Hocking Silas Kitto

The Squire's Daughter

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Hocking S.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
AN IMPERIOUS MAIDEN

The voice was soft and musical, but the tone was imperative.

"I say, young man, open that gate."

The young man addressed turned slowly from the stile on which he had been leaning, and regarded the speaker attentively. She was seated on a high-stepping horse with that easy grace born of long familiarity with the saddle, and yet she seemed a mere girl, with soft round cheeks and laughing blue eyes.

"Come, wake up," she said, in tones more imperious than before, "and open the gate at once."

He resented the tone, though he was charmed with the picture, and instead of going toward the gate to do her bidding he turned and began to climb slowly over the stile.

She trotted her horse up to him in a moment, her eyes flashing, her cheeks aflame. She had been so used to command and to prompt obedience that this insubordination on the part of a country yokel seemed nothing less than an insult.

"You dare disobey me?" she said, her voice thrilling with anger.

"Of course I dare," he answered, without turning his head. "I am not your servant."

The reply seemed to strike her dumb for a moment, and she reined back her horse several paces.

He turned again to look at her, then deliberately seated himself on one of the posts of the stile.

There was no denying that she made a pretty picture. With one foot on the top rung of the stile he was almost on a level with her, and he was near enough to see her bosom heave and the colour come and go upon her rounded cheeks.

His heart began to beat uncomfortably fast. He feared that he had played a churlish part. She looked so regal, and yet so sweet, that it seemed almost as if Nature had given her the right to command. And who was he that he should resent her imperious manner and refuse to do her bidding?

He had gone too far, however, to retreat. Moreover, his dignity had been touched. She had flung her command at him as though he were a serf. Had she asked him to open the gate, he would have done so gladly. It was the imperious tone that he resented.

"I did not expect such rudeness and incivility here of all places," she said at length in milder tones.

His cheeks flamed at that, and an angry feeling stole into his heart. Judged by ordinary standards, he had no doubt been rude, and her words stung him all the more on that account. He would have played a more dignified part if he had pocketed the affront and opened the gate; but he was in no mood to go back on what he had done.

"If I have been rude and uncivil, you are to blame as much as I – and more," he retorted angrily.

"Indeed?" she said, in a tone of lofty disdain, and an amused smile played round the corners of her mouth. She was interested in the young man in spite of his incivility. Now that she had an opportunity of looking more closely at him, she could not deny that he had no common face, while his speech was quite correct, and not lacking in dignity.

"I hope I am not so churlish as not to be willing to do a kindness to anybody," he went on rapidly, "but I resent being treated as dirt by such as you."

"Indeed? I was not aware – " she began, but he interrupted her.

"If you had asked me to open the gate I would have done so gladly, and been proud to do it," he went on; "but because I belong to what you are pleased to call the lower orders, you cannot ask; you command, and you expect to be obeyed."

"Of course I expect to be obeyed," she said, arching her eyebrows and smiling brightly, "and I am surprised that you – "

"No doubt you are," he interrupted angrily. "But if we are lacking in good manners, so are you," and he turned and leaped off the stile into the field.

"Come back, you foolish young man."

But if he heard, he did not heed; with his eyes fixed on a distant farmhouse, he stalked steadily on, never turning his head either to the right or the left.

For a moment or two she looked after him, an amused smile dimpling her cheeks; then she turned her attention to the gate.

"I wonder what I am to do now?" she mused. "I cannot unfasten it, and if I get off, I shall never be able to mount again; on the other hand, I hate going back through the village the way I came. I wonder if Jess will take it?" and she rode the mare up to the gate and let her smell at the rungs.

It was an ordinary five-barred gate, and the ground was soft and springy. The road was scarcely more than a track across a heathery common. Beyond the gate the road was strictly private, and led through a wide sweep of plantation, and terminated at length, after a circuit of a mile or two, somewhere near Hamblyn Manor.

Jess seemed to understand what was passing through her mistress's mind, and shook her head emphatically.

"You can do it, Jess," she said, wheeling the mare about, and trotting back a considerable distance. "I know you can," and she struck her across the flank with her riding crop.

Jess pricked up her ears and began to gallop toward the gate; but she halted suddenly when within a few feet of it, almost dislodging her rider.

The young lady, however, was not to be defeated. A second time she rode back, and then faced the gate once more.

Jess pricked up her ears, and shook her head as if demanding a loose rein, and then sprang forward with the swiftness of a panther. But she took the gate a moment too soon; there was a sharp crash of splintered wood, a half-smothered cry of pain, and horse and rider were rolling on the turf beyond.

Ralph Penlogan caught his breath and turned his head suddenly. The sound of breaking wood fell distinctly on his ear, and called him back from his not over-pleasant musings. He was angry with himself, angry with the cause of his anger. He had stood up for what he believed to be his rights, had asserted his opinions with courage and pertinacity; and yet, for some reason, he was anything but satisfied. The victory he had won – if it was a victory at all – was a barren one. He was afraid that he had asserted himself at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and before the wrong person.

The girl to whom he had spoken, and whose command he had defied, was not responsible for the social order against which he chafed, and which pressed so hardly on the class to which he belonged. She was where Providence had placed her just as much as he was, and the tone of command she had assumed was perhaps more a matter of habit than any assumption of superiority.

So within three minutes of leaving the stile he found himself excusing the fair creature to whom he had spoken so roughly. That she had a sweet and winning face there was no denying, while the way she sat her horse seemed to him the embodiment of grace.

Who she was he had not the remotest idea. To the best of his recollection he had never seen her before. That she belonged to what was locally termed the gentry there could be no doubt – a visitor most likely at one or other of the big houses in the neighbourhood.

Once the thought flashed across his mind that she might be the daughter of Sir John Hamblyn, but he dismissed it at once. In the first place, Sir John's daughter was old enough to be married – in

fact, the wedding day had already been fixed – while this young lady was a mere girl. She did not look more than seventeen if she looked a day. And in the second place, it was inconceivable that such a mean, grasping, tyrannical curmudgeon as Sir John could be the father of so fair a child.

He had seen Dorothy Hamblyn when she was a little girl in short frocks, and his recollection of her was that she was a disagreeable child. If he remembered aright, she was about his own age – a trifle younger.

"Why, I have turned twenty," he mused. "I am a man. She's only a girl."

So he dismissed the idea that she was Sir John's daughter who returned from school only about six months ago, and who was going to marry Lord Probus forthwith.

Suddenly he was recalled from his musings by the crash of the breaking gate. Was that a cry also he heard? He was not quite sure. A dozen vague fears shot through his mind in a moment. For a second only he hesitated, then he turned swiftly on his heel and ran back the way he had come.

The field was a wide one, wider than he had ever realised before. He was out of breath by the time he reached the stile, while his fears had increased with every step he took.

He leaped over the stile at a bound, and then stood still. Before him was the broken gate, and beyond it —

For a moment a mist swam before his eyes, and the ground seemed to be slipping away from beneath his feet. Vague questions respecting his responsibility crowded in upon his brain; the harvest of his churlishness had ripened with incredible swiftness. The word "guilty" seemed to stare at him from every point of the compass.

With a strong effort he pulled himself together, and advanced toward the prostrate figure. The horse stood a few paces away, trembling and bleeding from the knees.

He was almost afraid to look at the girl's face, and when he did so he gave a loud groan. There was no movement, nor any sign of life. The eyes were closed, the cheeks ghastly pale, while from underneath the soft brown hair there ran a little stream of blood.

CHAPTER II
APPREHENSIONS

Sir John Hamblyn was walking up and down in front of his house, fuming, as usual, and with a look upon his face that betokened acute anxiety. Why he should be so anxious he hardly knew. There seemed to be no special reason for it. Everything appeared to be moving along satisfactorily, and unless the absolutely unexpected happened, there was no occasion for a moment's worry.

But it was just the off-chance of something happening that irritated him. The old saying, "There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip," kept flitting across his brain with annoying frequency. If he could only get another month over without accident of any kind he would have peace; at least, so he believed.

Lord Probus was not the man to go back on his word, and Lord Probus had promised to stand by him, provided he became his – Sir John's – son-in-law.

It seemed a little ridiculous, for Lord Probus was the older man of the two, and to call a man his son-in-law who was older than himself was not quite in harmony with the usual order of things. But then, what did it matter? There were exceptions to every rule, and such exceptions were of constant occurrence.

When once the marriage knot was tied, a host of worries that had harassed him of late would come to an end. He had been foolish, no doubt. He ought to have lived within his income, and kept out of the way of the sharks of the Turf and the Stock Exchange. He had a handsome rent-roll, quite sufficient for his legitimate wants; and if things improved, he might be able to raise rents all round. Besides, if he had luck, some of the leases might fall in, which would further increase his income. But the off-chance of these things was too remote to meet his present needs. He wanted immediate help, and Lord Probus was his only hope.

Fortunately for him, Dorothy was not old enough to see the tragedy of such an alliance. She saw only the social side – the gilt and glitter and tinsel. The appeal had been made to her vanity and to her love of pretty and costly things. To be the mistress of Rostrevor Castle, to bear a title, to have a London house, to have any number of horses and carriages, to go to State functions, to be a society dame before she was twenty – all these things appealed to her girlish pride and vanity, and she accepted the offer of Lord Probus with alacrity, and with scarcely a moment's serious thought.

No time was lost in hurrying forward arrangements for the wedding. The sooner the contract was made secure the better. Any unnecessary delay might give her an excuse for changing her mind. Sir John felt that he would not breathe freely again until the wedding had taken place.

Now and then, when he looked at his bright-eyed, happy, imperious girl, his heart smote him. She had turned eighteen, but she was wonderfully girlish for her years, not only in appearance but in manner, and in her outlook upon life. She knew nothing as yet of the ways of the world, nothing of its treachery and selfishness. She had only just escaped from the seclusion of school and the drudgery of the classroom. She felt free as a bird, and the outlook was just delightful. She was going to have everything that heart could desire, and nothing would be too expensive for her to buy.

She was almost as eager for the wedding to take place as was her father; for directly the wedding was over she was going out to see the world – France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, Egypt. They were going to travel everywhere, and travel in such luxury as even Royalty might envy. Lord Probus had already given her a foretaste of what he would do for her by presenting her with a beautiful mare. Jess was the earnest of better things to come.

If Dorothy became imperious and slightly dictatorial, it was not to be wondered at. Nothing was left undone or unsaid that would appeal to her vanity. She was allowed her own way in everything.

Sir John was desperately afraid that the illusions might fade before the wedding day arrived. Financially he was in the tightest corner he had ever known, and unless he could tap some of Lord Probus's boundless wealth, he saw before him long years of mean economies and humiliating struggles with poverty. He saw worse – he saw the sale of his personal effects to meet the demands of his creditors, he saw the lopping off of all the luxuries that were as the breath of life to him.

Hence, though deep down in his heart he loathed the thought of his little girl marrying a man almost old enough to be her grandfather, he was sufficiently cornered in other ways to be intensely anxious that the wedding should take place. Lord Probus was the head of a large brewery and distilling concern. His immense and yearly increasing revenues came mainly from beer. How rich he was nobody knew. He hardly knew himself. He had as good as promised Sir John that if the wedding came off he would hand over to him sufficient scrip in the great company of which he was head to qualify him – Sir John – for a directorship. The scrip could be paid for at Sir John's convenience. The directorship should be arranged without undue delay. The work of a director was not exacting, while the pay was exceedingly generous.

Sir John had already begun to draw the salary in imagination, and to live up to it. Hence, if anything happened now to prevent the wedding, it would be like knocking the bottom out of the universe.

In the chances of human life, it did not seem at all likely that anything would happen to prevent what he so much desired. It seemed foolish to worry himself for a single moment. And yet he did worry. There was always that off-chance. Nobody could ward off accidents or disease.

Dorothy had gone out riding alone. She refused to have a groom with her, and, of course, she had to have her own way; but he was always more or less fidgety when she was out on these expeditions.

And yet it was not the fear of accidents that really troubled him. What he feared most was that she might become disillusioned. As yet she had not awakened to the meaning and reality of life. She was like a child asleep, wandering through a fairyland of dreams and illusions. But she might awake at any moment – awake to the passion of love, awake to the romance as well as the reality of life.

The appeal as yet had been to her vanity – to her sense of self-importance. There had been no appeal to her heart or affections. She did not know what love was, and if she married Lord Probus it would be well for her if she never knew. But love might awake when least expected; her heart might be stirred unconsciously. Some Romeo might cross her path, and with one glance of his eyes might change all her life and all her world; and a woman in love was more intractable than a comet.

Sir John would not like to be brought into such a position that he would have to coerce his child. Spendthrift that he was, and worse, with a deep vein of selfishness that made him intensely unpopular with all his tenants, he nevertheless loved Dorothy with a very genuine affection. Geoffrey, his son and heir, had never appealed very strongly to his heart. Geoffrey was too much like himself, too indolent and selfish. But Dorothy was like her mother, whose passing was as the snapping of a rudder chain in a storm.

The gritting of wheels on the gravel caused Sir John to turn suddenly on his heel, and descending the steps at the end of the terrace, he walked a little distance to meet the approaching carriage.

Lord Probus was not expected, but he was not the less welcome on that account.

"The day is so lovely that I thought I would drive across to have a peep at you all," Lord Probus said, stepping nimbly out of the landau.

He was a dapper man, rather below the medium height, with a bald head and iron-grey, military moustache. He was sixty years of age, but looked ten years younger.

"I am delighted to see you," Sir John said, with effusion, "and I am sure Dorothy will be when she returns."

"She is out, is she?"

"She is off riding as usual. Since you presented her with Jess, she has spent most of her time in the saddle."

"She is a good horsewoman?"

"Excellent. She took to riding as a duck takes to water. She rode with the hounds when she was ten."

"I wish I could ride!" Lord Probus said, reflectively. "I believe horse exercise would do me good; but I began too late in life."

"Like skating and swimming, one must start young if he is to excel," Sir John answered.

"Yes, yes; and youth passes all too quickly." And his lordship sighed.

"Well, as to that, one is as young as one feels, you know." And Sir John led the way into the house.

Lord Probus followed with a frown. Sir John had unwittingly touched him on a sore spot. If he was no younger than he felt, he was unmistakably getting old. He tried to appear young, and with a fair measure of success; tried to persuade himself that he was still in his prime; but every day the fact was brought painfully home to him that he had long since turned the brow of the hill, and was descending rapidly the other side. Directly he attempted to do what was child's play to him ten years before, he discovered that the spring had gone out of his joints and the nerve from his hand.

