly at the burn that swivelled at this point, a sawdust colour, between wooden boards; but the women pressed their bairns closely to their wrappers and gazed in each other's face.

A log of wood, with which some one had sought to improvise a fire between the bricks that narrowed Rob Angus's grate, turned peevishly to charcoal without casting much light on the men and women in the saw-mill kitchen. Already the burn had been searched near the mill, with Rob's white face staring at the searchers from his door.

The room was small and close. A closet-bed with the door off afforded seats for several persons; and Davit Lunan, the tinsmith, who could read Homer with Rob in the original, sat clumsily on the dresser. The pendulum of a wag-at-the-wa' clock swung silently against the wall, casting a mouse-like shadow on the hearth. Over the mantelpiece was a sampler in many colours, the work of Rob's mother when she was still a maid. The bookcase, fitted into a recess that had once held a press, was Rob's own handiwork, and contained more books than any other house in Thrums. Overhead the thick wooden rafters were crossed with saws and staves.

There was a painful silence in the gloomy room. Snecky Hobart tried to break the log in the fireplace, using his leg as a poker, but desisted when he saw every eye turned on him. A glitter of sparks shot up the chimney, and the starling in the window began to whistle. Pete Todd looked undecidedly at the minister, and, lifting a sack, flung it over the bird's cage, as if anticipating the worst. In Thrums they veil their cages if there is a death in the house.

'What do ye mean, Pete Todd?' cried Rob Angus fiercely.

His voice broke, but he seized the sack and cast it on the floor. The starling, however, whistled no more.

Looking as if he could strike Pete Todd, Rob stood in the centre of his kitchen, a saw-miller for the last time. Though they did not know it, his neighbours there were photographing him in their minds, and their children were destined to gape in the days to come over descriptions of Rob Angus in corduroys.

These pictures showed a broad-shouldered man of twenty-six, whose face was already rugged. A short brown beard hid the heavy chin, and the lips were locked as if Rob feared to show that he was anxious about the child. His clear grey eyes were younger-looking than his forehead, and the swollen balls beneath them suggested a student rather than a working man. His hands were too tanned and hard ever to be white, and he delved a little in his walk, as if he felt uncomfortable without a weight on his back. He was the best saw-miller in his county, but his ambition would have scared his customers had he not kept it to himself. Many a time strangers had stared at him as he strode along the Whunny road, and wondered what made this stalwart man whirl the axe that he had been using

as a staff. Then Rob was thinking of the man he was going to be when he could safely leave little Davy behind him, and it was not the firs of the Whunny wood that were in his eye, but a roaring city and a saw-miller taking it by the throat. There had been a time when he bore no love for the bairn who came between him and his career.

Rob was so tall that he could stand erect in but few rooms in Thrums, and long afterwards, when very different doors opened to him, he still involuntarily ducked, as he crossed a threshold, to save his head. Up to the day on which Davy wandered from home he had never lifted his hat to a lady; when he did that the influence of Thrums would be broken for ever.

'It's oncommon foolish o' Rob,' said Pete Todd, retreating to the side of the mole-catcher, 'no to be mair resigned-like.'

'It's his ind'pendence,' answered Jamie; 'ay, the wricht was sayin' the noo, says he, "If Davy's deid, Rob'll mak the coffin 'imsel, he's sae mighty ind'pendent.'"

Tammas Haggart stumbled into the saw-miller's kitchen. It would have been a womanish kind of thing to fling-to the door behind him.

'Fine growin' day, Rob,' he said deliberately.

'It is so, Tammas,' answered the saw-miller hospitably, for Haggart had been his father's bosom friend.

'No much drowth, I'm thinkin',' said Hobart, relieved by the turn the conversation had taken.

Tammas pulled from beneath the table an unsteady three-legged stool – Davy's stool – and sat down on it slowly. Rob took a step nearer as if to ask him to sit somewhere else, and then turned away his head.

'Ay, ay,' said Haggart.

Then, as he saw the others gathering round the minister at the door, he moved uneasily on his stool.

'Whaur's Davy?' he said.

'Did ye no ken she was lost?' the saw-miller asked, in a voice that was hardly his own.

'Ay, I kent,' said Tammas; 'she's on the Whunny road.'

Rob had been talking to the minister in what both thought English, which in Thrums is considered an ostentatious language, but he turned on Tammas in broad Scotch. In the years to come, when he could wear gloves without concealing his hands in his pockets, excitement brought on Scotch as a poultice raises blisters.

'Tammas Haggart,' he cried, pulling the stone-breaker off his stool.

The minister interposed.

'Tell us what you know at once, Tammas,' said Mr. Dishart, who, out of the pulpit, had still a heart.

It was a sad tale that Haggart had to tell, if a short one, and several of the listeners shook their heads as they heard it.

'I meant to turn the lassieky,' the stone-breaker explained, 'but, ou, she was past in a twinklin!'

On the saw-mill brig the minister quickly organised a search party, the brig that Rob had floored anew but the week before, rising daily with the sun to do it, because the child's little boot had caught in a worn board. From it she had often crooned to watch the dank mill-wheel climbing the bouncing burn. Ah, Rob, the rotten old planks would have served your turn.

'The Whunny road' were the words passed from mouth to mouth, and the driblet of men fell into line.

Impetuous is youth, and the minister was not perhaps greatly to blame for starting at once. But Lang Tammas, his chief elder, paused on the threshold.

'The Lord giveth,' he said solemnly, taking off his hat and letting the night air cut through his white hair, 'and the Lord taketh away: blessed be the name of the Lord.'

The saw-miller opened his mouth, but no words came.

The little search party took the cold Whunny road. The day had been bright and fine, and still there was a smell of flowers in the air. The fickle flowers! They had clustered round Davy and nestled on her neck when she drew the half-ashamed saw-miller through the bleating meadows, and now they could smile on him when he came alone – all except the daisies. The daisies, that cannot play a child false, had craned their necks to call Davy back as she tripped over them, and bowed their heavy little heads as she toddled on. It was from them that the bairn's track was learned after she wandered from the Whunny road.

By and by the hills ceased to echo their wailing response to Hobart's bell.

Far in the rear of the more eager searchers, the bellman and the joiner had found a seat on a mossy bank, and others, footsore and weary, had fallen elsewhere from the ranks. The minister and half a dozen others scattered over the fields and on the hillsides, despondent, but not daring to lag. Tinkers cowered round their kettles under threatening banks, and the squirrels were shadows gliding from tree to tree.

At a distant smithy a fitful light still winked to the wind, but the farm lamps were out and all the land was hushed. It was now long past midnight in country parts.

Rob Angus was young and strong, but the heaven-sent gift of tears was not for him. Blessed the moaning mother by the cradle of her eldest-born, and the maid in tears for the lover who went out so brave in the morning and was not at evenfall, and the weeping sister who can pray for her soldier brother, and the wife on her husband's bosom.

Some of his neighbours had thought it unmanly when Rob, at the rumble of a cart, hurried from the saw-mill to snatch the child in his arms, and bear her to a bed of shavings. At such a time Davy would lift a saw to within an inch of her baby face, and then, letting it fall with a wicked chuckle, run to the saw-miller's arms, as sure of her lover as ever maiden was of man.

