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Perlycross: A Tale of the Western Hills



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Perlycross: A Tale of the Western Hills

CHAPTER I. THE LAP OF PEACE

In the year 1835, the Rev. Philip Penniloe was Curate-in-charge of Perlycross, a village in a valley of the Blackdown Range. It was true that the Rector, the Rev. John Chevithorne, M.A., came twice every year to attend to his tithes; but otherwise he never thought of interfering, and would rather keep his distance from spiritual things. Mr. Penniloe had been his College-tutor, and still was his guide upon any points of duty less cardinal than discipline of dogs and horses.

The title of "Curate-in-charge" as yet was not invented generally; but far more Curates held that position than hold it in these stricter times. And the shifting of Curates from parish to parish was not so frequent as it is now; theological views having less range and rage, and Curates less divinity. Moreover it cost much more to move.

But the Curate of Perlycross was not of a lax or careless nature. He would do what his conscience required, at the cost of his last penny; and he thought and acted as if this world were only the way to a better one. In this respect he differed widely from all the people of his parish, as well as from most of his Clerical brethren. And it is no little thing to say of him, that he was beloved in spite of his piety.

Especially was he loved and valued by a man who had known him from early days, and was now the Squire, and chief landowner, in the parish of Perlycross. Sir Thomas Waldron, of Walderscourt, had battled as bravely with the sword of steel, as the Churchman had with the spiritual weapon, receiving damages more substantial than the latter can inflict. Although by no means invalided, perhaps he had been pleased at first to fall into the easy lap of peace. After eight years of constant hardship, frequent wounds, and famishing, he had struck his last blow at Waterloo, and then settled down in the English home, with its comforting cares, and mild delights.

Now, in his fiftieth year, he seemed more likely to stand on the battlements of life than many a lad of twenty. Straight and tall, robust and ruddy, clear of skin, and sound of foot, he was even cited by the doctors of the time, as a proof of the benefit that flows from bleeding freely. Few men living had shed more blood (from their own veins at any rate) for the good of their native land, and none had made less fuss about it; so that his Country, with any sense of gratitude, must now put substance into him. Yet he was by no means over fat; simply in good case, and form. In a word, you might search the whole county, and find no finer specimen of a man, and a gentleman too, than Colonel Sir Thomas Waldron.

All this Mr. Penniloe knew well; and having been a small boy, when the Colonel was a big one, at the best school in the west of England, he owed him many a good turn for the times when the body rules the roost, and the mind is a little chick, that can't say – "Cockadoodle." In those fine days, education was a truly rational process; creating a void in the juvenile system by hunger, and filling it up with thumps. Scientific research has now satisfied itself that the mind and the body are the selfsame thing; but this was not understood as yet, and the one ministered to the other. For example, the big Tom Waldron supplied the little Phil Penniloe with dumps and penny-puddings, and with fists ever ready for his defence; while the quicker mind sat upon the broad arch of chest sprawling along the old oak bench, and construed the lessons for it, or supplied the sad hexameter. When such a pair meet again in later life, sweet memories arise, and fine goodwill.

This veteran friendship even now was enduring a test too severe, in general, for even the most sterling affection. But a conscientious man must strive, when bound by Holy Orders, to make every member of his parish discharge his duty to the best advantage. And if there be a duty which our beloved Church – even in her snoring period – has endeavoured to impress, the candid layman must confess that it is the duty of alms-giving. Here Mr. Penniloe was strong – far in advance of the times he lived in, though still behind those we have the privilege to pay for. For as yet it was the faith of the general parishioner, that he had a strong parochial right to come to church for nothing; and if he chose to exercise it, thereby added largely to the welfare of the Parson, and earned a handsome reference. And as yet he could scarcely reconcile it with his abstract views of religion, to find a plate poked into his waistcoat pocket, not for increase, but depletion thereof.

Acknowledging the soundness of these views, we may well infer that Perlycross was a parish in which a well-ordered Parson could do anything reasonable. More than one substantial farmer was good enough to be pleased at first, and try to make his wife take it so, at these opportunities of grace. What that expression meant was more than he could for the life of him make out; but he always connected it with something black, and people who stretched out their hands under cocoa-nuts bigger than their heads, while "come over and help us," issued from their mouths. If a shilling was any good to them, bless their woolly heads, it only cost a quarter of a pound of wool!

Happy farmer, able still to find a shilling in his Sunday small-clothes, and think of the guineas in a nest beneath the thatch! For wheat was golden still in England, and the good ox owned his silver side. The fair outlook over hill and valley, rustling field and quiet meadow, was not yet a forlorn view, a sight that is cut short in sigh, a prospect narrowing into a lane that plods downhill to workhouse. For as yet it was no mockery to cast the fat grain among the clods, or trickle it into the glistening drill, to clear the sleek blade from the noisome weed, to watch the soft waves of silky tassels dimple and darken to the breeze of June, and then the lush heads with their own weight bowing to the stillness of the August sun, thrilling the eyes with innumerable throng, glowing with impenetrable depth of gold. Alas, that this beauty should be of the past, and ground into gritty foreign flour!

But in the current year of grace, these good sons of our native land had no dream of the treason, which should sell our homes and landscapes to the sneering foreigner. Their trouble, though heavy, was not of British madness, but inflicted from without; and therefore could be met and cured by men of strong purpose and generous act.