He regretted this not only for his own sake, but in some measure for Dorothy's. He never looked into her fresh young face without wishing he was thirty years younger. She seemed very fond of him at present. She would sit on the arm of his chair and pat his bald head and pull his moustache, and call him her dear, silly old boy; and when he turned up his face to be kissed, she would kiss him in the most delightful fashion.

But he could not help wondering at times how long it would last. That she was fond of him just now he was quite sure. She told him in her bright, ingenuous way that she loved him; but he was not so blind as not to see that there was no passion in her love. In truth, she did not know what love was.

He was none the less anxious, however, on that account, to make her his wife, but rather the more. The fact that the best part of his life was gone made him all the more eager to fill up what remained with delight. He might reckon upon another ten years of life, at least, and to possess Dorothy for ten years would be worth living for – worth growing old for.

"You expect Dorothy back soon?" Lord Probus questioned, dropping into an easy-chair.

"Any minute, my lord. In fact, I expected her back before this."

"Jess has been well broken in. I was very careful on that point." And his lordship looked uneasily out of the window.

"And then, you know, Dorothy could ride an antelope or a giraffe. She is just as much at ease in a saddle as you are in that easy-chair."

"Do you know, I get more and more anxious as the time draws near," his lordship said absently. "It would be an awful blow to me if anything should happen now to postpone the wedding."

"Nothing is likely to happen," Sir John said grimly, but with an apprehensive look in his eyes. "Dorothy is in the best of health, and so are you."

"Well, yes, I am glad to say I am quite well. And Dorothy, you think, shows no sign of rueing her bargain?"

"On the contrary, she has begun to count the days." And Sir John walked to the window and raised the blind a little.

"I shall do my best to make her happy," his lordship said, with a smile. "And, bachelor as I am, I think I know what girls like."

"There's no doubt about that," was the laughing answer. "But who comes here?" And Sir John ran to the door and stepped out on the terrace.

A boy without coat, and carrying his cap in his hand, ran eagerly up to him. His face was streaming with perspiration, and his eyes ready to start out of their sockets.

"If you please, sir," he said, in gasps, "your little maid has been and got killed!"

"My little maid?" Sir John questioned. "Which maid? I did not know any of the servants were out."

"No, not any servant, sir; but your little maid, Miss Dorothy."

"My daughter!" he almost screamed. And he staggered up against the porch and hugged one of the pillars for support.

"Thrown from her horse, sir, down agin Treliskey Plantation," the boy went on. "Molly Udy says she reckons her neck's broke."

Sir John did not reply, however. He could only stand and stare at the boy, half wondering whether he was awake or dreaming.

CHAPTER III
A NEW SENSATION

Ralph Penlogan's first impulse was to rush off into St. Goram and rouse the village; but on second thoughts he dropped on his knees by the side of the prostrate girl, and placed his ear close to her lips. For a moment or two he remained perfectly still, with an intent and anxious expression in his eyes; then his face brightened, and something like a smile played round the corners of his lips.

"No, she is not dead," he said to himself. And he heaved a great sigh of relief.

But he still felt doubtful as to the best course to take. To leave the unconscious girl lying alone by the roadside seemed to him, for some reason, a cruel thing to do. She might die, or she might return to consciousness, and find herself helpless and forsaken, without a human being or even a human habitation in sight.

"Oh, I hope she will not die," he said to himself, half aloud, "for if she does I shall feel like a murderer." And he put his ear to her lips a second time.

No, she still breathed, but the rivulet of blood seemed to be growing larger.

He raised her gently and let her head rest against his knee while he examined the wound underneath her auburn hair. He tried his best to repress a shudder, but failed. Then he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and proceeded to bind it tightly round her head. How pale her face was, and how beautiful! He had never seen, he thought, so lovely a face before.

He wondered who she was and where she lived.

The horse whinnied a little distance away, and again the question darted through his mind, What was he to do? If he waited for anyone to pass that way he might wait a week. The road was strictly private, and there was a notice up that trespassers would be prosecuted. It had been a public road once – a public road, indeed, from time immemorial – but Sir John had put a stop to that. In spite of protests and riots, and threatened appeals to law, he had won the day, and no man dared walk through the plantation now without first asking his consent.

"She can't be very heavy," Ralph thought, as he looked down into her sweet, colourless face. "I'll have to make the attempt, anyhow. It's nearly two miles to St. Goram; but perhaps I shall be able to manage it."

A moment or two later he had gathered her up in his strong arms, and, with her bandaged head resting on his shoulder, and her heart beating feebly against his own, he marched away back over the broken gate in the direction of St. Goram. Jess gave a feeble whinny, then followed slowly and dejectedly, with her nose to the ground.

Half a mile away the ground dipped into a narrow valley, with a clear stream of water meandering at the bottom.

Ralph laid down his burden very gently and tenderly close to the stream, with her head pillowed on a bank of moss. He was at his wits' end, but he thought it possible that some ice-cold water sprinkled on her face might revive her.

Jess stood stock-still a few yards away and watched the operation. Ralph sprinkled the cold water first on her face, then he got a large leaf, and made a cup of it, and tried to get her to drink; but the water trickled down her neck and into her bosom.

She gave a sigh at length and opened her eyes suddenly. Then she tried to raise her head, but it fell back again in a moment.

Ralph filled the leaf again and raised her head.

"Try to drink this," he said. "I'm sure it will do you good." And she opened her lips and drank.

He filled the leaf a third time, and she followed him with her eyes, but did not attempt to speak.

"Now, don't you feel better?" he questioned, after she had swallowed the second draught.

"I don't know," she answered, in a whisper. "But who are you? And where am I?"

"You have had an accident," he said. "Your horse threw you. Don't you remember?"

She closed her eyes and knitted her brows as if trying to recall what had happened.

"It was close to Treliskey Plantation," he went on, "and the gate was shut. You told me to open it, and I refused. I was a brute, and I shall never forgive myself so long as I live."

"Oh yes; I remember," she said, opening her eyes slowly, and the faintest suggestion of a smile played round her ashen lips. "You took offence because – "

"I was a brute!" he interjected.

"I ought not to have spoken as I did," she said, in a whisper. "I had no right to command you. Do – do you think I shall die?"

"No, no!" he cried, aghast. "What makes you ask such a question?"

"I feel so strange," she answered, in the same faint whisper, "and I have no strength even to raise my head."

"But you will get better!" he said eagerly. "You must get better – you must! For my sake, you must!"

"Why for your sake?" she whispered.

"Because if you die I shall feel like a murderer all the rest of my life. Oh, believe me, I did not mean to be rude and unkind! I would die for you this very moment if I could make you better! Oh, believe me!" And the tears came up and filled his eyes.

She looked at him wonderingly. His words were so passionate, and rang with such a deep note of conviction, that she could not doubt his sincerity.

"It was all my fault," she whispered, after a long pause; then the light faded from her eyes again. Ralph rushed to the stream and fetched more water, but she was quite unconscious when he returned.

For a moment or two he looked at her, wondering whether her ashen lips meant the approach of death; then he gathered her up in his arms again and marched forward in the direction of St. Goram.

The road seemed interminable, while his burden hung a dead weight in his arms, and grew heavier every step he took. He was almost ready to drop, when a feeble sigh sounded close to his ear, followed by a very perceptible shudder.

He was afraid to look at her. He had heard that people shuddered when they died. A moment or two later he was reassured. A soft voice whispered —

"Are you taking me home?"

"I am taking you to St. Goram," he answered "I don't know where your home is."

She raised herself suddenly and locked her arms about his neck, and at the touch of her hands the blood leaped in his veins and his face became crimson. He no longer felt his burden heavy, no longer thought the way long. A new chord had been struck somewhere, which sang through every fibre of his being. A new experience had come to him, unlike anything he had ever before felt or imagined.

He raised her a little higher in his arms, and pressed her still closer to his heart. He was trembling from head to foot; his head swam with a strange intoxication, his heart throbbed at twice its normal rate. He had suddenly got into a world of enchantment. Life expanded with a new meaning and significance.

It did not matter for the moment who this fair creature was or where she lived. He had got possession of her; her arms were about his neck, her head rested on his shoulder, her face was close to his, her breath fanned his cheek, he could feel the beating of her heart against his own.

He marched over the brow of the hill and down the other side in a kind of ecstasy.

He waited for her to speak again, but for some reason she kept silent. He felt her fingers clutch the back of his neck, and every now and then a feeble sigh escaped her lips.

"Are you in pain?" he asked at length.

"I think I can bear it," she answered feebly.

"I wish I could carry you more gently," he said, "but the ground is very rough."

"Oh, but you are splendid!" she replied. "I wish I had not been rude to you."

He gave a big gulp, as though a lump had risen in his throat.

"Don't say that again, please," he said at length. "I feel bad enough to drown myself."

She did not reply again, and for a long distance he walked on in silence. He was almost ready to drop, and yet he was scarcely conscious of fatigue. It seemed to him as though the strength of ten men had been given to him.

"We shall be in the high road in a few minutes now," he said at length; but she did not reply. Her hands seemed to be relaxing their hold about his neck again; her weight had suddenly increased.

He staggered hurriedly forward to the junction of the roads, and then sat down suddenly on a bank, still holding his precious charge in his arms. He shifted her head a little, so that he could look at her face. She did not attempt to speak, though he saw she was quite conscious.

"There's some kind of vehicle coming along the road," he said at length, lifting his head suddenly.

She did not reply, but her eyes seemed to search his face as though something perplexed her.

"Are you easier resting?" he questioned.

She closed her eyes slowly by way of reply; she was too spent to speak.

"You have not yet told me who you are," he said at length. All thought of rank and station had passed out of his mind. They were on an equality while he sat there folding her in his arms.

She opened her eyes again, and her lips moved, but no sound escaped them.

In the distance the rattle of wheels sounded more and more distinct.

"Help is coming," he whispered. "I'm sure it is."

Her eyes seemed to smile into his, but no other answer was given.

He looked eagerly toward the bend of the road, and after a few minutes a horse and carriage appeared in sight.

"It's Dr. Barrow's carriage," he said half aloud. "Oh, this is fortunate!"

He raised a shout as the carriage drew near. The coachman saw that something had happened, and pulled up suddenly. The doctor pushed his head out of the window, then turned the door-handle and stepped out on to the roadside.

"Hello, Ralph Penlogan!" he said, rushing forward, "what is the meaning of this?"

"She got thrown from her horse up against Treliskey Plantation," he answered. "Do you know who she is?"

"Of course I know who she is!" was the quick reply. "Don't you know?"

"No. I never saw her before. Do you think she will recover?"

"Has she been unconscious all the time?" the doctor asked, placing his fingers on her wrist.

"No; she's come to once or twice. I thought at first she was dead. There's a big cut on her head, which has bled a good deal."

"She must be got home instantly," was the reply. "Help me to get her into the carriage at once!"

It was an easy task for the two men. Dorothy had relapsed into complete unconsciousness again. Very carefully they propped her up in a corner of the brougham, while the doctor took his place by her side.

Ralph would have liked to ride with them. He rather resented Dr. Barrow taking his place. He had a notion that nobody could support the unconscious girl so tenderly as himself.

There was no help for it, however. He had to get out of the carriage and leave the two together.

"Tell William," said the doctor, "to drive round to the surgery before going on to Hamblyn Manor."

"To Hamblyn Manor?" Ralph questioned, with a look of perplexity in his eyes as he stood at the carriage door.

"Why, where else should I take her?"

"Is she from up the country?"

"From up the country – no. Do you mean to say you've lived here all your life and don't know Miss Hamblyn?"

"But she is only a girl," Ralph said, looking at the white face that was leaning against the doctor's shoulder.

"Well?"

"Miss Hamblyn is going to be married!"

The doctor's face clouded in a moment.

"I fear this will mean the postponement of the marriage," he said.

Ralph groaned inwardly and turned away.

"The doctor says you must drive round to the surgery before going on to Hamblyn Manor," he said, speaking to the coachman, and then he stood back and watched the carriage move away.

It seemed to him like a funeral, with Jess as the mourner, limping slowly behind. The doctor hoped to avoid attracting attention in St. Goram. He did not know that Jess was following the carriage all the way.

It was the sight of the riderless horse that attracted people's attention. Then, when the carriage pulled up at the doctor's door, someone bolder than the rest looked in at the window and caught a glimpse of the unconscious figure.

The doctor's anger availed him nothing. Other people came and looked, and the news spread through St. Goram like wildfire, and in the end an enterprising lad took to his heels and ran all the distance to Hamblyn Manor that he might take to Sir John the evil tidings.

CHAPTER IV
A BITTER INTERVIEW

Dr. Barrow remained at the Manor House most of the night. It was clear from his manner, as well as from the words he let fall, that he regarded Dorothy's case as serious. Sir John refused to go to bed.

"I shall not sleep in any case," he said. "And I prefer to remain downstairs, so that I can hear the latest news."

Lord Probus remained with him till after midnight, though very few words passed between them. Now and then they looked at each other in a dumb, despairing fashion, but neither had the courage to talk about what was uppermost in their thoughts.

Just as the daylight was struggling into the room, the doctor came in silently, and dropped with a little sigh into an easy-chair.

"Well?" Sir John questioned, looking at him with stony eyes.

"She is a little easier for the moment," was the quiet, unemotional answer.

"You think she will pull through?"

"I hope so, but I shall be able to speak with more confidence later."

"The wound in her head is a bad one?"

The doctor smiled. "If that were all, we would soon have her on her feet again."

"But what other injuries has she sustained?"

"It is impossible to say just at present. She evidently fell under the horse. The wonder is she's alive at all."

"I suppose nobody knows how it happened?" Sir John questioned after a pause.

"Well, I believe nobody saw the accident, though young Ralph Penlogan was near the spot at the time – and a fortunate thing too, or she might have remained where she fell till midnight."

"You have seen the young man?"

"He had carried her in his arms from Treliskey Plantation to the junction of the high road."

"Without assistance?"

"Without assistance. What else could he do? There was not a soul near the spot. Since you closed the road through the plantation, it is never used now, except by the few people to whom you have granted the right of way."

"So young Penlogan was in the plantation, was he?"

"I really don't know. He may have been on the common."

Sir John frowned. "Do you know," he said, after a pause, "that I dislike that young man exceedingly."

"Indeed?"

"He is altogether above his station. I believe he is clever, mind you, and all that, but what does a working-man's son want to bother himself with mechanics and chemistry for?"