A bashful lover he had been, shy, not of Davy but of what men would say, and now the time had come when he looked wistfully back to a fevered child tossing in a dark bed, the time when a light burned all night in Rob's kitchen, and a trembling, heavy-eyed man sat motionless on a high-backed chair. How noiselessly he approached the bonny mite and replaced the arm that had wandered from beneath the coverlet! Ah, for the old time when a sick imperious child told her uncle to lie down beside her, and Rob sat on the bed, looking shamefacedly at the minister. Mr. Dishart had turned away his head. Such things are not to be told. They are between a man and his God.

Far up the Whunny hill they found Davy's little shoe. Rob took it in his hand, a muddy, dragged shoe that had been a pretty thing when he put it on her foot that morning. The others gathered austere around him, and strong Rob stood still among the brackens.

'I'm dootin' she's deid,' said Tammagart.

Haggart looked into the face of old Rob's son, and then a strange and beautiful thing happened. To the wizened stone-breaker it was no longer the sombre Whunny hill that lay before him. Two barefooted herd-laddies were on the green fields of adjoining farms. The moon looking over the hills found them on their ragged backs, with the cows munching by their side. They had grown different boys, nor known why, among the wild roses of red and white, and trampling neck-high among the ferns. Haggart saw once again the raspberry bushes they had stripped together into flagons gleaming in the grass. Rob had provided the bent pin with which Tammagart lured his first trout to land, and Tammagart in return had invited him to throw the neck of a doomed hen. They had wandered hand-in-hand through thirsty grass, when scythes whistled in the corn-fields, and larks trilled overhead, and braes were golden with broom.

They are two broad-shouldered men now, and Haggart's back is rounding at the loom. From his broken window he can see Rob at the saw-mill, whistling as the wheel goes round. It is Saturday night, and they are in the square, clean and dapper, talking with other gallants about lasses. They are courting the same maid, and she sits on a stool by the door, knitting a stocking, with a lover on each side. They drop in on her mother straining the blaeberry juice through a bag suspended between two

chairs. They sheepishly admire while Easie sings a hen; for love of her they help her father to pit his potatoes; and then, for love of the other, each gives her up. It is a Friday night, and from a but and ben around which the rabble heave and toss, a dozen couples emerge in strangely gay and bright apparel. Rob leads the way with one lass, and Tammas follows with another. It must be Rob's wedding-day.

Dim grow Tammas's eyes on the Whunny hill. The years whirl by, and already he sees a grumpy gravedigger go out to dig Rob's grave. Alas! for the flash into the past that sorrow gives. As he clutches young Rob's hand the light dies from Tammas's eyes, his back grows round and bent, and the hair is silvered that lay in tousled locks on a lad's head.

A nipping wind cut the search party and fled down the hill that was changing in colour from black to grey. The searchers might have been smugglers laden with whisky bladders, such as haunted the mountain in bygone days. Far away at Thrums mothers still wrung their hands for Davy, but the men slept.

Heads were bared, and the minister raised his voice in prayer. One of the psalms of David trembled in the grey of the morning straight to heaven; and then two young men, glancing at Mr. Dishart, raised aloft a fallen rowan-tree, to let it fall as it listed. It fell pointing straight down the hill, and the search party took that direction; all but Rob, who stood motionless, with the shoe in his hand. He did not seem to comprehend the minister's beckoning.

Haggart took him by the arm.

'Rob, man, Rob Angus,' he said, 'she was but fower year auld.'

The stone-breaker unbuttoned his trouser pocket, and with an unsteady hand drew out his snuff-mull. Rob tried to take it, but his arm trembled, and the mull fell among the heather.

'Keep yourselves from idols,' said Lang Tammas sternly.

But the minister was young, and children lisped his name at the white manse among the trees at home. He took the shoe from the saw-miller who had once been independent, and they went down the hill together.

Davy lay dead at the edge of the burn that gurgles on to the saw-mill, one little foot washed by the stream. The Whunny had rocked her to sleep for the last time. Half covered with grass, her baby-fist still clutched the letter. When Rob saw her, he took his darling dead bairn in his arms and faced the others with cracking jaws.

'I dinna ken,' said Tammas Haggart, after a pause, 'but what it's kind o' nat'ral.'

CHAPTER III

ROB GOES OUT INTO THE WORLD

One evening, nearly a month after Rob Angus became 'single,' Mr. George Frederick Licquorish, editor and proprietor of the *Silchester Mirror*, was sitting in his office cutting advertisements out of the *Silchester Argus*, and pasting each on a separate sheet of paper. These advertisements had not been sent to the *Mirror*, and, as he thought this a pity, he meant, through his canvasser, to call the attention of the advertisers to the omission.

Mr. Licquorish was a stout little man with a benevolent countenance, who wrote most of his leaders on the backs of old envelopes. Every few minutes he darted into the composing-room, with an alertness that was a libel on his genial face; and when he returned it was pleasant to observe the kindly, good-natured manner in which he chaffed the printer's devil who was trying to light the fire. It was, however, also noticeable that what the devil said subsequently to another devil was – 'But, you know, he wouldn't give me any sticks.'

The *Mirror* and the *Argus* are two daily newspapers published in Silchester, each of which has the largest circulation in the district, and is therefore much the better advertising medium. Silchester is the chief town of an English midland county, and the *Mirror's* business notepaper refers to it as the centre of a population of half a million souls.

The *Mirror's* offices are nearly crushed out of sight in a block of buildings, left in the middle of a street for town councils to pull down gradually. This island of houses, against which a sea of humanity beats daily, is cut in two by a narrow passage, off which several doors open. One of these leads up a dirty stair to the editorial and composing-rooms of the *Daily Mirror*, and down a dirty stair to its printing-rooms. It is the door at which you may hammer for an hour without any one's paying the least attention.

During the time the boy took to light Mr. Licquorish's fire, a young man in a heavy overcoat knocked more than once at the door in the alley, and then moved off as if somewhat relieved that there was no response. He walked round and round the block of buildings, gazing upwards at the windows of the composing-room; and several times he ran against other pedestrians on whom he turned fiercely, and would then have begged their pardons had he known what to say. Frequently he felt in his pocket to see if his money was still there, and once he went behind a door and counted it. There was three pounds seventeen shillings altogether, and he kept it in a linen bag that had been originally made for carrying worms in when he went fishing. When he re-entered the close he always drew a deep breath, and if any persons emerged from the *Mirror* office he looked after them. They were mostly telegraph boys, who fluttered out and in.

When Mr. Licquorish dictated an article, as he did frequently, the apprentice-reporter went into the editor's room to take it down, and the reporters always asked him, as a favour, to shut George Frederick's door behind him. This apprentice-reporter did the police reports and the magazine notices, and he wondered a good deal whether the older reporters really did like brandy and soda. The reason why John Milton, which was the unfortunate name of this boy, was told to close the editorial door behind him was that it was close to the door of the reporters' room, and generally stood open. The impression the reporters' room made on a chance visitor varied according as Mr. Licquorish's door was ajar or shut. When they heard it locked on the inside, the reporters and the sub-editor breathed a sigh of relief; when it opened they took their legs off the desk.