"Why not?" the doctor asked, with slightly raised eyebrows.

"Why? Because this higher education, as it is called, is bringing the country to the dogs. Get an educated proletariat, and the reign of the nobility and gentry is at an end. You see the thin end of the wedge already. Your Board-school boys and girls are all cursed with notions; they are too big for their jackets, too high for their station; they have no respect for squire or parson, and they are too high and mighty to do honest work."

"I cannot say that has been my experience," the doctor said quietly; and he rose from his chair and began to pull on his gloves.

"You are not going?" Sir John questioned anxiously.

"For an hour or two. I should like, with your permission, to telegraph to Dr. Roscommon. You know he is regarded now as the most famous surgeon in the county."

"But surely, doctor – " Sir John began, with a look of consternation in his eyes.

"I should like to have his opinion," the doctor said quietly.

"Of course – of course! Get the best advice you can. No expense must be spared. My child must be saved at all costs."

"Rest assured we shall do our best," the doctor answered, and quietly left the room.

For the best part of another hour Sir John paced restlessly up and down the room, then he dropped into an easy-chair and fell fast asleep.

He was aroused at length by a timid knock at the door.

"Come in!" he answered sleepily, fancying for a moment that he was in bed, and that his servant had brought him his shaving-water.

The next moment he was on his feet, with an agitated look in his eyes.

A servant entered, followed by Ralph Penlogan, who looked as if he had not slept for the night.

Instead of waiting to know if Sir John would see him, Ralph had stalked into the room on the servant's heels. He was too anxious to stand on ceremony, too eager to unburden his mind. He had never had a moment's peace since his meeting with Dorothy Hamblyn the previous afternoon. He felt like a criminal, and would have given all he possessed if he could have lived over the previous afternoon again.

Sir John recognised him in a moment, and drew himself up stiffly. He never felt altogether at ease in the presence of the Penlogans. He knew that he had "done" the father, driven a most unfair bargain with him, and it is said a man never forgives a fellow-creature he has wronged.

"I have come to speak to you about the accident to your daughter," Ralph said, plunging at once into the subject that filled his mind.

"Yes, yes; I am glad you have called," Sir John said, walking to the mantelpiece and leaning his elbow on it.

"I hope she is better?" Ralph went on. "You think she will recover?"

"I am sorry to say she is very seriously injured," Sir John answered slowly; "but, naturally, we hope for the best."

Ralph dropped his eyes to the floor, and for a moment was silent.

"Dr. Barrow tells me that you were near the spot at the time of the accident," Sir John went on; "for that reason I am glad you have called."

"There isn't much to tell," Ralph answered, without raising his eyes, "but I am anxious to tell what there is."

"Ah!" Sir John gasped, glancing across at his visitor suspiciously.

"After what has happened, you can't blame me more than I blame myself," Ralph went on; "though, of course, I never imagined for a moment that she would attempt to leap the gate."

"I don't quite understand," Sir John said stiffly.

"Well, it was this way. I was leaning on the stile leading down into Dingley Bottom, when someone rode up and ordered me to open the gate leading into Treliskey Plantation. If the lady had asked me to open the gate I should have done it in a minute."

"So you refused to do a neighbourly act, did you?"

"I told her I was not her servant, at which she got very indignant, and ordered me to do as I was told."

"And you refused a second time?"

"I did. In fact, I felt very bitter. People in our class suffer so many indignities from the rich that we are apt to be soured."

"Soured, indeed! Your accursed Board-school pride not only makes cads of you, but criminals!" And Sir John's eyes blazed with passion.

"I am not going to defend myself any further," Ralph said, raising his eyes and looking him full in the face. "I am sorry now that I did not open the gate – awfully sorry. I would give anything if I could live over yesterday afternoon again!"

"I should think so, indeed!" Sir John said, in his most biting tones. "And understand this, young man, if my daughter dies I shall hold you responsible for her death!"

Ralph's face grew very white, but he did not reply.

Sir John, however, was in no mood to be silent. He had a good many things bottled up in his mind, and Ralph's visit gave him an excuse for pulling the cork out.

"I want to say this also to you," he said, "now that you have given me an opportunity of opening my mind – that I consider young men of your stamp a danger and a menace to the neighbourhood!"

Ralph looked at him without flinching, but he did not speak.

"There was a time," Sir John went on, "when people knew how to respect their betters, when the working classes kept their place and did not presume, and when such as you would never have ventured into this house by the front door!"

"I came by the nearest way," Ralph answered, "and did not trouble to inquire which door it was."

"Your father no doubt thinks he has been doing a wise thing in keeping himself on short commons to give you what he foolishly imagines is an education."

"Excuse me, but we are all kept on short commons because you took advantage of my father's ignorance. If he had had a little better education he would not have allowed himself to be duped by you!" And he turned and made for the door.

But Sir John intercepted him, with flashing eyes and passion-lined face.

"Have you come here to insult me?" he thundered. "By Heaven, I've a good mind to call my servants in and give you a good horsewhipping!"

Ralph stood still and scowled angrily.

"I neither came here to insult you nor to be insulted by you! I came here to express my regret that I did not pocket my pride and open the gate for your daughter. I have made the best amends in my power, and now, if you will let me, I will go home."

"I am not sure that I will let you!" Sir John said angrily. "It seems to me the proper thing would be to send for the police and get you locked up. How do I know that you did not put something in the way to prevent my daughter's horse clearing the gate? I know that you hate your betters – like most of your class, alas! in these times – "

"We should not hate you if you dealt justly by us!" Ralph retorted.

"Dealt justly, indeed!" Sir John sneered. "It makes me ill to hear such as you talking about justice! You ought to be thankful that you are allowed to live in the parish at all!"

"We are. We are grateful for the smallest mercies – grateful for room to walk about."

"That's more than some of you deserve," Sir John retorted angrily. "Now go home and help your father on the farm. And, by Jove, tell him if he's behind with his ground rent this year I'll make him sit up."

Ralph's eyes blazed in a moment. That ground rent was to him the sum of all iniquity. It represented to him the climax of greed and injustice. The bitterness of it had eaten out all the joy of his father's life and robbed his mother of all the fruits of her thrift and economy.

Ralph's face was toward the door; but he turned in a moment, white with passion.

"I wonder you are not ashamed to speak of that ground rent," he said slowly, and with biting emphasis. "You, who took advantage of my father's love for his native place, and of his ignorance of legal phraseology – you, who robbed a poor man of his savings, and cheated his children out of their due. Ground rent, indeed! I wonder the word does not stick in your throat and choke you." And before Sir John could reply he had pulled open the door and passed out into the hall.

He walked home by the forbidden path through the plantation, feeling more reckless and defiant than he had ever felt before. He was in the mood to run his head against any brick wall that might

stand in his way; he almost hoped that a keeper would cross his path and arrest him. He wanted to have another tilt with Sir John, and show him how lightly he regarded his authority.

No keeper, however, showed his face. He was left in undisturbed possession of field and fell. He whistled loudly and defiantly, as he strutted through the dim aisles of the plantation, and tried to persuade himself that he was not a bit sorry that Sir John at that moment was suffering all the tortures of suspense. He would have persuaded himself, if he could, that he did not care whether Dorothy Hamblyn lived or died; but that was altogether beyond his powers. He did care. Every fibre of his being seemed to plead for her recovery.

He came at length upon the scene of the previous day's accident. To all appearances no one had visited it. The broken gate had not been touched. On the ground was a dark stain which had been crimson the day before, but no one would notice it unless it were pointed out; for the rest, Nature showed no regard for human pain or grief.

It was a glorious morning in late summer. The woods were at their best; the fields were yellowing in all directions to the harvest. High in the blue heavens the larks were trilling their morning song, while in the banks and hedges the grasshoppers were whirring and chattering with all their might. It was a morning to inspire the heart with confidence and hope, to cleanse the eyes from the dust of doubt, and to uplift the spirit from the fogs of pessimism and despair.

And yet Ralph Penlogan heard no song that morning, nor even saw the sunshine. A dull weight was pressing on his heart which he had no power to lift. Anger and regret struggled within him for the mastery, while constantly a new emotion – which he did not understand as yet – ran through his veins like liquid fire.

When he reached the stile he rested for a few moments, and recalled the scene of the previous day. It was not difficult. The face of the fair horsewoman he would never forget; the soft, imperious voice rang through his brain like the sound of evening bells. Her smile was like sunshine on waving corn.

Then in his fancy he saw Jess dart forward, and then came the sickening sound of splintering wood. What happened after that he knew all too well.

It would be a cruel thing for death to blot out a smile so sweet, and the grave to hide a face so fair. While there were so many things in the world that were neither lovely nor useful nor inspiring, it would seem like a sin against Nature to blot out and destroy so sweet a presence. Let the weeds be plucked up, let the thorns be burned; but the flowers should be allowed to remain to brighten the world and gladden the hearts of men.

He sprang over the stile at length, and strode away in the direction of Dingley Bottom with a scowl upon his face.

What right had he to be thinking about the squire's daughter? Did he not despise the class to which she belonged? Did he not hate her father because, having a giant's strength, he used it like a giant? Had not the justice of the strong become a byword and a loathing? Had he not sworn eternal enmity to the oppressor and all who shared his gains?

On the brow of the next low hill he paused again. Before him, in a little hollow, lay the homestead his father had built; and spread out on three sides were the fields he had reclaimed from the wilderness.

It had been a hard and almost heartbreaking task, for when he commenced the enterprise he had but a faint idea what it would cost. It seemed easy enough to root up the furze bushes and plough down the heather, and the soil looked so loamy and rich that he imagined a heavy crop would be yielded the first year.

And yet it was not to make money that David Penlogan had leased a portion of Polskiddy Downs, and built a house thereon. It was rather that he might have a quiet resting-place in the evening of his life, and be able to spend his days in the open air – in the wind and sunshine – and be set free from the perils that beset an underground captain in a Cornish mine.

With what high hopes he embarked upon the enterprise none but David knew. It was his one big investment. All the savings of a lifetime went into it. He took his hoarded sovereigns out of the bank without misgiving, and felt as happy as a king, while he toiled like a slave.

His neighbours stared and shook their heads when it leaked out on what terms he had taken the lease.

"Sir John has been too many for you, David," an old farmer said to him one day. "You might as well empty your purse in his pocket right off. You'll not have money enough to buy a coffin with when he's finished with you."

But David knew better, or fancied he did, which is much the same thing.

He hired horses and ploughs and stubbers and hedgers and ditchers, and masons and carpenters, and for a year that corner of Polskiddy Downs was alive with people.

The house was built from plans David prepared himself. Barn and cowsheds were erected at a convenient distance. Hedges were carried in straight lines across the newly cultivated fields. A small orchard was planted beyond the kitchen garden, and everything, to David's hopeful eyes, looked promising for the future.

That was twelve years ago, and in those years David had grown to be an old man. He had spent his days in the open air, it is true – in the wind and sunshine, and in the rain and snow – and he had contracted rheumatism and bronchitis, and all the heart had gone out of him in the hopeless struggle.

As Ralph looked out over the not too fruitful fields which his father had reclaimed from the waste with such infinite toil, and at the sacrifice of all his savings, he forgot the fair face of Dorothy Hamblyn, which had been haunting him all the way back, and remembered only the iron hand of her father.

CHAPTER V
THE CHANCES OF LIFE

Ralph had started so early that morning that he had had no time to get breakfast. Now he began to feel the pangs of hunger most acutely.

"I expect mother will have kept something for me," he said to himself, as he descended the slope. "I hope she is not worrying about what has become of me."

He looked right and left for his father, expecting to find him at work in the fields, but David was nowhere in evidence.

Ralph made a bee-line across the fields, and was soon in the shelter of the little homestead. He found his father and mother and his sister Ruth still seated at the breakfast-table. Ruth pushed back her chair at the sound of his footsteps and rose to her feet.

"Why, Ralph," she said, "where have you been? Mother's been quite worried about you."

"If that's all she has to worry her, she needn't worry much," he said, with a laugh. "But has anything happened? You all look desperately sober."

"We've heard some news that has made us all feel very anxious," David answered wearily. "We've sat here talking about it for the last half-hour."

"Then the news concerns us all?" Ralph questioned, with a catch in his voice.

"Very closely, my boy – very closely. The truth is, Julian Seccombe has got wounded out in Egypt."

"And he's the last life on the farm?" Ralph questioned, with a gasp.

"That is so, my boy. It seems strange that I should be so unfortunate in the choice of lives, and yet I could not have been more careful. Who could have thought that the parson's boy would become a soldier?"

"Life is always uncertain," Ralph answered, with a troubled look in his eyes, "whether a man is a soldier or a farmer."

"That is so," David answered reflectively. "Yet my father held his little place on only two lives, and one of them lived to be seventy-five."

"But, even then, I've heard you say the lease ran only a little over sixty years. It's a wicked gamble, is this leasehold system, with the chances in favour of the landlord."

"Why a gamble in favour of the landlord, my boy?" David questioned, lifting his mild eyes to his son's face.

"Why, because if all the 'lives' live out their threescore years and ten, the lease is still a short one; for you don't start with the first year of anyone's life."

"That is true," David answered sadly. "The parson's boy was ten, which I thought would be balanced by the other two."

"And the other two did not live ten years between them."

"Of course, nobody could foresee that," David answered sadly. "They were both healthy children. Our little Billy was three, and the healthiest baby of the lot."

"But with all the ailments of children in front of him?"

"Well, no. He had had whooping-cough, and got through it easily. It was the scarlet fever that carried him off. Poor little chap, he was gone in no time."

"And so, within a year, and after you had spent the greater part of your money, your farm hung upon two lives," Ralph said bitterly.

"But, humanly speaking, they were good lives. Not lives that would be exposed to much risk. Lawyer Doubleday told me that he intended to bring up his boy to the same profession, and Parson

Seccombe told me he had dedicated Julian to the Church in his infancy. What better lives, humanly speaking, could you get? Neither parsons nor lawyers run any risks to speak of."

"Yes; that's true enough. The system being what it is, you did the best you could, no doubt."

"Nobody could foresee," David said sadly, "that Doubleday's boy would go and get drowned. I nearly fainted when I heard the news."

"And now you say that young Seccombe has got shot out in Egypt."

"I don't know as to his being shot; but Tom Dyer, who was here this morning, said that he had just seen the parson, who was in great trouble, news having reached him last evening that Julian was wounded."

"Then if the parson's in great trouble, the chances are he's badly wounded."

"I don't know. I thought of walking across to St. Goram directly, and seeing the parson for myself; but I'm almost afraid to do so, lest the worst should be true."

"We shall have to face it, whatever it is," Ralph said doggedly.

"But think of what it would mean to us if the parson's son should die! Poor mother is that troubled that she has not been able to eat a mouthful of breakfast!"

"She seems scarcely able to talk about it," Ralph said, glancing at the door through which his mother and Ruth had disappeared.

"She's a little bit disposed to look on the dark side of things generally," David said slowly. "For myself, I keep hoping for the best. It doesn't seem possible that God can strip us of everything at a blow."

"It doesn't seem to me as though God had any hand in the business," Ralph answered doggedly.

"Hush, Ralph, my boy! The issues of life and death are in His hands."

"And you believe also that He is the author of the leasehold system that obtains in this country?"

"I did not say that, Ralph; but He permits it."

"Just as He permits lying and theft, and murder and war, and all the other evil things there are in the world. But that is nothing to the point. You can't make me believe that the Almighty ever meant a few people to parcel out the world among themselves, and cheat all the rest out of their rights."

"The world is what it is, my boy, and neither you nor I can alter it."

"And you think it is our duty to submit quietly and uncomplainingly to whatever wrong or injustice is heaped upon us?"

"We must submit to the law, my boy, however hardly it presses upon us."

"But we ought to try, all the same, to get bad laws mended."

"You can't ladle the sea dry with a limpet-shell, Ralph, nor carry off a mountain in your pocket. No, no; let us not talk about the impossible, nor give up hope until we are forced to. Perhaps young Seccombe will recover."

"But if he should die, father. What would happen then?"

"I don't know, my boy, and I can't bear to think."

"But we'd better face the possibility," Ralph answered doggedly, "so that, if the worst should come to the worst, we may know just where we are."

"'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,'" David answered, with a far-away look in his eyes. And he got up from his seat and walked slowly out of the house.

Ralph sat looking out of the window for several minutes, and then he went off in search of his mother and Ruth.

"Do you know, mother," he said, as cheerily as he could, "that I have had no breakfast yet? And, in spite of the bad news, I am too hungry for words."

"Had no breakfast?" she said, lifting up her hands in surprise. "I made sure you got something to eat before you went out."

"Well, then, you were wrong for once," he said, laughing. "Now, please put me out of my misery as quickly as possible."

"Ah, Ralph," she answered, with a sigh, "if we had no worse misery than hunger, how happy we should be!"

"That is so, mother," he said, with a laugh. "Hunger is not at all bad when you have plenty to eat."

She sighed again.

"It is well that you young people don't see far ahead of you," she said plaintively. "But come here and get your breakfast."

Two hours later, when in the home close hoeing turnips, he lifted his head and saw his father coming across the fields from the direction of St. Goram, he straightened his back at once and waited. He knew that he had been to see the parson to get the latest and fullest news. David came slowly on with his eyes upon the ground, as if buried in profound thought.

"Well, father, what news?" Ralph questioned, when his father came within speaking distance.

David started as though wakened out of a reverie, and came to a full stop. Then a pathetic smile stole over his gentle face, and he came forward with a quickened step.

"I waited for the parson to get a reply from the War Office, or I should have been home sooner," he said, bringing out the words slowly and painfully.

"Well?" Ralph questioned, though he felt sure, from his father's manner, what the answer would be.

"The parson fears the worst," David answered, bringing out the words in jerks. "Poor man! He's in great trouble. I almost forgot my own when I thought of his."

"But what was the news he got from the War Office?" Ralph questioned.

"Not much. He's on the list of the dangerously wounded, that's all."

"But he may recover," Ralph said, after a pause.

"Yes, he may," David answered, with a sigh. "God alone knows, but the parson gave me no comfort at all."

"How so?"

"He says that the swords and spears of the dervishes are often poisoned; then, you see, water is scarce, and the heat is terrible, so that a sick man has no chance like he has here."

Ralph did not reply. For a moment or two he looked at his father, then went on with his hoeing. David walked by his side between the rows of turnips. His face was drawn and pale, and his lips twitched incessantly.

"The world seems terribly topsy-turvy," he said at length, as if speaking to himself. "I oughtn't to be idling here, but all the heart's gone out of me somehow."

"We must hope for the best," Ralph said, without raising his head.

"The parson's boy is the last 'life,'" David went on, as though he had not heard what Ralph had said. "The last life. Just a thread, a feeble little thread. One little touch, and then – "

"Well, and what then?" Ralph questioned.

"If the boy dies, this little farm is no longer ours. Though I have reclaimed it from the waste, and spent on it all my savings, and toiled from dawn to dark for twelve long years, and built the house and the barn and the cowsheds, and gone into debt to stock it; if that boy dies it all goes."

"You mean that the squire will take possession?"

"I mean that Sir John will claim it as his."

Ralph did not speak again for several moments, but he felt his blood tingling to his finger-tips.

"It's a wicked, burning shame," he jerked out at length.

"It is the law, my boy," David said sadly, "and you see there's no going against the law."

Ralph hung his head, and began hoeing vigorously his row.

"Besides," David went on, "you see I was party to the arrangement – that is, I accepted the conditions; but the luck has been on Sir John's side."

"He took a mean advantage of you, father, and you know it, and he knows it," Ralph snapped.

"He knew that I had set my heart on a bit of land that I could call my own; that I wanted a sort of resting-place in my old age, and that I desired to end my days in the parish in which I was born."

"And so he put the screw on. It's always been a wonder to me, since I could think about it at all, that you accepted the conditions. I would have seen Sir John at the bottom of the sea first."

"I did try to get better terms," David answered, looking wistfully across the fields, "and I mentioned ninety-nine years as the term of the lease, and he nearly turned me out of his office. 'Three lives or nothing,' he snarled, 'and be quick about it.' So I had to make up my mind there and then."

"You'd have been better off, father, if you'd dropped all your money down a mine shaft, and gone to work on a farm as a day labourer," Ralph said bitterly.

"I shouldn't have had to work so hard," David assented.

"And you would have got more money, and wouldn't have had a hundredth part of the anxiety."

"You see, I thought the land was richer than it has turned out to be, and the furze roots have kept sprouting year after year, and that has meant ploughing the fields afresh. And the amount of manure I have had to put in has handicapped me terribly. But I have kept hoping to get into smooth waters by and by. The farm is looking better now than ever it did before."

"But the ground rent, father, is an outrage. Did you really understand how much you were paying?"

"He wouldn't consent to any less," David said wistfully. "You see things were good with farmers at the time, and rents were going up. And then I thought I should be allowed to work the quarry down in the delf, and make some money out of the stone."

"And you were done in that as in other things?"

"Well, yes. There's no denying it. When I got to understand the deed – and it took me a goodish time to riddle it out – I found out that I had no right to the stone or the mineral, or the fish in the stream, or to the trees, or to the game. Do you know he actually charged me for the stone dug out of my own farm to build the house with?"

"And ever since has been working the quarry at a big profit, which would never have been unearthed but for you, and destroying one of your fields in the process?"

"I felt that about the quarry almost more than anything," David went on. "But he's never discovered the tin lode, and I shall never tell him."

"Is there a tin lode on the farm?" Ralph questioned eagerly.

"Ay, a beauty! It must be seven years ago since I discovered it, and I've kept it to myself. You see, it would ruin the farm to work it, and I should not get a penny of the dues; they'd all go to the squire."

"Everything gets back to the rich in the long-run," Ralph said bitterly. "There's no chance for the poor man anywhere."

"Oh, well, in a few years' time it won't matter to any of us," David said, looking with dreamy eyes across the valley to the distant range of hills. "In the grave we shall all be equal, and we shall never hear again the voice of the oppressor."

"That does not seem to me anything to the point," Ralph said, flashing out the words angrily. "We've got as good a right to live as anybody else. I don't ask favours from anybody, but I do want justice and fair play."

"It's difficult to know what justice is in this world," David said moodily. "But there, I've been idling long enough. It's time I went back and fetched my hoe and did a bit of work." And he turned slowly on his heel and walked away toward the house.

Ralph straightened his back and looked after him, and as he did so the moisture came into his eyes.

"Poor old father!" he said to himself, with a sigh. "He's feeling this much more deeply than anyone knows. I do hope for all our sakes that Julian Seccombe will recover."

For the rest of the day Ralph's thoughts hovered between the possible loss of their farm and the chances of Dorothy Hamblyn's recovery. He hardly knew why he should worry himself about the squire's daughter so much. Was it solely on the ground that he had refused to open the gate, or was it because she was so pretty?

He felt almost vexed with himself when this thought suggested itself to his mind. What did it matter to him whether she was fair or plain? She was Sir John Hamblyn's daughter, and that ought to be sufficient for him. If there was any man on earth he hated and despised it was John Hamblyn; hence to concern himself about the fate of his daughter because she was good to look upon seemed the most ridiculous folly.

It must surely be the other consideration that worried him. If he had opened the gate the accident would not have happened; but neither would it if she had ridden home the other way. She was paying the penalty of her own wilfulness and her own imperiousness. He was not called on to be the hack of anybody.

But from whatever cause his anxiety might spring, it was there, deep-rooted and persistent.

He was glad when night came, so that he might forget himself, forget the world, and forget everybody in it in the sweet oblivion of sleep.

He hoped that the new day would bring better news, but in that he was disappointed. The earlier part of the day brought no news at all, and neither he nor his father went to seek it. But as the afternoon began to wane, a horse-dealer from St. Goram left word that the parson's son was dead, and that the squire's daughter was not likely to get better.

CHAPTER VI
WAITING FOR THE BLOW TO FALL

David Penlogan was not the man to cry out when he was hurt. He went about his work in dumb resignation. The calamity was too great to be talked about, too overwhelming to be shaped into words. He could only shut his teeth and endure. To discuss the matter, even with his wife, would be like probing a wound with a red-hot needle. Better let it be. There are times when words are like a blister on a burn.

What the future had in store for him he did not know, and he had not the courage to inquire. One text of Scripture he repeated to himself morning, noon, and night, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," and to that he held. It was his one anchor. The rope was frayed, and the anchor out of sight – whether hooked to a rock or simply embedded in the sand he did not know – but it steadied him while the storm was at its worst. It helped him to endure.

Harvest was beginning, and the crop had to be gathered in – gathered in from fields that were no longer his, and that possibly he would never plant again. It was all very pathetic. He seemed sometimes like a man preparing for his own funeral.

"When next year comes – " he would say to himself, and then he would stop short. He had not courage enough yet to think of next year; his business was with the present. His first, and, as far as he could see, his only duty was to gather in the crops. Sir John had not spoken to him yet. He was too concerned about his daughter to think of so small a matter as the falling-in of a lease. Strange that what was a mere trifle to one man should be a matter of life and death to another.

It was a sad and silent harvest-tide for the occupants of Hillside Farm. The impending calamity, instead of drawing them more closely together, seemed to separate them. Each was afraid of betraying emotion before the rest. So they avoided each other. Even at meal-times they all pretended to be so busy that there was no time to talk. The weather was magnificent, and all the cornfields were growing ripe together. This was true of nearly every other farm in the parish. Hence hired labour could not be had for love or money. The big farmers had picked up all the casual harvesters beforehand. The small farmers would have to employ their womenfolk and children.

Ralph and his father got up each morning at sunrise, and, armed with reaping-hooks, went their ways in different directions. Ralph undertook to cut down the barley-field, David negotiated a large field of oats. They could not talk while they were in different fields. Moreover, neither was in the mood for company. Later on they might be able to talk calmly and without emotion, but at present it would be foolish to make the attempt.

Every day they expected that Sir John Hamblyn or his steward would put in an appearance; that would bring things to a head, and put an end to the little conspiracy of silence that had now lasted nearly a week. But day after day passed away, and the solemn gloom of the farm remained unbroken.

Ralph kept doggedly to his work. Work was the best antidote against painful thoughts. Since the morning he walked across to Hamblyn Manor, in order to ease his conscience by making a clean breast of it, he had never ventured beyond his own homestead. He tried to persuade himself it was no concern of his what happened, and that if Dorothy Hamblyn died it would be a just judgment on Sir John for his grasping and oppressive ways.

But his heart always revolted against such reasoning. Deep down in his soul he knew that, for the moment, he was more concerned about the fate of Dorothy than anything else, and that it would be an infinite relief to him to hear that she was out of danger. Try as he would, he could not shake off the feeling that he was more or less responsible for the accident.

But day by day the news found its way across to the farm that "the squire's little maid," as the villagers called her, was no better. Sometimes, indeed, the news was that she was a good deal worse, and that the doctors held out very little hope of her recovery.

Ralph remained as silent on this as on the other subject. He had never told anyone but Sir John that he had refused to open the gate. It had seemed to him, while he sat on the stile and faced the squire's daughter, a brave and courageous part to take, but he was ashamed of it now. It would have been a far more heroic thing to have pocketed the affront and overcome arrogance by generosity.

But vision often comes too late. We see the better part when we are no longer able to take it.

Sunday brought the family together, and broke the crust of silence that had prevailed so long.

It was David's usual custom on a Sunday morning to walk across the fields to his class-meeting, held in the little Methodist Chapel at Veryan. But this particular Sunday morning he had not the courage to go. If he could not open his heart before the members of his own family, how could he before others? Besides, his experience would benefit no one. He had no tale to tell of faith triumphing over despondency, and hope banishing despair. He had come nearer being an infidel than ever before in his life. It is not every man who can see that Providence may be as clearly manifested in calamity as in prosperity.

So instead of going to his meeting, David went out for a quiet walk in the fields. He could talk to himself, if he had not the courage to talk to others. Besides, Nature was nearly always restful, if not inspiring.

Ralph came down to breakfast an hour later than was his custom. He was so weary with the work of the week that he was half disposed to lie in bed till the following morning. He found his breakfast set for him in what was called the "living-room," but neither Ruth nor his mother was visible. He ate his food without tasting it. His mind was too full of other things to trouble himself about the quality of his victuals. When he had finished he rose slowly from his chair, took a cloth cap from a peg, and went through the open door into the garden. Plucking a sprig of lad's-love, he stuck it into the buttonhole of his jacket, then climbed over the hedge into an adjoining field.

He came face to face with his father ten minutes later, and stared at him in surprise.

"Why, I thought you had gone to your meeting!" he said, in a tone of wonderment.

"I don't feel in any mood for meetings," David answered gloomily. "I reckon I'm best by myself."

"I fancy we've all been thinking the same thing these last few days," Ralph answered, with a smile. "I'm not sure, however, that we're right. We've got to talk about things sooner or later."