The editor's room had a carpet, and was chiefly furnished with books sent in for review. It was more comfortable, but more gloomy-looking than the reporters' room, which had a long desk running along one side of it, and a bunk for holding coals and old newspapers on the other side. The floor was so littered with papers, many of them still in their wrappers, that, on his way between his seat

and the door, the reporter generally kicked one or more into the bunk. It was in this way, unless an apprentice happened to be otherwise disengaged, that the floor was swept.

In this room were a reference library and an old coat. The library was within reach of the sub-editor's hand, and contained some fifty books, which the literary staff could consult, with the conviction that they would find the page they wanted missing. The coat had hung unbrushed on a nail for many years, and was so thick with dust that John Milton could draw pictures on it with his finger. According to legend, it was the coat of a distinguished novelist, who had once been a reporter on the *Mirror*, and had left Silchester unostentatiously by his window.

It was Penny, the foreman in the composing-room, who set the literary staff talking about the new reporter. Penny was a lank, loosely-jointed man of forty, who shuffled about the office in slippers, ruled the compositors with a loud voice and a blustering manner, and was believed to be in Mr. Licquorish's confidence. His politics were respect for the House of Lords, because it rose early, enabling him to have it set before supper-time.

The foreman slithered so quickly from one room to another that he was at the sub-editor's elbow before his own door had time to shut. There was some copy in his hand, and he flung it contemptuously upon the desk.

'Look here, Mister,' he said, flinging the copy upon the sub-editor's desk, 'I don't want that.'

The sub-editor was twisted into as little space as possible, tearing telegrams open and flinging the envelopes aside, much as a housewife shells peas. His name was Protheroe, and the busier he was the more he twisted himself. On Budget nights he was a knot. He did voluntarily so much extra work that Mr. Licquorish often thought he gave him too high wages; and on slack nights he smiled to himself, which showed that something pleased him. It was rather curious that this something should have been himself.

'But – but,' cried Protheroe, all in a flutter, 'it's town council meeting; it – it must be set, Mr. Penny.'

'Very well, Mister; then that special from Birmingham must be slaughtered.'

'No, no, Mr. Penny; why, that's a speech by Bright.'

Penny sneered at the sub-editor, and flung up his arms to imply that he washed his hands of the whole thing, as he had done every night for the last ten years, when there was pressure on his space. Protheroe had been there for half of that time, yet he still trembled before the autocrat of the office.

'There's enough copy on the board,' said Penny, 'to fill the paper. Any more specials coming in?'

He asked this fiercely, as if of opinion that the sub-editor arranged with leading statesmen nightly to flood the composing-room of the *Mirror* with speeches, and Protheroe replied abjectly, as if he had been caught doing it – 'Lord John Manners is speaking to-night at Nottingham.'

The foreman dashed his hand upon the desk.

'Go it, Mister, go it,' he cried; 'anything else? Tell me Gladstone's dead next.'

Sometimes about two o'clock in the morning Penny would get sociable, and the sub-editor was always glad to respond. On those occasions they talked with bated breath of the amount of copy that would come in should anything happen to Mr. Gladstone; and the sub-editor, if he was in a despondent mood, predicted that it would occur at midnight. Thinking of this had made him a Conservative.

'Nothing so bad as that,' he said, dwelling on the subject, to show the foreman that they might be worse off; 'but there's a column of local coming in, and a concert in the People's Hall, and –'

'And you expect me to set all that?' the foreman broke in. 'Why, the half of that local should have been set by seven o'clock, and here I've only got the beginning of the town council yet. It's ridiculous.'

Protheroe looked timidly towards the only reporter present, and then apologetically towards Penny for having looked at the reporter.

'The stuff must be behind,' growled Tomlinson, nicknamed Umbrage, 'as long as we're a man short.'

Umbrage was very short and stout, with a big moon face, and always wore his coat unbuttoned. In the streets, if he was walking fast and there was a breeze, his coat-tails seemed to be running after him. He squinted a little, from a habit he had of looking sideways at public meetings to see if the audience was gazing at him. He was 'Juvenal' in the *Mirror* on Friday mornings, and headed his column of local gossip which had that signature, 'Now step I forth to whip hypocrisy.'

'I wonder,' said the sub-editor, with an insinuating glance at the foreman, 'if the new man is expected to-night.'

Mr. Licquorish had told him that this was so an hour before, but the cunning bred of fear advised him to give Penny the opportunity of divulging the news.

That worthy smiled to himself, as any man has a right to do who has been told something in confidence by his employer.

'He's a Yorkshireman, I believe,' continued the crafty Protheroe.

'That's all you know,' said the foreman, first glancing back to see if Mr. Licquorish's door was shut. 'Mr. George Frederick has told me all about him; he's a Scotsman called Angus, that's never been out of his native county.'

'He's one of those compositors taken to literature, is he?' asked Umbrage, who by literature meant reporting, pausing in the middle of a sentence he was transcribing from his note-book. 'Just as I expected,' he added contemptuously.

'No,' said the foreman, thawing in the rays of such ignorance; 'Mr. George Frederick says he's never been on a newspaper before.'

'An outsider!' cried Umbrage, in the voice with which outsiders themselves would speak of reptiles. 'They are the ruin of the profession, they are.'

'He'll make you all sit up, Mister,' said Penny, with a chuckle. 'Mr. George Frederick has had his eye on him for a twelvemonth.'

'I don't suppose you know how Mr. George Frederick fell in with him?' said the sub-editor, basking in Penny's geniality.

'Mr. George Frederick told me everythink about him – everythink,' said the foreman proudly. 'It was a parson that recommended him.'

'A parson!' ejaculated Umbrage, in such a tone that if you had not caught the word you might have thought he was saying 'An outsider!' again.

'Yes, a parson whose sermon this Angus took down in shorthand, I fancy.'

'What was he doing taking down a sermon?'

'I suppose he was there to hear it.'

'And this is the kind of man who is taking to literature nowadays!' Umbrage cried.

'Oh, Mr. George Frederick has heard a great deal about him,' continued Penny maliciously, 'and expects him to do wonders. He's a self-made man.'

'Oh,' said Umbrage, who could find nothing to object to in that, having risen from comparative obscurity himself.

'Mr. George Frederick,' Penny went on, 'offered him a berth here before Billy Tagg was engaged, but he couldn't come.'

'I suppose,' said Juvenal, with the sarcasm that made him terrible on Fridays, 'the *Times* offered him something better, or was it the *Spectator* that wanted an editor?'

'No, it was family matters. His mother or his sister, or – let me see, it was his sister's child – was dependent on him, and could not be left. Something happened to her, though. She's dead, I think, so he's a free man now.'

'Yes, it was his sister's child, and she was found dead,' said the sub-editor, 'on a mountain-side, curiously enough, with George Frederick's letter in her hand offering Angus the appointment.'

Protheroe was foolish to admit that he knew this, for it was news to the foreman, but it tries a man severely to have to listen to news that he could tell better himself. One immediate result of the sub-editor's rashness was that Rob Angus sank several stages in Penny's estimation.

'I dare say he'll turn out a muff,' he said, and flung out of the room, with another intimation that the copy must be cut down.