"Yes; I suppose that is so," David answered wearily. "But, to tell you the truth, I haven't got my bearings yet."

"I reckon our first business is to try to keep afloat," Ralph answered. "If we can do that, we may find our bearings later on."

"You will find no difficulty, Ralph, for you are young, and have all the world before you. Besides, I've given you an education. I knew it was all I could give you."

"I'm afraid it won't be of much use to me in a place like this," Ralph answered, with a despondent look in his eyes.

"There's no knowing, my boy. Knowledge, they say, is power. If you are thrown overboard you will swim; but with mother and me it is different. We're too old to start again, and all our savings are swallowed up."

"Not all, surely, father! There are the crops and cattle and implements."

David shook his head.

"Over against the crops," he said, "are the seed bills, and the manure bills, and the ground rent, and over against the cattle is the mortgage. I never thought of telling you, Ralph, for I never reckoned on this trouble coming. But when I started I thought the money I had would be quite enough not only to build the house and outbuildings, and bring the farm under cultivation, but to stock it as well. But it was a much more expensive business than I knew."

"And so you had to mortgage the farm?"

"No, my lad. Nobody would lend money on a three-life lease."

"And yet you risked your all on it?"

"Ah, my boy, I did it for the best. God knows I did! I wanted to provide a nest for our old age."

"No one will blame you on that score," Ralph answered, with tears in his eyes; "but the best ships founder sometimes."

"Yes. I have kept saying to myself ever since the news came that I am not the only man who has come to grief, and yet I don't know, my boy, that that helps me very much."

Ralph was silent for several minutes; then he said —

"Is this mortgage or note of hand or bill of sale – or whatever it is – for a large amount?"

"Well, rather, Ralph. I'm afraid, if we have to shift from here, there'll be little or nothing left."

"But if you are willing to remain as tenant, Sir John will make no attempt to move you?"

"I'm not so sure, my son. Sir John is a hard man and a bitter, and he has no liking for me. At the last election I was not on his side, as you may remember, and he never forgets such things."

Ralph turned away and bit his lip. The memory of what the squire said to him a few days previously swept over him like a cold flood.

"I'm inclined to think, father," he said at length, "that we'd better prepare for the worst. It'll be better than building on any consideration we may receive from the squire."

"I think you are right, my boy." And they turned and walked toward the house side by side.

They continued their talk in the house, and over the dinner-table. Now that the ice was broken the stream of conversation flowed freely. Ruth and Mrs. Penlogan let out the pent-up feelings of their hearts, and their tears fell in abundance.

It did the women good to cry. It eased the pain that was becoming intolerable. Ralph talked bravely and heroically. All was not lost. They had each other, and they had health and strength, and neither of them was afraid of hard work.

By tea-time they had talked each other into quite a hopeful frame of mind. Mrs. Penlogan was inclined to the belief that Sir John would recognise the equity of the case, and would let them remain as tenants at a very reasonable rent.

"Don't let us build on that, mother," Ralph said. "If he foregoes the tiniest mite of his pound of flesh, so much the better; but to reckon on it might mean disappointment. We'd better face the worst, and if we do it bravely we shall win."

In this spirit they went off to the evening service at the little chapel at Veryan. The building was plain – four walls with a lid, somebody described it – the service homely in the extreme, the singing decidedly amateurish, but there were warmth and emotion and conviction, and everybody was pleased to see the Penlogans in their places.

At the close of the service a little crowd gathered round them, and manifested their sympathy in a dozen unspoken ways. Of course, everybody knew what had happened, and everybody wondered what the squire would do in such a case. The law was on his side, no doubt, but there ought to be some place for equity also. David Penlogan had scarcely begun yet to reap any of the fruit of his labour, and it would be a most unfair thing, law or no law, that the ground landlord should come in and take everything.

"Oh, he can't do it," said an old farmer, when discussing the matter with his neighbour. "He may be a hard man, but he'd never be able to hold up his head again if he was to do sich a thing."

"It's my opinion he'll stand on the law of the thing," was the reply. "A bargain's a bargain, as you know very well, an' what's the use of a bargain ef you don't stick to 'un?"

"Ay, but law's one thing and right's another, and a man's bound to have some regard for fair play."

"He ought to have, no doubt; but the squire's 'ard up, as everybody knows, and is puttin' on the screw on every tenant he's got. My opinion is he'll stand on the law."

No one said anything to David, however, about what had happened, except in the most indirect way. Sunday evening was not the time to discuss secular matters. Nevertheless, David felt the unspoken sympathy of his neighbours, and returned home comforted.

The next week passed as the previous one had done, and the week after that. The squire had not come across, nor sent his steward. David began to fear that the long silence was ominous. Mrs. Penlogan held to the belief that Sir John meant to deal generously by them. Ralph kept his thoughts to himself, but on the whole he was not hopeful.

The weather continued beautifully fine, and all hands were kept busy in the fields. Except on Sundays they scarcely ever caught a glimpse of their neighbours. No one had any time to pay visits or receive them. The harvest must be got in, if possible, before the weather broke, and to that end everyone who could help – little and big, young and old – was pressed into the service.

On the big farms there was a good deal of fun and hilarity. The village folk – lads and lasses alike – who knew anything about harvest work, and were willing to earn an extra sixpence, were made heartily welcome. Consequently there was not a little horse-play, and no small amount of flirtation, especially after night came on, and the harvest moon began to climb up into the heavens.

Then, when the field was safely sheafed and shocked, they repaired to the farm kitchen, where supper was laid, and where ancient jokes were trotted out amid roars of laughter, and where the hero of the evening was the man who had a new story to tell. Supper ended, they made their way home through the quiet lanes or across the fields. That, to some of the young people, seemed the best part of the day. They forgot the weariness engendered by a dozen hours in the open air while they listened to a story old as the human race, and yet as new to-day as when syllabled by the first happy lover.

But on the small farms, where no outside help was employed, there was very little mirth or hilarity. All the romance of harvest was found where the crowd was gathered. Young people sometimes gave their services of an evening, so that they could take part in the fun.

As David Penlogan and his family toiled in the fields in the light of the harvest moon they sometimes heard sounds of merry-making and laughter floating across the valley from distant farmsteads, and they wondered a little bit sadly where the next harvest-time would find them.

On the third Saturday night they stood still to listen to a familiar sound in that part of the country.

"Listen, Ralph," Ruth said, "they're cutting neck at Treligga."

Cutting neck means cutting the last shock of the year's corn, and is celebrated by a big shout in the field, and a special supper in the farmer's kitchen.

Ralph raised himself from his stooping posture, and his father did the same. Ruth took her mother's hand in hers, and all four stood and listened. Clear and distinct across the moonlit fields the words rang —

"What have 'ee? What have 'ee?"

"A neck! A neck!"

"Hoorah! Hoorah! Hoorah!"

Slowly the echoes died over the hills, and then silence reigned again.

Ralph and David had also cut neck, but they raised no shout over it. They were in no mood for jubilation.

Sir John Hamblyn had not spoken yet, nor had his steward been across to see them. Why those many days of grace, neither David nor Ralph could surmise.

It was reported that the squire's daughter was slowly recovering from her accident, but that many months would elapse before she was quite well and able to ride again.

"We shall not have to wait much longer, depend upon it," David said, on Monday morning, as he and Ralph went out in the fields together; and so it proved. About ten o'clock a horseman was seen riding up the lane toward the house. David was the first to catch sight of him.

"It's the squire himself," he said.

CHAPTER VII
DAVID SPEAKS HIS MIND

Sir John alighted from his horse and threw the reins over the garden gate, then he walked across the stockyard, and looked at the barn and the cowsheds, taking particular notice of the state of repair they were in. After awhile he returned to the dwelling-house and walked round it deliberately, looking carefully all the time at the roof and windows, but he did not attempt to go inside.

David and Ralph watched him from the field, but neither attempted to go near him.

"He'll come to us when he has anything to say," David said, with a little catch in his voice.

Ralph noticed that his father trembled a good deal, and that he was pale even to the lips.

The squire came hurrying across the fields at length, slapping his leg as he walked with his riding-crop. His face was hard and set, like a man who had braced himself to do an unpleasant task, and was determined to carry it through. Ralph watched his face narrowly as he drew near, but he got no hope or inspiration from it. The squire did not notice him, but addressed himself at once to David.

"Good-morning, Penlogan!" he said. "I see you have got down all your corn."

"Yes, sir, we cut neck on Saturday night."

"And not a bad crop either, by the look of it."

"No, sir, it's pretty middling. The farm is just beginning to show some fruit for all the labour and money that have been spent on it."

"Exactly so. Labour and manure always tell in the end. You know, of course, that the lease has fallen in?"

"I do, sir. It's hard on the parson at St. Goram, and it's harder lines on me."

"Yes, it's rough on you both, I admit. But we can't be against these things. When the Almighty does a thing, no man can say nay."

"I'm not so sure that the Almighty does a lot of those things that people say He does."

"You're not?"

"No, sir. I don't see that the parson's son had any call to go out to Egypt to shoot Arabs, particularly when he knew that my farm hung on his life."

"He went at the call of duty," said the squire unctuously; "went to defend his Queen and country."

"Don't believe it," said David doggedly. "Neither the Queen nor the country was in any danger. He went because he had a roving disposition and no stomach for useful ways."

"Well, anyhow, he's dead," said the squire, "and naturally we are all sorry – sorry for his father particularly."

"I suppose you are not sorry for me?" David questioned.

"Well, yes; in some respects I am. The luck has gone against you, there's no denying, and one does not like to see a fellow down on his luck."

"Then in that case I presume you do not intend to take advantage of my bad luck?"

The squire raised his eyebrows, and his lip curled slightly.

"I don't quite understand what you mean," he said.

"Well, it's this way," David said mildly. "According to law this little farm is now yours."

"Exactly."

"But according to right it is not yours – it is mine."

"Oh, indeed?"

"You need not say, 'Oh, indeed.' You can see it as clearly as I do. I've made the farm. I reclaimed it from the waste. I've fenced it and manured it, and built houses upon it. And what twelve years ago

was a furzy down is now a smiling homestead, and you have not spent a penny piece on it, and yet you say it is yours."

"Of course it is mine."

"Well, I say it isn't yours. It's mine by every claim of equity and justice."

"I'm not talking about the claims of equity and justice," the squire said, colouring violently. "I take my stand on the law of the country; that's good enough for me. And what's good enough for me ought to be good enough for you," he added, with a snort.

"That don't by any means follow," David answered quietly. "The laws of the land were made by the rich in the interests of the rich. That they're good for you there is no denying; but for me they're cruel and oppressive."

"I don't see it," the squire said, with an impatient shrug of his shoulders. "You live in a free country, and have all the advantages of our great institutions."

"I suppose you call the leasehold system one of our great institutions?" David questioned.

"Well, and what then?"

"I don't see much advantage in living under it," was the reply.

"You might have something a great deal worse," the squire said angrily. "The high-and-mighty airs some of you people take on are simply outrageous."

"We don't ask for any favours," David said meekly. "But we've a right to live as well as other people."

"Nobody denies your right, that I know of."

"But what am I to do now that my little farm is gone? All the savings of a lifetime, and all the toil of the last dozen years, fall into your pocket."

"I grant that the luck has been against you in this matter. But we have no right to complain of the ways of Providence. The luck might just as easily have gone against me as against you."

"I don't believe in mixing luck and Providence up in that way," David answered, with averted eyes. "But, as far as I can see, what you call luck couldn't possibly have gone against you."

"Why not?"

"Because you laid down the conditions, and however the thing turned out you would stand to win."

"I don't see it."

"You don't?" And David gave a loud sniff. "Why, if all the 'lives' had lived till they were eighty, I and mine would not have got our own back."

"Stuff and nonsense!" the squire said angrily. "Besides, you agreed to the conditions."

"I know it," David answered sadly. "You would grant me no better, and I was hopeful and ignorant, and looked at things through rose-coloured glasses."

"I'm sure the farm has turned out very well," the squire replied, with a hurried glance round him.

"It's just beginning to yield some little return," David said, looking off to the distant fields. "For years it's done little more than pay the ground rent. But this year it seems to have turned the corner. It ought to be a good little farm in the future." And David sighed.

"Yes, it ought to be a good farm, and what is more, it is a good farm," the squire said fiercely. "Upon my soul, I believe I've let it too cheap!"

"You've done what, sir?" David questioned, lifting his head suddenly.

"I said I believed I had let it too cheap. It's worth more than I am going to get for it."

"Do you mean to say you have let it?" David said, in a tone of incredulity.

"Of course I have let it. I could have let it five times over, for there's no denying it's an exceedingly pretty and compact little farm."

At this point Ralph came forward with white face and trembling lips.

"Did I hear you tell father that you had let this farm?" he questioned, bringing the words out slowly and with an effort.

"My business is with your father only," the squire said stiffly, and with a curl of the lip.

"What concerns my father concerns me," Ralph answered quietly, "for my labour has gone into the farm as well as his."

"That's nothing to the point," the squire answered stiffly. And he turned again to David, who stood with blanched face and downcast eyes.

"I want to make it as easy and pleasant for you as possible," the squire went on. "So I have arranged that you can stay here till Michaelmas without paying any rent at all."

David looked up with an expression of wonder in his eyes, but he did not reply.

"Between now and Michaelmas you will be able to look round you," the squire continued, "and, in case you don't intend to take a farm anywhere else, you will be able to get your corn threshed and such things as you don't want to take with you turned into money. William Jenkins, I understand, is willing to take the root crops at a valuation, also the straw, which, by the terms of your lease, cannot be taken off the farm."

"So William Jenkins is to come here, is he?" David questioned suddenly.

"I have let the farm to him," the squire replied pompously, "and, as I have before intimated, he will take possession at Michaelmas."

"It is an accursed and a cruel shame!" Ralph blurted out vehemently.

The squire started and looked at him.

"And why could you not have let the farm to me?" David questioned mildly, "or, at any rate, given me the refusal of it? You said just now that you were sorry for me. Is this the way you show your sorrow? Is this doing to others as you would be done by?"

"I have surely the right to let my own farm to whomsoever I please," the squire said, in a tone of offended dignity.

"This farm was not yours to start with," Ralph said, flinging himself in front of the squire. "Before you enclosed it, it was common land, and belonged to the people. You had no more right to it than the man in the moon. But because you were strong, and the poor people had no power to oppose you, you stole it from them."