The evening wore on. Protheroe had half a dozen things to do at once, and did them.

Telegraph boys were dropping the beginning of Lord John Manners's speech through a grating on to the sub-editorial desk long before he had reached the end of it at Nottingham.

The sub-editor had to revise this as it arrived in flimsy, and write a summary of it at the same time. His summary was set before all the speech had reached the office, which may seem strange. But when Penny cried aloud for summary, so that he might get that column off his hands, Protheroe made guesses at many things, and, risking, 'the right hon. gentleman concluded his speech, which was attentively listened to, with some further references to current topics,' flung Lord John to the boy, who rushed with him to Penny, from whose hand he was snatched by a compositor. Fifteen minutes afterwards Lord John concluded his speech at Nottingham.

About half-past nine Protheroe seized his hat and rushed home for supper. In the passage he nearly knocked himself over by running against the young man in the heavy top-coat. Umbrage went out to see if he could gather any information about a prize-fight. John Milton came in with a notice of a concert, which he stuck conspicuously on the chief reporter's file. When the chief reporter came in, he glanced through it and made a few alterations, changing 'Mr. Joseph Grimes sang out of tune,' for instance, to 'Mr. Grimes, the favourite vocalist, was in excellent voice.' The concert was not quite over yet, either; they seldom waited for the end of anything on the *Mirror*.

When Umbrage returned, Billy Kirker, the chief reporter, was denouncing John Milton for not being able to tell him how to spell 'deceive.'

'What is the use of you?' he asked indignantly, 'if you can't do a simple thing like that?'

'Say "cheat,"' suggested Umbrage.

So Kirker wrote 'cheat.' Though he was the chief of the *Mirror's* reporting department, he had only Umbrage and John Milton at present under him.

As Kirker sat in the reporters' room looking over his diary, with a cigarette in his mouth, he was an advertisement for the *Mirror*, and if he paid for his velvet coat out of his salary, the paper was in a healthy financial condition. He was tall, twenty-two years of age, and extremely slight. His manner was languid, though his language was sometimes forcible, but those who knew him did not think him mild. This evening his fingers looked bare without the diamond ring that sometimes adorned them. This ring, it was noticed, generally disappeared about the middle of the month, and his scarf-pin followed it by the twenty-first. With the beginning of the month they reappeared together. The literary staff was paid monthly.

Mr. Licquorish looked in at the door of the reporters' room to ask pleasantly if they would not like a fire. Had Protheroe been there he would have said 'No'; but Billy Kirker said 'Yes.' Mr. Licquorish had thought that Protheroe was there.

This was the first fire in the reporters' room that season, and it smoked. Kirker, left alone, flung up the window, and gradually became aware that some one with a heavy tread was walking up and down the alley. He whistled gently in case it should be a friend of his own, but, getting no response, resumed his work. Mr. Licquorish also heard the footsteps, but though he was waiting for the new reporter, he did not connect him with the man outside.

Rob had stopped at the door a score of times, and then turned away. He had arrived at Silchester in the afternoon, and come straight to the *Mirror* office to look at it. Then he had set out in quest of lodgings, and, having got them, had returned to the passage. He was not naturally a man crushed by a sense of his own unworthiness, but, looking up at these windows and at the shadows that passed them every moment, he felt far away from his saw-mill. What a romance to him, too, was in the

glare of the gas and in the *Mirror* bill that was being reduced to pulp on the wall at the mouth of the close! It had begun to rain heavily, but he did not feel the want of an umbrella, never having possessed one in Thrums.

Fighting down the emotions that had mastered him so often, he turned once more to the door, and as he knocked more loudly than formerly, a compositor came out, who told him what to do if he was there on business.

'Go upstairs,' he said, 'till you come to a door, and then kick.'

Rob did not have to kick, however, for he met Mr. Licquorish coming downstairs, and both half stopped.

'Not Mr. Angus, is it?' asked Mr. Licquorish.

'Yes,' said the new reporter, the monosyllable also telling that he was a Scotsman, and that he did not feel comfortable.

Mr. Licquorish shook him warmly by the hand, and took him into the editor's room. Rob sat in a chair there with his hat in his hand, while his new employer spoke kindly to him about the work that would begin on the morrow.

'You will find it a little strange at first,' he said; 'but Mr. Kirker, the head of our reporting staff, has been instructed to explain the routine of the office to you, and I have no doubt we shall work well together.'

Rob said he meant to do his best.

'It is our desire, Mr. Angus,' continued Mr. Licquorish, 'to place every facility before our staff, and if you have suggestions to make at any time on any matter connected with your work, we shall be most happy to consider them and to meet you in a cordial spirit.'

While Rob was thanking Mr. Licquorish for his consideration, Kirker in the next room was wondering whether the new reporter was to have half-a-crown a week less than his predecessor, who had begun with six pounds a month.

'It is pleasant to us,' Mr. Licquorish concluded, referring to the novelist, 'to know that we have sent out from this office a number of men who subsequently took a high place in literature. Perhaps our system of encouraging talent by fostering it has had something to do with this, for we like to give every one his opportunity to rise. I hope the day will come, Mr. Angus, when we shall be able to recall with pride the fact that you began your literary career on the *Mirror*.'

Rob said he hoped so too. He had, indeed, very little doubt of it. At this period of his career it made him turn white to think that he might not yet be famous.

'But I must not keep you here any longer,' said the editor, rising, 'for you have had a weary journey, and must be feeling tired. We shall see you at ten o'clock to-morrow?'

Once more Rob and his employer shook hands heartily.

'But I might introduce you,' said Mr. Licquorish, 'to the reporting-room. Mr. Kirker, our chief, is, I think, here.'

Rob had begun to descend the stairs, but he turned back. He was not certain what you did when you were introduced to any one, such formalities being unknown in Thrums; but he held himself in reserve to do as the other did.

'Ah, Mr. Kirker,' said the editor, pushing open the door of the reporting-room with his foot, 'this is Mr. Angus, who has just joined our literary staff.'

Nodding genially to both, Mr. Licquorish darted out of the room; but before the door had finished its swing, Mr. Kirker was aware that the new reporter's nails had a rim of black.

'What do you think of George Frederick?' asked the chief, after he had pointed out to Rob the only chair that such a stalwart reporter might safely sit on.

'He was very pleasant,' said Rob.

'Yes,' said Billy Kirker thoughtfully, 'there's nothing George Frederick wouldn't do for any one if it could be done gratis.'

'And he struck me as an enterprising sort of man.'

'"Enterprise without outlay" is the motto of this office,' said the chief.

'But the paper seems to be well conducted,' said Rob, a little crestfallen.

'The worst conducted in England,' said Kirker cheerfully.

Rob asked how the *Mirror* compared with the *Argus*.

'They have six reporters to our three,' said Kirker, 'but we do double work and beat them.'

'I suppose there is a great deal of rivalry between the staffs of the two papers?' Rob asked, for he had read of such things.

'Oh no,' said Kirker, 'we help each other. For instance, if Daddy Walsh, the *Argus* chief, is drunk, I help him; and if I'm drunk, he helps me. I'm going down to the Frying Pan to see him now.'

'The Frying Pan?' echoed Rob.

'It's a literary club,' Kirker explained, 'and very exclusive. If you come with me I'll introduce you.'

Rob was somewhat taken aback at what he had heard, but he wanted to be on good terms with his fellow-workers.

'Not to-night,' he said. 'I think I'd better be getting home now.'

Kirker lit another cigarette, and saying he would expect Rob at the office next morning, strolled off. The new reporter was undecided whether to follow him at once, or to wait for Mr. Licquorish's reappearance. He was looking round the office curiously, when the door opened and Kirker put his head in.

'By the bye, old chap,' he said, 'could you lend me five bob?'

'Yes, yes,' said the new reporter.

He had to undo the string of his money-bag, but the chief was too fine a gentleman to smile.

'Thanks, old man,' Kirker said carelessly, and again withdrew.

The door of the editor's room was open as Rob passed.

'Ah, Mr. Angus,' said Mr. Licquorish, 'here are a number of books for review; you might do a short notice of some of them.'

He handed Rob the two works that happened to lie uppermost, and the new reporter slipped them into his pockets with a certain elation. The night was dark and wet, but he lit his pipe and hurried up the muddy streets to the single room that was now his home. Probably his were the only lodgings in his street that had not the portrait of a young lady on the mantelpiece. On his way he passed three noisy young men. They were Kirker and two reporters on the *Argus* trying which could fling his hat highest in the rain.

Sitting in his lonely room Rob examined his books with interest. One of them was Tennyson's new volume of poems, and a month afterwards the poet laureate's publishers made Rob march up the streets of Silchester with his chest well forward by advertising 'The *Silchester Mirror* says, "This admirable volume."' After all, the great delight of being on the Press is that you can patronise the Tennysons. Doubtless the poet laureate got a marked copy of Rob's first review forwarded him, and had an anxious moment till he saw that it was favourable. There had been a time when even John Milton felt a thrill pass through him as he saw Messrs. Besant and Rice boasting that he thought their *Chaplain of the Fleet* a novel of sustained interest, 'which we have read without fatigue.'

Rob sat over his empty grate far on into the night, his mind in a jumble. As he grew more composed the *Mirror* and its staff sank out of sight, and he was carrying a dead child in his arms along the leafy Whunny road. His mouth twitched, and his head drooped. He was preparing to go to bed when he sat down again to look at the other book. It was a novel by 'M.' in one thin volume, and Rob thought the title, *The Scorn of Scorns*, foolish. He meant to write an honest criticism of it, but never having reviewed a book before, he rather hoped that this would be a poor one, which he could condemn brilliantly. Poor Rob! he came to think more of that book by and by.

At last Rob wound up the big watch that neighbours had come to gaze at when his father bought it of a pedlar forty years before, and took off the old silver chain that he wore round his neck. He went down on his knees to say his prayers, and then, remembering that he had said them already, rose up and went to bed.

CHAPTER IV

'THE SCORN OF SCORNS'

St. Leonard's Lodge is the residence of Mr. William Meredith, an ex-mayor of Silchester, and stands in the fashionable suburb of the town. There was at one time considerable intercourse between this house and Dome Castle, the seat of Colonel Abinger, though they are five miles apart and in different counties; and one day, after Rob had been on the Press for a few months, two boys set out from the castle to show themselves to Nell Meredith. They could have reached the high road by a private walk between a beech and an ivy hedge, but they preferred to climb down a steep path to the wild-running Dome. The advantage of this route was that they risked their necks by taking it.

Nell, who did not expect visitors, was sitting by the fire in her boudoir dreaming. It was the room in which she and Mary Abinger had often discussed such great questions as Woman, her Aims, her Influence; Man, his Instability, his Weakness, his Degeneration; the Poor, how are we to Help them; why Lady Lucy Gilding wears Pink when Blue is obviously her Colour.

Nell was tucked away in a soft arm-chair, in which her father never saw her without wondering that such a little thing should require eighteen yards for a dress.

'I'm not so little,' she would say on these occasions, and then Mr. Meredith chuckled, for he knew that there were young men who considered his Nell tall and terrible. He liked to watch her sweeping through a room. To him the boudoir was a sea of reefs. Nell's dignity when she was introduced to a young gentleman was another thing her father could never look upon without awe, but he also noticed that it soon wore off.

On the mantelpiece lay a comb and several hairpins. There are few more mysterious things than hairpins. So far back as we can go into the past we see woman putting up her hair. It is said that married men lose their awe of hairpins and clean their pipes with them.

A pair of curling-tongs had a chair to themselves near Nell, and she wore a short blue dressing-jacket. Probably when she woke from her reverie she meant to do something to her brown hair. When old gentlemen called at the Lodge they frequently told their host that he had a very pretty daughter; when younger gentlemen called they generally called again, and if Nell thought they admired her the first time she spared no pains to make them admire her still more the next time. This was to make them respect their own judgment.

It was little Will Abinger who had set Nell a-dreaming, for from wondering if he was home yet for the Christmas holidays her thoughts wandered to his sister Mary, and then to his brother Dick. She thought longer of Dick in his lonely London chambers than of the others, and by and by she was saying to herself petulantly, 'I wish people wouldn't go dying and leaving me money.' Mr. Meredith, and still more Mrs. Meredith, thought that their only daughter, an heiress, would be thrown away on Richard Abinger, barrister-at-law, whose blood was much bluer than theirs, but who was, nevertheless, understood to be as hard-up as his father.

The door-bell rang, and two callers were ushered into the drawing-room without Nell's knowing it. One of them left his companion to talk to Mrs. Meredith, and clattered upstairs in search of the daughter of the house. He was a bright-faced boy of thirteen, with a passion for flinging stones, and, of late, he had worn his head in the air, not because he was conceited, but that he might look with admiration upon the face of the young gentleman downstairs.

Bouncing into the parlour, he caught sight of the object of his search before she could turn her head.

'I say, Nell, I'm back.'

Miss Meredith jumped from her chair.

'Will!' she cried.

When the visitor saw this young lady coming toward him quickly, he knew what she was after and tried to get out of her way. But Nell kissed him.

'Now, then,' he said indignantly, pushing her from him.

Will looked round him fearfully, and then closed the door.

'You might have waited till the door was shut, at any rate,' he grumbled. 'It would have been a nice thing if any one had seen you!'

'Why, what would it have mattered, you horrid little boy!' said Nell.

'Little boy! I'm bigger than you, at any rate. As for its not mattering – but you don't know who is downstairs. The captain –'

'Captain!' cried Nell.

She seized her curling-tongs.

'Yes,' said Will, watching the effect of his words, 'Greybrooke, the captain of the school. He is giving me a week just now.'

Will said this as proudly as if his guest was Napoleon Bonaparte, but Nell laid down her curling-irons. The intruder interpreted her action and resented it.

'You're not his style,' he said; 'he likes bigger women.'

'Oh, does he?' said Nell, screwing up her little Greek nose contemptuously.

'He's eighteen,' said Will.

'A mere schoolboy.'

'Why, he shaves.'

'Doesn't the master whip him for that?'

'What? Whip Greybrooke!'