"What is that, young man?" Sir John said, stepping back and striking a defiant attitude.

"I said you stole Polskiddy Downs from the people. It had been common land from time immemorial, and you know it." And Ralph stared him straight in the eyes without flinching. "You took away the rights of the people, shut them out from their own, let the land that did not belong to you, and pocketed the profits."

"Young man, I'll make you suffer for this insult," Sir John stammered, white with passion.

"And God will make you suffer for this insult and wrong to us," Ralph replied, with flashing eyes. "Do you think that robbing the poor, and cheating honest people out of their rights, will go unpunished?"

Sir John raised his riding-crop suddenly, and struck at Ralph with all his might. Ralph caught the crop in his hand, and wrenched it from his grasp, then deliberately broke it across his knee and flung the pieces from him.

For several moments the squire seemed too astonished either to speak or move. In all his life before he had never been so insulted. He glowered at Ralph, and looked him up and down, but he did not go near him. He was no match for this young giant in physical strength.

David seemed almost as much astonished as the squire. He looked at his son, but he did not open his lips.

The squire recovered his voice after a few moments.

"If I had been disposed to deal generously with you – " he began.

"You never were so disposed," Ralph interposed bitingly. "You did your worst before you came. We understand now why you kept away so long. I wonder you are not ashamed to show your face here now."

"Cannot you put a muzzle on this wild beast?" the squire said, turning to David.

"He has not spoken to you very respectfully," David replied slowly, "but there's no denying the truth of much that he has said."

"Indeed! Then let me tell you I am glad you will have to clear out of the parish."

"You would have been glad if I could have been cleared out of the parish before the last election," David said insinuatingly.

"I have never interfered with your politics since you came."

"You had no right to; but you've intimidated a great many others, as everybody in the division knows."

Sir John grew violently red again, and turned on his heel. He had meant to be conciliatory when he came, and to prove to David, if possible, that he had dealt by him very considerately, and even generously. But the tables had been turned on him unexpectedly, and he had been insulted to his face.

"This is the result of the Board schools," he reflected to himself angrily. "I always said that education would be the ruin of the working classes. They learn enough to make them impertinent and discontented, and then they are flung adrift to insult their betters and undermine our most sacred institutions. That young fellow will be a curse to society if he's allowed to go on. If I could have my way, I'd lock him up for a year. He's evidently infected his father with his notions, and he'll go on infecting other people." And he faced round again, with an angry look in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I took the trouble to come and speak to you at all," he said. "I did it in good part, and with the best intentions. I wanted to show you that my action is strictly within the law, and that in letting you remain till Michaelmas I was doing a generous thing. But clearly my good feeling and good intentions are thrown away."

"Good feelings are best shown in kind deeds," David said quietly. "If you had come to me and said, 'David, you are unfortunate, but as your loss is my gain, I won't insist on the pound of flesh the law allows me, but I'll let you have the farm for another eight or ten years on the ground rent alone, so that you can recoup yourself a little for all your expenditure' – if you had said that, sir, I should have believed in your good feelings. But since you have let the little place over my head, and turned me out of the house I built and paid for out of my own earnings, I think, sir, the less said about your good feelings the better."

"As you will," the squire replied stiffly, and in a hurt tone. "As you refuse to meet me in a friendly spirit, you must not be surprised if I insist upon my own to the full. My agent will see you about putting the place in proper repair. I notice that one of the sheds is slated only about half-way up, the remainder being covered with corrugated iron. You will see to it that the entire roof is properly slated. The stable door is also worn out, and will have to be replaced by a new one. I noticed, also, as I rode along, that several of the gates are sadly out of repair. These, by the terms of the lease, you will be required to make good. If I mistake not, also the windows and doors of the dwelling-house are in need of a coat of paint. I did not go inside, but my agent will go over the place and make an inventory of the things requiring to be done."

"He may make out twenty inventories if he likes," David said angrily, "but I shan't do a stitch more to the place than I've done already."

"Oh, well, that is not a point we need discuss," the squire said, with a cynical smile. "The man who attempts to defy the law soon discovers which is the stronger." And with a wave of the hand, he turned on his heel and strode away.

David stood still and stared after him, and after a few moments Ralph stole up to his side.

"Well, Ralph, my boy," David said at length, with a little shake in his voice, "he's done his worst."

"It's only what I expected," Ralph answered. "Now, we've got to do our best."

David shook his head.

"There's no more best in this world for me," he said.

"Don't say that, father. Wherever we go we shan't work harder than we've done on the farm."

"Ah, but here I've worked for myself. I've been my own master, with no one to hector me. And I've loved the place and I've loved the work. And I've put so much of my life into it that it seems like part of myself. Boy, it will break my heart!" And the tears welled suddenly up into his eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

Ralph did not reply. He felt that he had no word of comfort to offer. None of them as yet felt the full weight of the blow. They would only realise how much they had lost when they had to wander forth to a strange place, and see strangers occupying the home they loved.

CHAPTER VIII
CONFLICTING EMOTIONS

Two days later Sir John's agent came across to Hillside Farm, and made a careful inspection of the premises, after which he made out a list of repairs that needed doing, and handed it to David.

"What is this?" David asked, taking the paper without looking at it.

"It is a list of repairs that you will have to execute before leaving the place."

"Oh, indeed!" And David deliberately tore the paper in half, then threw the pieces on the ground and stamped upon them.

"That's foolish," the agent said, "for you'll have to do the repairs whether you like it or no."

"I never will," David answered vehemently. And he turned on his heel and walked away.

In the end, the agent got the repairs done himself, and distrained upon David's goods for the amount.

By Michaelmas Day David was ready to take his departure. Since his interview with the squire he had never been seen to smile. He made no complaint to anyone, neither did he sit in idleness and mope. There was a good deal to be done before the final scene, and he did his full share of it. The corn was threshed and sold. The cattle were disposed of at Summercourt Fair. The root crops and hay were taken at a valuation by the incoming tenant. The farm implements were disposed of at a public auction, and when all the accounts had been squared, and the mortgage cleared off, and the ground rent paid, David found himself in possession of his household furniture and thirty pounds in hard cash.

David's neighbours sympathised with him greatly, but none of them gave any more for what they bought than they could help. They admitted that things went dirt cheap, that the cattle and implements were sold for a great deal less than their real value; but that was inevitable in a forced sale. When the seller was compelled to sell, and there was no reserve, and the buyers were not compelled to buy, and there was very little competition, the seller was bound to get the worst of it.

David looked sadly at the little heap of sovereigns – all that was left out of the savings of a lifetime. He had spent a thousand pounds on the farm, and, in addition, had put in twelve years of the hardest work of his life, and this was all that was left. What he thought no one knew, not even his wife, for he kept his thoughts and his feelings to himself.

The day before their departure, David took Ralph for a walk to the extreme end of the farm.

"I have something to tell you, my boy, and something to show you."

Ralph wondered what there was to see that he had not already seen, but he asked no questions.

"You may remember, Ralph," David said, when they had got some distance from the house, "that I told you once that I had discovered a tin lode running across the farm?"

"Yes, I remember well," Ralph answered, looking up with an interested light in his eyes.

"I want to show it to you, my boy."

"Why, what's the use?" Ralph questioned, after a momentary pause. "If it were a reef of gold it would be of no value to us."

"Yes, that seems true enough now," David answered sadly, "but there's no knowing what may happen in the future."

"I don't see how we can ever benefit by it, whatever may happen."

"I am not thinking of myself, Ralph. My day's work is nearly over. But new conditions may arise, new discoveries may be made, and if you know, you may be able to sell your knowledge for something."

Ralph shook his head dubiously, and for several minutes they tramped along side by side in silence.

Then David spoke again.

"It is farewell to-day, my boy. We shall toil in these fields no more."

"That fact by itself does not trouble me," Ralph said.

"You do not like farming," his father answered. "You never did; and sometimes I have felt sorry to keep you here, and yet I could not spare you. You have done the work of two, and you have done it for your bare keep."

"I have done it for the squire," Ralph answered, with a cynical laugh.

"Ah, well, it is over now, my boy, and we know the worst. In a few years nothing will matter, for we shall all be asleep."

Ralph glanced suddenly at his father, but quickly withdrew his eyes. There was a look upon his face that hurt him – a look as of some hunted creature that was appealing piteously for life.

For weeks past Ralph had wished that his father would get angry. If he would only storm and rave at fortune generally, and at the squire in particular, he believed that it would do him good. Such calm and quiet resignation did not seem natural or healthy. Ralph sometimes wondered if what his father predicted had come true – that the loss had broken his heart.

They reached the outer edge of the farm at length, and David paused in the shadow of a tree.

"Come here, my boy," he said. And Ralph went and stood by his side. "You see the parlour chimney?" David questioned.

"Yes."

"Well, now draw a straight line from this tree to the parlour chimney, and what do you strike?"

"Well, nothing except a gatepost over there in Stone Close."

"That's just it. It was while I was digging a pit to sink that post in that I struck the back of the lode."

"And you say it's rich in tin?"

"Very. It intersects the big Helvin lode at that point, and the junction makes for wealth. There'll be a fortune made out of this little farm some day – not out of what grows on the surface, but out of what is dug up from underground."

"And in which direction does the lode run?"

"Due east and west. We are standing on it now, and it passes under the house."

"Then it passes under Peter Ladock's farm also?" Ralph questioned. And he turned and looked over the boundary hedge across their neighbour's farm.

"Ay; but the lode's no use out there," David said.

"Why?"

"Well, you see, 'tisn't mineral-bearing strata, that's all. I dug a pit just where you are standing, and came upon the lode two feet below the surface. But there's no tin in it here scarcely. It's the same lode that the spring comes out of down in the delf, and I've sampled it there. But all along that high ridge where it cuts through the Helvin it's richer than anything I know in this part of the county."

"But the tin might give out as you sink."

"It might, but it would be something unheard of, if it did. If I know anything about mining – and I think I know a bit – that lode will be twenty per cent. richer a hundred fathoms down than it is at the surface."

"Oh, well!" Ralph said, with a sigh, "rich or poor, it can make no difference to us."

"Perhaps not – perhaps not," David said wistfully. "But it may be valuable to somebody some day. I have passed the secret to you. Some day you may pass it on to another. The future is with God," and he drew a long breath, and turned his face toward home, which in a few hours would be his home no more.

Ralph turned his face in another direction.

"I think I will go on to St. Goram," he said, "and see how they are getting on with the cottage. You see we have to move into it to-morrow."

"As you will," David answered, and he strode away across the stubble.

Ralph struck across the fields into Dingley Bottom, and then up the gentle slant toward Treliskey Plantation. When he reached the stile he rested for several minutes, and recalled the meeting and conversation between Dorothy Hamblyn and himself. How long ago it seemed, and how much had happened since then.

Though he loathed the very name of Hamblyn, he was, nevertheless, thankful that the squire's daughter was getting slowly better. She had been seen once or twice in St. Goram in a bath-chair, drawn by a donkey. "Looking very pale and so much older," the villagers said.

By all the rules of logic and common sense, Ralph felt that he ought not only to hate the squire, but everybody belonging to him. Sir John was the tyrant of the parish, the oppressor of the poor, the obstructor of everything that was for the good of the people, and no doubt his daughter had inherited his temper and disposition; while as for the son, people said that he gave promise of being worse than his father.

But for some reason Ralph was never able to work up any angry feeling against Dorothy. He hardly knew why. She had given evidence of being as imperious and dictatorial as any autocrat could desire. She had spoken to him as if he were her stable boy.

And yet —

He recalled how he had rested her fair head upon his lap, how he had carried her in his arms and felt her heart beating feebly against his, how he had given her to drink down in the hollow, and when he lifted her up again she clasped her arms feebly about his neck, and he felt her cheek almost close to his.

It is true he did not know then that she was the squire's daughter, and so he let his sympathies go out to her unawares. But the curious thing was he had not been able to recall his sympathy, though he had discovered directly after that she was the daughter of the man he hated above all others.

As he made his way across the broad and billowy common towards the high road, he found himself wondering what Lord Probus was like. By all the laws and considerations of self-interest, he ought to have been wondering how he and his father were to earn their living – for, as yet, that was a problem that neither of them had solved. But for a moment it was a relief to forget the sorrowful side of life, and think of something else. And, as he had carried Dorothy Hamblyn in his arms every step of the way down the high road, it was the most natural thing in the world that his thoughts should turn in her direction, and from her to the man she had promised to marry.

For some reason or other he felt a little thrill of satisfaction that the wedding had not taken place, and that there was no prospect of its taking place for several months to come.

Not that it could possibly make any difference to him; only he did not see why the rich and strong should always have their heart's desire, while others, who had as much right to live as they had, were cheated all along the line.

Who Lord Probus was Ralph had not the slightest idea. He was a comparatively new importation. He had bought Rostrevor Castle from the Penwarricks, who had fallen upon evil times, and had restored it at great expense. But beyond that Ralph knew nothing.

That he was a young man Ralph took for granted. An elderly bachelor would not want to marry, and a young girl like Dorothy Hamblyn would never dream of marrying an elderly man.

To Ralph Penlogan it seemed almost a sin that a mere child, as Dorothy seemed to be, should think of marriage at all. But since she was going to get married, it was perfectly natural to assume that she was going to marry a young man.

He reached the high road at length, and then hurried forward with long strides in the direction of St. Goram.

The cottage they had taken was at the extreme end of the village, and, curiously enough, was in the neighbouring parish of St. Ivel.

CHAPTER IX
PREPARING TO GO

Almost close to St. Goram were the lodge gates of Hamblyn Manor. The manor itself was at the end of a long and winding avenue, and behind a wide belt of trees. As Ralph reached the lodge gates he walked a little more slowly, then paused for a moment and looked at the lodge with its quaint gables, its thatched roof and overhanging eaves. Beyond the gates the broad avenue looked very majestic and magnificently rich in colour. The yellow leaves were only just beginning to fall, while the evergreens looked all the greener by contrast with the reds and browns.

He turned away at length, and came suddenly face to face with "the squire's little maid." She was seated in her rubber-tyred bath-chair, which was drawn by a white donkey. By the side of the donkey walked a boy in buttons. Ralph almost gasped. So great a change in so short a time he had never witnessed before. Only eight or nine weeks had passed since the accident, and yet they seemed to have added years to her life. She was only a girl when he carried her from Treliskey Plantation down to the high road. Now she was a woman with deep, pathetic eyes, and cheeks hollowed with pain.

Ralph felt the colour mount to his face in a moment, and his heart stabbed him with a sudden poignancy of regret. He wished again, as he had wished many times during the last two months, that he had pocketed his pride and opened the gate. It might be quite true that she had no right to speak to him as she did, quite true also that it was the most natural and human thing in the world to resent being spoken to as though he were a serf. Nevertheless, the heroic thing – the divine thing – would have been to return good for evil, and meet arrogance with generosity.

He would have passed on without presuming to recognise her, but she would not let him.

"Stop, James," she called to the boy; and then she smiled on Ralph ever so sweetly, and held out her hand.

For a moment a hot wave of humiliation swept over him from head to foot. He seemed to realise for the first time in his life what was meant by heaping coals of fire on one's head. He had the whole contents of a burning fiery furnace thrown over him. He was being scorched through every fibre of his being.

At first he almost resented the humiliation. Then another feeling took possession of him, a feeling of admiration, almost of reverence. Here was nobleness such as he himself had failed to reach. Here was one high in the social scale, and higher still in grace and goodness, condescending to him, who had indirectly been the cause of all her suffering. Then in a moment his mood changed again to resentment. This was the daughter of the man who had broken his father's heart. But a moment ago he had looked into his father's hopeless, suffering eyes, and felt as though it would be the sweetest drop of his life if he could make John Hamblyn and all his tribe suffer as he had made them suffer.

But even as he reached out his hard brown hand to take the pale and wasted one that was extended to him, the pendulum swung back once more; the better and nobler feeling came back. The large sad eyes that looked up into his had in them no flash of pride or arrogance. The smile that played over her wan, pale face seemed as richly benevolent as the sunshine of God. Possibly she knew nothing of the calamity that had overtaken him and his, a calamity that her father might have so wonderfully lightened, and at scarcely any cost to himself, had he been so disposed. But it was not his place to blame the child for what her father had done or left undone.

The soft, thin fingers were enveloped in his big strong palm, and then his eyes filled. A lump came up into his throat and prevented him from speaking. Never in all his life before had he seemed so little master of himself.

Then a low, sweet voice broke the silence, and all his self-possession came back to him.

"I am so glad I have met you."

"Yes?" he questioned.

"I wanted to thank you for saving my life."

He dropped his eyes slowly, and a hot wave swept over him from head to foot.

"Dr. Barrow says if you had not found me when you did I should have died." And she looked at him as if expecting an answer. But he did not reply or even raise his head.

"And you carried me such a long distance, too," she went on, after a pause; "and I heard Dr. Barrow tell the nurse that you bound up my head splendidly."

"You were not much to carry," he said, raising his head suddenly. "But – but you are less now." And his voice sank almost to a whisper.

"I have grown very thin," she said, with a wan smile. "But the doctor says I shall get all right again with time and patience."

"I hoped you would have got well much sooner," he said, looking timidly into her face. "I have suffered a good deal during your illness."

"You?" she questioned, raising her eyebrows. "Why?"

"Because if I had not been surly and boorish, the accident would not have happened. If you had died, I should never have forgiven myself."

"No, no; it was not your fault at all," she said quickly. "I have thought a good deal about it while I have been ill, and I have learnt some things that I might never have learnt any other way, and I see now that – that – " And she dropped her eyes to hide the moisture that had suddenly gathered. "I see now that it was very wrong of me to speak to you as I did."

"You were reared to command," he said, ready in a moment to champion her cause, "and I ought to have considered that. Besides, it isn't a man's place to be rude to a girl – I beg your pardon, miss, I mean to a – "

"No, no," she interrupted, with a laugh; "don't alter the word, please. If I feel almost an old woman now, I was only a girl then. How much we may live in a few weeks! Don't you think so?"

"You have found that out, have you?" he questioned. And a troubled look came into his eyes.

"You see, lying in bed, day after day and week after week, gives one time to think – "

"Yes?" he questioned, after a brief pause.

She did not reply for several seconds; then she went on as if there had been no break. "I don't think I ever thought seriously about anything before I was ill. I took everything as it came, and as most things were good, I just enjoyed myself, and there seemed nothing else in the world but just to enjoy one's self – "

"There's not much enjoyment for most people," he said, seeing she hesitated.

"I don't think enjoyment ought to be the end of life," she replied seriously. Then, suddenly raising her eyes, she said —

"Do you ever get perplexed about the future?"

"I never get anything else," he stammered. "I'm all at sea this very moment."

"You? Tell me about it," she said eagerly.

He shrugged his shoulders, and looked along the road toward the village. Should he tell her? Should he open her eyes to the doings of her own father? Should he point out some of the oppressive conditions under which the poor lived?

For a moment or two there was silence. He felt that her eyes were fixed intently on his face, that she was waiting for him to speak.

"I suppose your father has never told you that we have lost our little farm?" he questioned abruptly, turning his head and looking hard at her at the same time.

"No. How have you lost it? I do not understand."

"Well, it was this way." And he went on to explain the nature of the tenure on which his father leased his farm, but he was careful to avoid any mention of her father's name.

"And you say that in twelve years all the three 'lives' have died?"

"That is unfortunately the case."

"And you have no longer any right to the house you built, nor to the fields you reclaimed from the downs?"

"That is so."

"And the lord of the manor has taken possession?"

"He has let it to another man, who takes possession the day after to-morrow."

"And the lord of the manor puts the rent into his own pocket?"

"Yes."

"And your father has to go out into the world and start afresh?"

"We leave Hillside to-morrow. I'm going to St. Goram now, to see if the little cottage is ready. After to-morrow father starts life afresh, in his old age, having lost everything."

"But wasn't your father very foolish to risk his all on such a chance? Life is always such an uncertain thing."

"I think he was very foolish; and he thinks so now. But at the time he was very hopeful. He thought the cost of bringing the land under cultivation would be much less than it has proved to be. He hoped, too, that the crops would be much heavier. Then, you see, he was born in the parish, and he wanted to end his days in it – in a little home of his own."

"It seems very hard," she said, with a distant look in her eyes.

"It's terribly hard," he answered; "and made all the harder by the landlord letting the farm over father's head."

"He could have let you remain?"

"Of course he could, if he had been disposed to be generous, or even just."

"I've often heard that Lord St. Goram is a very hard man."

He started, and looked at her with a questioning light in his eyes.

"He needn't have claimed all his pound of flesh," she went on. "Law isn't everything. Nobody would have expected that all three 'lives' would have died in a dozen years."

"I believe the law of average works out to about forty-seven years," he said.

"In which case your father ought to have his farm another thirty-five years."

"He ought. In fact, no lease ought to be less than ninety-nine years. However, the chances of life have gone against father, and so we must submit."

"I don't understand any man exacting all his rights in such a case," she said sympathetically. "If only people would do to others as they would be done unto, how much happier the world would be!"

"Ah, if that were the case," he said, with a smile, "soldiers and policemen and lawyers would find all their occupations gone."

"But, all the same, what's religion worth if we don't try to put it into practice? The lord of the manor has, no doubt, the law on his side. He can legally claim his pound of flesh, but there's no justice in it."

"It seems to me the strong do not often know what justice means," he said, with an icy tone in his voice.

"No; don't say that," she replied, looking at him reproachfully. "I think most people are really kind and good, and would like to help people if they only knew how."

"I'm afraid most people think only of themselves," he answered.

"No, no; I'm sure – " Then she paused suddenly, while a look of distress or of annoyance swept over her face. "Why, here comes Lord Probus," she said, in a lower tone of voice, while the hot blood flamed up into her pale cheeks in a moment.

Ralph turned quickly round and looked towards the park gates.

"Is that Lord Probus?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Good – " But he did not finish the sentence. She looked up into his face, and saw that it was dark with anger or disgust. Then she glanced again at the approaching figure of her affianced husband, then back again to the tall, handsome youth who stood by her side, and for a moment she involuntarily contrasted the two men. The lord and the commoner; the rich brewer and the poor, ejected tenant.

"Please pardon me for detaining you so long," he said hurriedly.

"You have not detained me at all," she replied. "It has been a pleasure to talk to you, for the days are very long and very dull."

"I hope you will soon be as well as ever," he answered; and he turned quickly on his heel and strode away.

"And I hope your father will soon – " But the end of the sentence did not reach his ears. For the moment he was not concerned about himself. The tragedy of his own life seemed of small account. It was the tragedy of her life that troubled him. It seemed a wicked thing that this fragile girl – not yet out of her teens – should marry a man old enough almost to be her grandfather.

What lay behind it, he wondered? What influences had been brought to bear upon her to win her consent? Was she going of her own free will into this alliance, or had she been tricked or coerced?

He recalled again the picture of her when she sat on her horse in the glow of the summer sunshine. She was only a girl then – a heedless, thoughtless, happy girl, who did not know what life meant, and who in all probability had never given five minutes' serious thought to its duties and responsibilities. But eight or nine weeks of suffering had wrought a great change in her. She was a woman now, facing life seriously and thoughtfully. Did she regret, he wondered, the promise she had made? Was she still willing to be the wife of this old man?

Ralph felt the blood tingling to his finger-tips. It was no business of his. What did it matter to him what Sir John Hamblyn or any of his tribe did, or neglected to do? If Dorothy Hamblyn chose to marry a Chinaman or a Hindoo, that was no concern of his. He had no interest in her, and never would have.

He pulled himself up again at that point. He had no interest in her, it was true, and yet he was interested – more interested than in any other girl he had ever seen. So interested, in fact, that nothing could happen to her without it affecting him.

He reached the cottage at length at the far end of the village. It was but a tiny crib, but it was the best they could get at so short a notice, and they would not have got that if Sir John Hamblyn could have had his way.

Ralph could hardly repress a groan when he stepped over the threshold. It was so painfully small after their roomy house at Hillside. The whitewashers and paperhangers had just finished, and were gathering up their tools, and a couple of charwomen were scouring the floors.

A few minutes later there was a patter on the uncarpeted stairs, and Ruth appeared, with red eyes and dishevelled hair.

"There seems nothing that I can do," he said, without appearing to notice that she had been crying.

"Not to-day," she answered, looking past him; "but there will be plenty for you to do to-morrow."

Half an hour later they walked away together toward Hillside Farm, but neither was in the mood for conversation. Ralph looked up the drive towards Hamblyn Manor as they passed the park gates, but no one was about, and the name of Hamblyn was not mentioned.

During the rest of the day all the Penlogans were kept busy getting things ready for the carts on the morrow. To any bystander it would have been a pathetic sight to see how each one tried to keep his or her trouble from the rest, and even to wear a cheerful countenance.

Neither talked of the past, nor uttered any word of regret, but they planned where this piece of furniture should be placed in the new house, and where that, and speculated as to how the wardrobe should be got up the narrow stairs, and in which room the big chest of drawers should be placed.

David seemed the least interested of the family. He sat for the most part like one dazed, and watched the others in a vague, unseeing way. Ruth and her mother bustled about the house, pretending to do a dozen things, and talked all the while about the fittings and curtains and pictures.

When evening came on, and there was no longer any room for pretence, they sat together in the parlour before a fire of logs, for the air was chilly, and the wind had risen considerably. No one attempted to break the silence, but each one knew what the others were thinking about. The wind rumbled in the chimney and whispered through the chinks of the window, but no one heeded it.

This was to be their last evening together in the old home, which they had learned to love so much, and the pathos of the situation was too deep for words. They were silent, and apparently calm, not because they were resigned, but because they were helpless. They had schooled themselves not to resignation, but to endurance. They could be silent, but they could never approve. The loathing they felt for John Hamblyn grew hour by hour. They could have seen him gibbeted with a sense of infinite satisfaction.

The day faded quickly in the west, and the firelight alone illumined the room. Ralph, from his corner by the chimney-breast, could see the faces of all the others. Ruth looked sweeter and almost prettier than he had ever seen her. The chastening hand of sorrow had softened the look in her dark-brown eyes and touched with melancholy the curves of her rich, full lips. His mother had aged rapidly. She looked ten years older than she did ten weeks ago. Trouble had ploughed its furrows deep, and all the light of hope had gone out of her eyes. But his father was the most pathetic figure of all. Ralph looked across at him every now and then, and wondered if he would ever rouse himself again. He looked so worn, so feeble, so despairing, it would have been a relief to see him get angry.

Ruth had got up at length and lighted the lamp and drew the blind; then, without a word, sat down again. The wind continued to rumble in the chimney and sough in the trees outside; but, save for that, no sound broke the silence. There were no sheep in the pens, no cows in the shippen, no horses in the stable, and no neighbour came in to say good-bye.

The evening wore away until it grew late. Then David rose and got the family Bible and laid it on the table, so that the light of the lamp fell upon its pages.

Drawing up his chair, he sat down and began to read —

"'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.'"

His voice did not falter in the least. Quietly, and without emphasis, he read the psalm through to the end; then he knelt on the floor, with his hands on the chair, the others following his example. His prayer was very simple that night. He made no direct allusion to the great trouble that was eating at all their hearts. He gave thanks for the mercies of the day, and asked for strength to meet the future.

"Now, my dears," he said, as he rose from his knees, "we had better get off to bed." And he smiled with great sweetness, and Ruth recalled afterwards how he kissed her several times.

But if he had any premonition of what was coming, he did not betray it by a single word.

CHAPTER X
RALPH SPEAKS HIS MIND

It was toward the dawn when Ralph was roused out of a deep sleep by a violent knocking at his bedroom door.

"Yes," he called, springing up in bed and staring into the semi-darkness.

"Come quickly; your father is very ill!" It was his mother who spoke, and her voice was vibrant and anxious.

He sprang out of bed at once, and hurriedly got into his clothes. In a few moments he was by his father's bedside.

At first he thought that his mother had alarmed herself and him unnecessarily. David lay on his side as if asleep.

"I cannot rouse him," she said in gasps. "I've tried every way, but he doesn't move."

Ralph laid his hand on his father's shoulder and shook him, but there was no response of any kind.

"He must be dead," his mother said.

"No, no. He breathes quite regularly," Ralph answered, and he took the candle and held it where the light fell full on his father's eyelids. For a moment there was a slight tremor, then his eyes slowly opened, and a look of infinite appeal seemed to dart out of them.

"He has had a stroke," Ralph answered, starting back. "He is paralysed. Call Ruth, and I will go for the doctor at once."

Twenty-four hours later David was sufficiently recovered to scrawl on a piece of paper with a black lead pencil the words —

"I shall die at home. Praise the Lord!"

He watched intently the faces of his wife and children as they read the words, and a smile played over his own. It seemed to be a smile of triumph. He was not going to live in the cottage after all. He was going to end his days where he had always hoped to do, and no one could cheat him out of that victory.