Will laughed hysterically.

'You should just see him at breakfast with old Jerry. Why, I've seen him myself, when half a dozen of us were asked to tea by Mrs. Jerry, and though we were frightened to open our mouths, what do you think Greybrooke did?'

'Something silly, I should say.'

'He asked old Jerry, as cool as you like, to pass the butter! That's the sort of fellow Greybrooke is.'

'How is Mary?'

'Oh, she's all right. No, she has a headache. I say, Greybrooke says Mary's rather slow.'

'He must be a horror,' said Nell, 'and I don't see why you brought him here.'

'I thought you would like to see him,' explained Will. 'He made a hundred and three against Rugby, and was only bowled off his pads.'

'Well,' said Nell, yawning, 'I suppose I must go down and meet your prodigy.'

Will, misunderstanding, got between her and the door.

'You're not going down like that,' he said anxiously, with a wave of his hand that included the dressing-jacket and the untidy hair. 'Greybrooke's so particular, and I told him you were a jolly girl.'

'What else did you tell him?' asked Nell suspiciously.

'Not much,' said Will, with a guilty look.

'I know you told him something else?'

'I told him you – you were fond of kissing people.'

'Oh, you nasty boy, Will – as if kissing a child like you counted!'

'Never mind,' said Will soothingly, 'Greybrooke's not the fellow to tell tales. Besides, I know you girls can't help it. Mary's just the same.'

'You are a goose, Will, and the day will come when you'll give anything for a kiss.'

'You've no right to bring such charges against a fellow,' said Will indignantly, strutting to the door.

Half-way downstairs he turned and came back.

'I say, Nell,' he said, 'you – you, when you come down, you won't kiss Greybrooke?'

Nell drew herself up in a way that would have scared any young man but Will.

'He's so awfully particular,' Will continued apologetically.

'Was it to tell me this you came upstairs?'

'No, honour bright, it wasn't. I only came up in case you should want to kiss me, and to – to have it over.'

Nell was standing near Will, and before he could jump back she slapped his face.

The snow was dancing outside in a light wind when Nell sailed into the drawing-room. She could probably still inform you how she was dressed, but that evening Will and the captain could not tell Mary. The captain thought it was a reddish dress or else blue; but it was all in squares like a draught-board, according to Will. Forty minutes had elapsed since Will visited her upstairs, and now he smiled at the conceit which made her think that the captain would succumb to a pretty frock. Of course Nell had no such thought. She always dressed carefully because – well, because there is never any saying.

Though Miss Meredith froze Greybrooke with a glance, he was relieved to see her. Her mother had discovered that she knew the lady who married his brother, and had asked questions about the baby. He did not like it. These, he thought, were things you should pretend not to know about. He had contrived to keep his nieces and nephews dark from the fellows at school, though most of them would have been too just to attach any blame to him. Of this baby he was specially ashamed, because they had called it after him.

Mrs. Meredith was a small, stout lady, of whose cleverness her husband spoke proudly to Nell, but never to herself. When Nell told her how he had talked, she exclaimed, 'Nonsense!' and then waited to hear what else he had said. She loved him, but probably no woman can live with a man for many years without having an indulgent contempt for him, and wondering how he is considered a good man of business. Mrs. Meredith, who was a terribly active woman, was glad to leave the entertainment of her visitors to Nell, and that young lady began severely by asking 'how you boys mean to amuse yourselves?'

'Do you keep rabbits?' she said to the captain sweetly.

'I say, Nell!' cried Will warningly.

'I have not kept rabbits,' Greybrooke replied, with simple dignity, 'since I was a boy.'

'I told you,' said Will, 'that Greybrooke was old – why, he's nearly as old as yourself. She's older than she looks, you know, Greybrooke.'

The captain was gazing at Nell with intense admiration. As she raised her head indignantly he thought she was looking to him for protection. That was a way Nell had.

'Abinger,' said the captain sternly, 'shut up.'

'Don't mind him, Miss Meredith,' he continued; 'he doesn't understand girls.'

To think he understands girls is the last affront a youth pays them. When he ceases trying to reduce them to fixed principles he has come of age. Nell, knowing this, felt sorry for Greybrooke, for she foresaw what he would have to go through. Her manner to him underwent such a change that he began to have a high opinion of himself. This is often called falling in love. Will was satisfied that his friend impressed Nell, and he admired Greybrooke's politeness to a chit of a girl, but he became restless. His eyes wandered to the piano, and he had a lurking fear that Nell would play something. He signed to the captain to get up.

'We'll have to be going now,' he said at last; 'good-bye.'

Greybrooke glared at Will, forgetting that they had arranged beforehand to stay as short a time as possible.

'Perhaps you have other calls to make?' said Nell, who had no desire to keep them there longer than they cared to stay.

'Oh yes,' said Will.

'No,' said the captain, 'we only came into Silchester with Miss Abinger's message for you.'

'Why, Will,' exclaimed Nell, 'you never gave me any message?'

'I forgot what it was,' Will explained cheerily; 'something about a ribbon, I think.'

'I did not hear the message given,' the captain said, in answer to Nell's look, 'but Miss Abinger had a headache, and I think Will said it had to do with that.'

'Oh, wait a bit,' said Will, 'I remember something about it now. Mary saw something in a Silchester paper, the *Mirror*, I think, that made her cry, and she thinks that if you saw it you would cry too. So she wants you to look at it.'

'The idea of Mary's crying!' said Nell indignantly. 'But did she not give you a note?'

'She was too much upset,' said Will, signing to the captain not to let on that they had refused to wait for the note.

'I wonder what it can be?' murmured Nell.

She hurried from the room to her father's den, and found him there surrounded by newspapers.

'Is there anything in the *Mirror*, father?' she asked.

'Nothing,' said Mr. Meredith, who had made the same answer to this question many hundreds of times; 'nothing except depression in the boot trade.'

'It can't be that,' said Nell.

'Can't be what?'

'Oh, give me the paper,' cried the ex-mayor's daughter impatiently.

She looked hastily up and down it, with an involuntary glance at the births, deaths, and marriages, turned it inside out and outside in, and then exclaimed 'Oh!' Mr. Meredith, who was too much accustomed to his daughter's impulses to think that there was much wrong, listened patiently while she ejaculated, 'Horrid!' 'What a shame!' 'Oh, I wish I was a man!' and, 'Well, I can't understand it.' When she tossed the paper to the floor, her face was red and her body trembled with excitement.

'What is it, Nelly?' asked her father.

Whether Miss Abinger cried over the *Mirror* that day is not to be known, but there were indignant tears in Nell's eyes as she ran upstairs to her bedroom. Mr. Meredith took up the paper and examined it carefully at the place where his daughter had torn it in her anger. What troubled her seemed to be something in the book notices, and he concluded that it must be a cruel 'slating' of a novel in one volume called *The Scorn of Scorns*. Mr. Meredith remembered that Nell had compelled him to read that book and to say that he liked it.

'That's all,' he said to himself, much relieved.