Ralph sat down by the bedside and took his father's hand. The affection between the two was very tender. They had been more than father and son, they had been friends and comrades. Ruth and her mother ran out of the room to hide their tears. They did not want to distress the dying man by obtruding their grief.

For several minutes Ralph was unable to speak. David never took his eyes from his face. He seemed waiting for some assurance that his message was understood.

"We understand, father," Ralph said at length. "No one can turn you out now."

David smiled again. Then the tears filled his eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

"You always wanted to end your days here," Ralph went on, "and it looks as if you were going to do it."

David raised the hand that was not paralysed and pointed upward.

"There are no leasehold systems there, at any rate," Ralph said, with a gulp. "The earth is the landlord's, but heaven is God's."

David smiled again, and then closed his eyes. Three hours later a second stroke supervened, and stilled his heart for ever.

Ralph walked slowly out of the room and into the open air. He felt thankful for many reasons that his father was at rest. And yet, in his heart the feeling grew that John Hamblyn had killed him, and there surged up within him an intense and burning passion to make John Hamblyn suffer something

of what he himself was suffering. Why should he go scot free? Why should he live unrebuked, and his conscience be left undisturbed?

For a moment or two Ralph stood in the garden and looked up at the clouds that were scudding swiftly across the sky. Then he flung open the gate and struck out across the fields. The wind battered and buffeted him and almost took his breath away, but it did not weaken his resolve for a moment. He would go and tell John Hamblyn what he had done – tell him to his face that he had killed his father; ay, and tell him that as surely as there was justice in the world he would not go unpunished.

Over the brow of the hill he turned, and down into Dingley Bottom, and then up the long slant toward Treliskey Plantation. He scarcely heeded the wind that was blowing half a gale, and appeared to be increasing in violence every minute.

The gate that Dorothy's horse had broken had been mended long since, and the notice board repainted:

"Trespassers will be Prosecuted."

He gritted his teeth unconsciously as the white letters stared him in the face. He had heard his father tell that from time immemorial here had been a public thoroughfare, till Sir John took the law into his own hands, and flung a gate across it and warned the public off with a threat of prosecution.

But what cared he about the threat? John Hamblyn could prosecute him if he liked. He was going to tell him what he thought of him, and he was going the nearest way.

He vaulted lightly over the gate, and hurried along without a pause. In the shadow of the trees he scarcely felt the violence of the wind, but he heard it roaring in the branches above him, like the sound of an incoming tide.

He reached the manor, and pulled violently at the door bell.

"Is your master at home?" he said to the boy in buttons who opened the door.

"Yes – "

"Then tell him I want to see him at once," he went on hurriedly, and he followed the boy into the hall.

A moment later he was standing before Sir John in his library.

The baronet looked at him with a scowl. He disliked him intensely, and had never forgiven him for being the cause – as he believed – of his daughter's accident. Moreover, he had no proper respect for his betters, and withal possessed a biting tongue.

"Well, young man, what brought you here?" he said scornfully.

"I came on foot," was the reply, and Ralph threw as much scorn into his voice as the squire had done.

"Oh, no doubt – no doubt!" the squire said, bridling. "But I have no time to waste in listening to impertinences. What is your business?"

"I came to tell you that my father is dead."

"Dead!" Sir John gasped. "No, surely? I never heard he was ill!"

"He was taken with a stroke early yesterday morning, and he died an hour ago."

"Only an hour ago? Dear me!"

"I came straight away from his deathbed to let you know that you had killed him."

"That I had killed him!" Sir John exclaimed, with a gasp.

"You might have seen it in his face, when you told him that you had let the farm over his head, and that he was to be turned out of the little home he had built with his own hands."

"I gave him fair notice, more than he could legally claim," Sir John said, looking very white and distressed.

"I am not talking about the law," Ralph said hurriedly. "If you had behaved like a Christian, my father would have been alive to-day. But the blow you struck him killed him. He never smiled again till this morning, when he knew he was dying. I am glad he is gone. But as surely as you punished us, God will punish you."

"What, threatening, young man?" Sir John replied, stepping back and clenching his fists.

"No, I am not threatening," Ralph said quietly. "But as surely as you stand there, and I stand here, some day we shall be quits," and he turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

Outside the wind was roaring like an angry lion and snapping tree branches like matchwood. A little distance from the house he met a gardener, who told him there was no road through the plantation. But Ralph only smiled at him and walked on.

He was feeling considerably calmer since his interview with Sir John. It had been a relief to him to fling off what was on his mind. He was conscious that his heart was less bitter and revengeful. He only thought once of Dorothy, and he quickly dismissed her from his mind. He wished that he could dismiss her so effectually that the thought of her would never come back. It was something of a humiliation that constantly, and in the most unexpected ways, her face came up before him, and her sweet, winning eyes looked pleadingly and sometimes reproachfully into his.

But he was master of himself to-day. At any rate he was so far master of himself that no thought of the squire's "little maid" could soften his heart toward the squire. He hurried back home at the same swinging pace as he came. It was a house of mourning to which he journeyed, but his mother and Ruth would need him. He was the only one now upon whom they could lean, and he would have to play the man, and make the burden for them as light as possible.

He scarcely heeded the wind. His thoughts were too full of other things. In the heart of the plantation the branches were still snapping as the trees bent before the fury of the gale. He rather liked the sound. Nature was in an angry mood, and it accorded well with his own temper. It would have been out of place if the wind had slept on the day his father died.

He was hardly able to realise yet that his father was dead. It seemed too big and too overwhelming a fact to be comprehended all at once. It seemed impossible that that gentle presence had gone from him for ever. He wondered why he did not weep. Surely no son ever loved a father more than he did, and yet no tear had dimmed his eyes as yet, no sob had gathered in his throat.

Over his head the branch of a tree flew past that had been ripped by the gale from its moorings.

"Hallo," he said, with a smile. "This is getting serious," and he turned into the middle of the road and hurried on again.

A moment or two later a sudden blow on the head struck him to the earth. For several seconds he lay perfectly still just where he fell. Then a sharp spasm of pain caused him to sit up and stare about him with a bewildered expression in his eyes. What had happened he did not know. He raised his right hand to his head almost mechanically – for the seat of the pain was there – then drew it slowly away and looked at it. It was dyed red and dripping wet.

He struggled to his feet after a few moments, and tried to walk. It was largely an unconscious effort, for he did not know where he was, or where he wanted to go to; and when he fell again and struck the hard ground with his face, he was scarcely aware that he had fallen.

In a few minutes he was on his feet again, but the world was dark by this time. Something had come up before his eyes and shut out everything. A noise was in his ears, but it was not the roaring of the wind in the trees; he reeled and stumbled heavily with his head against a bank of heather. Then the noise grew still, and the pain vanished, and there was a sound in his ears like the ringing of St. Goram bells, which grew fainter till oblivion wrapped him in its folds.

CHAPTER XI
UNCONSCIOUS SPEECH

Ralph had scarcely left the house when Dorothy sought her father in the library. He was walking up and down with his hands in his pockets, and a troubled expression in his eyes. He was much more distressed than he liked to own even to himself. To be told to his face that he had caused the death of one of his tenants would, under some circumstances, have simply made him angry. But in the present case he felt, much more acutely than was pleasant, that there was only too much reason for the contention.

That David Penlogan had loved his little homestead there was no doubt whatever. He had poured into it not only the savings of a lifetime and the ungrudging labour of a dozen years, but he had poured into it the affection of a generous and confiding nature. There was something almost sentimental in David's affection for his little farm, and to have to leave it was a heavier blow than he was able to bear. That his misfortune had killed him seemed not an unreasonable supposition.

"But I am not responsible for that," Sir John said to himself angrily. "I had no hand in killing off the 'lives.' That was a decree of Providence."

But in spite of his reasoning, he could not shake himself free from an uneasy feeling that he was in some way responsible.

Legally, no doubt, he had acted strictly within his rights. He had exacted no more than in point of law was his due, but might there not be a higher law than the laws of men? That was the question that troubled him, and it troubled him for the first time in his life.

He was a very loyal citizen. He had been taught to regard Acts of Parliament as something almost as sacred as the Ark of the Covenant, and the authority of the State as supreme in all matters of human conduct. Now for the first time a doubt crept into his mind, and it made him feel decidedly uncomfortable. Man-made laws might, after all, have little or no moral force behind them. Selfish men might make laws just to protect their own selfish interests.

Legally, man's law backed him up in the position he had taken. But where did God's law come in? He knew his Bible fairly well. He was a regular church-goer, and followed the lessons Sunday by Sunday with great diligence. And he felt, with a poignant sense of alarm, that Jesus Christ would condemn what he had done. There was no glimmer of the golden rule to be discerned in his conduct. He had not acted generously, nor even neighbourly. He had extorted the uttermost farthing, not because he had any moral claim to it, but because laws which men had made gave him the right.

He was so excited that his mind worked much more rapidly than was usual with him. He recalled again Ralph Penlogan's words about God punishing him and their being quits. He disliked that young man. He ought to have kicked him out of the house before he had time to utter his insults. But he had not done so, and somehow his words had stuck. He wished it was the son who had died instead of the father. David Penlogan, in spite of his opinions and politics, was a mild and harmless individual; he would not hurt his greatest enemy if he had the chance. But he was not so sure of the son. He had a bolder and a fiercer nature, and if he had the chance he might take the law into his own hands.

The door opened while these thoughts were passing through his mind, and his daughter stood before him. He stopped suddenly in his walk, and his hard face softened.

"Oh, father, I've heard such a dreadful piece of news," she said, "that I could not help coming to tell you!"

"Dreadful news, Dorothy?" he questioned, in a tone of alarm.

"Well, it seems dreadful to me," she went on. "You heard about the Penlogans being turned out of house and home, of course?"

"I heard that he had to leave his farm," he said shortly.

"Well, the trouble has killed him – broken his heart, people say. He had a stroke yesterday morning, and now he's dead."

"Well, people must die some day," he said, with averted eyes.

"Yes, that is true. But I think if I were in Lord St. Goram's place I should feel very unhappy."

"Why should Lord St. Goram feel unhappy?"

"Well, because he profited by the poor man's misfortune."

"What do you know about it?" he snapped almost angrily.

"Only what Ralph Penlogan told me."

"What, that young rascal who refused to open the gate for you?"

"That was just as much my fault as his, and he has apologised very handsomely since."

"I am surprised, Dorothy, that you condescend to speak to such people," he said severely.

"I don't know why you should, father. He is well educated, and has been brought up, as you know, quite respectably."

"Educated beyond his station. It's a mistake, and will lead to trouble in the long-run. But what did he say to you?"

"I met him as he was walking into St. Goram, and he told me how they had taken a little cottage, and were going to move into it next day – that was yesterday. Then, of course, all the story came out, how the vicar's son was the last 'life' on their little farm, and how, when he died, the farm became the ground landlord's."

"And what did he say about the ground landlord?" he questioned.

"I don't remember his words very well, but he seemed most bitter, because he had let the farm over their heads, without giving them a chance of being tenants."

"Well?"

"I told him I thought it was a very cruel thing to do. Law is not everything. David Penlogan had put all his savings into the farm, had reclaimed the fields from the wilderness, and built the house with his own money, and the lord of the manor had done nothing, and never spent a penny-piece on it, and yet, because the chances of life had gone against David, he comes in and takes possession – demands, like Shylock, his pound of flesh, and actually turns the poor man out of house and home! I told Ralph Penlogan that it was wicked – at least, if I did not tell him, I felt it – and, I am sure, father, you must feel the same."

Sir John laughed a short, hard laugh.

"What is the use of the law, Dorothy," he said, "unless it is kept? It is no use getting sentimental because somebody is hanged."

"But surely, father, our duty to our neighbour is not to get all we can out of him?"

"I'm inclined to think that is the general practice, at any rate," he said, with a laugh.

She looked at him almost reproachfully for a moment, and then her eyes fell. He was quick to see the look of pain that swept over her face, and hastened to reassure her.

"You shouldn't worry yourself, Dorothy, about these matters," he said, in gentler tones. "You really shouldn't. You see, we can't help the world being what it is. Some are rich and some are poor. Some are weak and some are strong. Some have trouble all the way, and some have a good time of it from first to last, and nobody's to blame, as far as I know. If luck's fallen to our lot, we've all the more to be grateful for, don't you see. But the world's too big for us to mend, and it's no use trying. Now, run away, that's a good girl, and be happy as long as you can."

She drew herself up to her full height, and looked him steadily in the eyes. She had grown taller during her illness, and there was now a look upon her face such as he had never noticed before.

"I do wish, father," she said slowly, "that you would give over treating me as though I were a child, and had no mind of my own."

"Tut, tut!" he said sharply. "What's the matter now?"

"I mean what I say," she answered, in the same slow and measured fashion. "I may have been a child up to the time of my illness, but I have learned a lot since then. I feel like one who has awaked out of a sleep. My illness has given me time to think. I have got into a new world."

"Then, my love, get back into the old world again as quickly as possible. It's not a bit of use your worrying your little head about matters you cannot help, and which are past mending. It's your business to enjoy yourself, and do as you are told, and get all the happiness out of life that you can."

"There's no getting back, father," she answered seriously. "And there's no use in pretending that you don't feel, and that you don't see. I shall never be a little girl again, and perhaps I shall never be happy again as I used to be; or, perhaps, I may be happy in a better and larger way – but that is not the point. You must not treat me as a child any longer, for I am a woman now."

"Oh, nonsense!" he said, in a tone of irritation.

"Why nonsense?" she asked quickly. "If I am old enough to be married, I am old enough to be a woman – "

"Oh, I am not speaking of age," he interjected, in the same irritable tone. "Of course you are old enough to be married, but you are not old enough – and I hope you never will be – to worry yourself over other people's affairs. I want my little flower to be screened from all the rough winds of the world, and I am sure that is the desire of Lord Probus."

"There you go again!" she said, with a sad little smile. "I'm only just a hothouse plant, to be kept under glass. But that is what I don't want. I don't want to be treated as though I should crumple up if I were touched – I want to do my part in the world."

"Of course, my child, and your part is to look pretty and keep the frowns away from your forehead, and make other folks happy by being happy yourself."

"But really, father, I'm not a doll," she said, with just a touch of impatience in her voice. "I'm afraid I shall disappoint you, but I cannot help it. I've lived in dreamland all my life. Now I am awake, and nothing can ever be exactly the same again as it has been."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.