He fancied that Nell, being a girl, was distressed to see a book she liked called 'the sentimental out-pourings of some silly girl who ought to confine her writing to copy-books.' In a woman so much excitement over nothing seemed quite a natural thing to Mr. Meredith. The sex had ceased to surprise him. Having retired from business, Mr. Meredith now did things slowly as a good way of passing the time. He had risen to wealth from penury, and counted time by his dining-room chairs, having passed through a cane, a horsehair, and a leather period before arriving at morocco. Mrs. Meredith counted time by the death of her only son.

It may be presumed that Nell would not have locked herself into her bedroom and cried and stamped her feet on an imaginary critic had *The Scorn of Scorns* not interested her more than her father thought. She sat down to write a note to Mary. Then she tore it up, and wrote a letter to Mary's elder brother, beginning with the envelope. She tore this up also, as another idea came into her head. She nodded several times to herself over this idea, as a sign that the more she thought of it the more she liked it. Then, after very nearly forgetting to touch her eyes with something that made them look less red, she returned to the drawing-room.

'Will,' she said, 'have you seen the new ponies papa gave me on my birthday?'

Will leapt to his feet.

'Come on, Greybrooke,' he cried, making for the door.

The captain hesitated.

'Perhaps,' said Nell, with a glance at him, 'Mr. Greybrooke does not have much interest in horses?'

'Doesn't he just!' said Will; 'why –'

'No,' said Greybrooke; 'but I'll wait here for you, Abinger.'

Will was staggered. For a moment the horrible thought passed through his mind that these girls had got hold of the captain. Then he remembered.

'Come on,' he said, 'Nell won't mind.'

But Greybrooke had a delicious notion that the young lady wanted to see him by himself, and Will had to go to the stables alone.

'I won't be long,' he said to Greybrooke, apologising for leaving him alone with a girl. 'Don't bother him too much,' he whispered to Nell at the door.

As soon as Will had disappeared Nell turned to Greybrooke.

'Mr. Greybrooke,' she said, speaking rapidly in a voice so low that it was a compliment to him in itself, 'there is something I should like you to do for me.'

The captain flushed with pleasure.

'There is nothing I wouldn't do for you,' he stammered.

'I want you,' continued Miss Meredith, with a most vindictive look on her face, 'to find out for me who wrote a book review in to-day's *Mirror*, and to – to – oh, to thrash him.'

'All right,' said the captain, rising and looking for his hat.

'Wait a minute,' said Nell, glancing at him admiringly. 'The book is called *The Scorn of Scorns*, and it is written by – by a friend of mine. In to-day's *Mirror* it is called the most horrid names, sickly sentimental, not even grammatical, and all that.'

'The cads!' cried Greybrooke.

'But the horribly mean, wicked thing about it,' continued Nell, becoming more and more indignant as she told her story, 'is that not two months ago there was a review of the book in the same paper, which said it was the most pathetic and thoughtful and clever tale that had ever been published by an anonymous author!'

'It's the lowest thing I ever heard of,' said Greybrooke, 'but these newspaper men are all the same.'

'No, they're not,' said Nell sharply (Richard Abinger, Esq.'s, only visible means of sustenance was the press), 'but they are dreadfully mean, contemptible creatures on the *Mirror* – just reporters, you know.'

Greybrooke nodded, though he knew nothing about it.

'The first review,' Nell continued, 'appeared on the 3rd of October, and I want you to show them both to the editor, and insist upon knowing the name of the writer. After that find the wretch out, and –'

'And lick him,' said the captain.

His face frightened Nell.

'You won't hit him very hard?' she asked apprehensively, adding as an afterthought, 'perhaps he is stronger than you.'

Greybrooke felt himself in an unfortunate position. He could not boast before Nell, but he wished very keenly that Will was there to boast for him. Most of us have experienced the sensation.

Nell having undertaken to keep Will employed until the captain's return, Greybrooke set off for the *Mirror* office with a look of determination on his face. He went into two shops, the one a news-shop, where he bought a copy of the paper. In the other he asked for a thick stick, having remembered that the elegant cane he carried was better fitted for swinging in the air than for breaking a newspaper man's head. He tried the stick on a paling. Greybrooke felt certain that Miss Meredith was the novelist. That was why he selected so thick a weapon.

He marched into the advertising office, and demanded to see the editor of the *Mirror*.

'Stairs,' said a clerk, with his head in a ledger. He meant upstairs, and the squire of dames took his advice. After wandering for some time in a labyrinth of dark passages, he opened the door of the day composing-room, in which half a dozen silent figures were bending over their cases.

'I want the editor,' said Greybrooke, somewhat startled by the sound his voice made in the great room.

'Stairs,' said one of the figures, meaning downstairs.

Greybrooke, remembering who had sent him here, did not lose heart. He knocked at several doors, and then pushed them open. All the rooms were empty. Then he heard a voice saying —

'Who are you? What do you want?'

Mr. Licquorish was the speaker, and he had been peering at the intruder for some time through a grating in his door. He would not have spoken at all, but he wanted to go into the composing-room, and Greybrooke was in the passage that led to it.

'I don't see you,' said the captain; 'I want the editor.'

'I am the editor,' said the voice, 'but I can see no one at present except on business.'

'I am here on business,' said Greybrooke. 'I want to thrash one of your staff.'

'All the members of my literary staff are engaged at present,' said Mr. Licquorish, in a pleasant voice; 'which one do you want?'

'I want the low cad who wrote a review of a book called *The Scorn of Scorns*, in to-day's paper.'

'Oh!' said Mr. Licquorish.

'I demand his name,' cried Greybrooke.

The editor made no answer. He had other things to do than to quarrel with schoolboys. As he could not get out he began a leaderette. The visitor, however, had discovered the editorial door now, and was shaking it violently.

'Why don't you answer me?' he cried.

Mr. Licquorish thought for a moment of calling down the speaking-tube which communicated with the advertisement office for a clerk to come and take this youth away, but after all he was good-natured. He finished a sentence, and then opened the door. The captain strode in, but refused a chair.

'Are you the author of the book?' the editor asked.

'No,' said Greybrooke, 'but I am her friend, and I am here to thrash —'

Mr. Licquorish held up his hand to stop the flow of the captain's indignation. He could never understand why the public got so excited over these little matters.

'She is a Silchester lady?' he asked.

Greybrooke did not know how to reply to this. He was not sure whether Nell wanted the authorship revealed.

'That has nothing to do with the matter,' he said. 'I want the name of the writer who has libelled her.'

'On the press,' said Mr. Licquorish, repeating some phrases which he kept for such an occasion as the present, 'we have a duty to the public to perform. When books are sent us for review we never allow prejudice or private considerations to warp our judgment. The *Mirror* has in consequence a reputation for honesty that some papers do not possess. Now I distinctly remember that this book, *The Vale of Tears*—'

'*The Scorn of Scorns*.'

'I mean *The Scorn of Scorns*, was carefully considered by the expert to whom it was given for review. Being honestly of opinion that the treatise —'

'It is a novel.'

'That the novel is worthless, we had to say so. Had it been clever, we should —'

Mr. Licquorish paused, reading in the other's face that there was something wrong. Greybrooke had concluded that the editor had forgotten about the first review.

'Can you show me a copy of the *Mirror*,' the captain asked, 'for October 3rd?'

Mr. Licquorish turned to the file, and Greybrooke looked over his shoulder.

'There it is!' cried the captain indignantly.

They read the original notice together. It said that, if *The Scorn of Scorns* was written by a new writer, his next story would be looked for with great interest. It 'could not refrain from quoting the following exquisitely tender passage.' It found the earlier pages 'as refreshing as a spring morning,' and the closing chapters were a triumph of 'the art that conceals art.'

'Well, what have you to say to that?' asked Greybrooke fiercely.

'A mistake,' said the editor blandly. 'Such things do happen occasionally.'

'You shall make reparation for it!'

'Hum,' said Mr Licquorish.

'The insult,' cried Greybrooke, 'must have been intentional.'

'No. I fancy the authoress must be to blame for this. Did she send a copy of the work to us?'

'I should think it very unlikely,' said Greybrooke, fuming.

'Not at all,' said the editor, 'especially if she is a Silchester lady.'

'What would make her do that?'

'It generally comes about in this way. The publishers send a copy of the book to a newspaper, and owing to pressure on the paper's space, no notice appears for some time. The author, who looks for it daily, thinks that the publishers have neglected their duty, and sends a copy to the office himself. The editor, forgetful that he has had a notice of the book lying ready for printing for months, gives the second copy to another reviewer. By and by the first review appears, but owing to an oversight the editor does not take note of it, and after a time, unless his attention is called to the matter, the second review appears also. Probably that is the explanation in this case.'

'But such carelessness on a respectable paper is incomprehensible,' said the captain.

The editor was looking up his books to see if they shed any light on the affair, but he answered

—
'On the contrary, it is an experience known to most newspapers. Ah, I have it!'

Mr. Licquorish read out, '*The Scorn of Scorns*, received September 1st, reviewed October 3rd.' Several pages farther on he discovered, '*The Scorn of Scorns*, received September 24th, reviewed December 19th.'

'You will find,' he said, 'that this explains it.'

'I don't consider the explanation satisfactory,' replied the captain, 'and I insist, first, upon an apology in the paper, and second, on getting the name of the writer of the second review.'

'I am busy this morning,' said Mr. Licquorish, opening his door, 'and what you ask is absurd. If the authoress can give me her word that she did not send the book and so bring this upon herself, we shall insert a word on the subject but not otherwise. Good-morning.'

'Give me the writer's name,' cried the captain.

'We make a point of never giving names in that way,' said Mr. Licquorish.

'You have not heard the last of this,' Greybrooke said from the doorway. 'I shall make it my duty to ferret out the coward's name, and —'

'Good-morning,' Mr. Licquorish repeated.

The captain went thumping down the stairs, and meeting a printer's devil at the bottom, cuffed him soundly because he was part of the *Mirror*.

To his surprise, Miss Meredith's first remark when he returned was —

'Oh, I hope you didn't see him.'

She looked at Greybrooke's face, fearing it might be stained with blood, and when he told her the result of his inquiries she seemed pleased rather than otherwise. Nell was soft-hearted after all, and she knew how that second copy of the novel had reached the *Mirror* office.

'I shall find the fellow out, though,' said Greybrooke, grasping his cudgel firmly.

'Why, you are as vindictive as if you had written the book yourself,' said Nell.

Greybrooke murmured, blushing the while, that an insult to her hurt him more than one offered to himself. Nell opened the eyes of astonishment.

'You don't think I wrote the book?' she asked; then seeing that it was so from his face, added, 'oh no, I'm not clever enough. It was written by – by a friend of mine.'

Nell deserves credit for not telling Greybrooke who the friend was, for that was a secret. But there was reason to believe that she had already divulged it to twelve persons (all in the strictest confidence). When the captain returned she was explaining all about it by letter to Richard Abinger, Esq. Possibly that was why Greybrooke thought she was not nearly so nice to him now as she had been an hour before.

Will was unusually quiet when he and Greybrooke said adieu to the whole family of Merediths. He was burning to know where the captain had been, and also what Nell called him back to say in such a low tone. What she said was —

'Don't say anything about going to the *Mirror* office, Mr. Greybrooke, to Miss Abinger.'

The captain turned round to lift his hat, and at the same time expressed involuntarily a wish that Nell could see him punishing loose bowling.

Mrs. Meredith beamed to him.

'There is something very nice,' she said to Nell, 'about a polite young man.'

'Yes,' murmured her daughter, 'and even if he isn't polite.'

CHAPTER V

ROB MARCHES TO HIS FATE

On the morning before Christmas a murder was committed in Silchester, and in murders there is 'lineage.' As a consequence, the head reporter attends to them himself. In the *Mirror* office the diary for the day was quickly altered. Kirker set off cheerfully for the scene of the crime, leaving the banquet in the Henry Institute to Tomlinson, who passed on his dinner at Dome Castle to Rob, whose church decorations were taken up by John Milton.

Christmas Eve was coming on in snow when Rob and Walsh, of the *Argus*, set out for Dome Castle. Rob disliked doing dinners at any time, partly because he had not a dress suit. The dinner was an annual one given by Will's father to his tenants, and reporters were asked because the colonel made a speech. His neighbours, when they did likewise, sent reports of their own speeches (which they seemed to like) to the papers; and some of them, having called themselves eloquent and justly popular, scored the compliments out, yet in such a way that the editor would still be able to read them, and print them if he thought fit. Rob did not look forward to Colonel Abinger's reception of him, for they had met some months before, and called each other names.

It was one day soon after Rob reached Silchester. He had gone a-fishing in the Dome and climbed unconsciously into preserved waters. As his creel grew heavier his back straightened; not until he returned home did the scenery impress him. He had just struck a fine fish, when a soldierly-looking man at the top of the steep bank caught sight of him.

'Hi, you sir!' shouted the onlooker. Whir went the line – there is no music like it. Rob was knee-deep in water. 'You fellow!' cried the other, brandishing his cane, 'are you aware that this water is preserved?' Rob had no time for talk. The colonel sought to attract his attention by flinging a pebble. 'Don't do that,' cried Rob fiercely.

Away went the fish. Away went Rob after it. Colonel Abinger's face was red as he clambered down the bank. 'I shall prosecute you,' he shouted. 'He's gone to the bottom; fling in a stone!' cried Rob. Just then the fish showed its yellow belly and darted off again. Rob let out more line. 'No, no,' shouted the colonel, who fished himself, 'you lose him if he gets to the other side; strike, man, strike!' The line tightened, the rod bent – a glorious sight. 'Force him up stream,' cried the colonel, rolling over boulders to assist. 'Now, you have him. Bring him in. Where is your landing-net?' 'I haven't one,' cried Rob; 'take him in your hands.' The colonel stooped to grasp the fish and missed it. 'Bungler!' screamed Rob. This was too much. 'Give me your name and address,' said Colonel Abinger, rising to his feet; 'you are a poacher.' Rob paid no attention. There was a struggle. Rob did not realise that he had pushed his assailant over a rock until the fish was landed. Then he apologised, offered all his fish in lieu of his name and address, retired coolly so long as the furious soldier was in sight, and as soon as he turned a corner disappeared rapidly. He could not feel that this was the best introduction to the man with whom he was now on his way to dine.

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