That grand old church of Perlycross (standing forth in gray power of life, as against the black ruins of the Abbey) had suddenly been found wanting – wanting foundation, and broad buttress, solid wall, and sound-timbered roof, and even deeper hold on earth for the high soar of the tower. This tower was famous among its friends, not only for substance, and height, and proportion, and piercings, and sweet content of bells; but also for its bold uplifting of the green against the blue. To-wit, for a time much longer than any human memory, a sturdy yew-tree had been standing on the topmost stringing-course, in a sheltering niche of the southern face, with its head over-topping the battlements, and scraping the scroll of the south-east vane. Backed as it was by solid stone, no storm had succeeded in tugging its tough roots out of the meshes of mortar; and there it stood and meant to stand, a puzzle to gardeners, a pleasure to jackdaws, and the pride of all Perlycrucians. Even Mr. Penniloe, that great improver, could not get a penny towards his grand designs, until he had signed a document with both Churchwardens, that happen what might, not a hair of the head of the sacred yew-tree should perish.

Many a penny would be wanted now, and who was to provide them? The parish, though large and comprising some of the best land in East Devon, had few resources of commerce, and not many of manufacture. The bright Perle running from east to west clove it in twain; and the northern part, which was by far the larger, belonged to the Waldrons; while the southern (including the church and greater part of village) was of divers owners, the chiefest being the Dean and Chapter of Exeter. It is needless to say that this sacred body never came nigh the place, and felt no obligation towards it, at the manhood of this century.

"What is to be done?" cried the only man who could enter into the grief of it, when Richard Horner of Pumpington, architect, land-agent, and surveyor, appeared before the Clergyman and Churchwardens, with the report required by them.

"One of two things," answered Mr. Horner, a man of authority and brevity; "either let it crumble, or make up your minds to spend a thousand pounds upon it."

"We should be prepared to spend that sum, if we had only got it;" Mr. Penniloe said, with that gentle smile which made his people fond of him.

"We han't got a thousand, nor a hundred nayther You talk a bit too big, Dick. You always did have a big mouth, you know."

The architect looked at his cousin, Farmer John (the senior Churchwarden of Perlycross, and chief tenant of the Capitular estates), and if his own mouth was large, so was that of his kinsman, as he addressed him thus.

"John Horner, we know well enough, what you be. It wouldn't make much of a hole in you, to put down your hundred pounds – to begin with."

"Well," said his colleague, Frank Farrant, while the elder was in labour of amazement; "if John will put down his hundred pounds, you may trust me to find fifty."

"And fifty to you is a good bit more than a thousand to him, I reckon. Book it, Mr. Penniloe, before they run back; and me for another five and twenty."

"I never said it; I never said a word of it" – Farmer John began to gasp, while cousin and colleague were patting him on the back, crying,

"Don't go back from your word, John."

"Now, did I say it, Parson Penniloe?" he appealed, as soon as they would let him speak; "come now, I'll go by what you say of it."

"No, Mr. Horner; I wish you had. You never said anything of the kind."

"Parson, you are a gentleman. I do like a man as tells the truth. But as for them fellows, I'll just show them what's what. Whether I said it, or no – I'll do it."

Mr. Penniloe smiled, but not with pleasure only. Simple and charitable as he was, he could scarcely believe that the glory of God was the motive power in the mind of Farmer John.

CHAPTER II. FAIRY FAITH

At the beginning of July, work was proceeding steadily, though not quite so merrily perhaps, as some of the workmen might have wished; because Mr. Penniloe had forbidden the presence of beer-cans in consecrated ground. A large firm of builders at Exeter (Messrs. Peveril, Gibbs & Co.) had taken the contract according to Mr. Horner's specifications; and had sent a strong staff of workmen down, under an active junior partner, Mr. Robson Adney. There are very few noises that cannot find some ear to which they are congenial; and the clink of the mason's trowel is a delight to many good people. But that pleasant sound is replaced, too often, by one of sadder harmony – the chink of coin that says adieu, with all the regret behind it.

Perlycross had started well on this, its greatest enterprise; every man was astonished at his neighbour's generosity, and with still better reason at his own. Mr. Penniloe's spirit rose above the solid necessity of repairs, and aspired to richer embellishment. That hideous gallery at the western end, which spoiled the tower entrance and obscured a fine window, should go into the fire at last; the noble arch of the chancel (which had been shored with timber braces) should be restored and reopened, and the blocked-up windows should again display their lovely carving. In the handsomest manner, Sir Thomas Waldron had sent him a cheque for five hundred pounds; which after all was only just, because the vaults of the Waldron race lay at the bottom of half the lapse. The Dean and Chapter of Exeter had contributed a hundred pounds; and the Rector another hundred; and the Curate's own father – an ancient clergyman in the north of Devon, with a tidy living and a plump estate – had gone as far as twenty pounds, for the honour of the family.

With this money in hand, and much more in hope, all present designs might well be compassed. But alas, a new temptation rose, very charming, and very costly. The Curate had long suspected that his favourite church had been endowed (like its smaller sister at Perlycombe) with a fair rood-screen; perhaps a fine one, worthy of the days, when men could carve. And now, when the heavy wooden gallery of Queen Anne's time had been removed, it happened that Sergeant Jakes, the schoolmaster, who had seen a great deal of old work in Spain, was minded to enquire into the bearings of the great bressemer at the back. He put his foot into a hole beneath it, where solid brickwork was supposed to be; but down went his foot into a lot of crumbling stuff, and being no more than a one-armed man, Mr. Jakes had a narrow escape of his neck. Luckily he clung with his one hand to a crossbeam still in position, and being of a very wiry frame – as all the school-children knew too well – was enabled to support himself, until a ladder was clapped to. Even then it was no easy thing to extricate his foot, wedged between two trefoils of sharply cut stone; and for more than a week it was beyond his power to bring any fugitive boy to justice. The Parson was sent for at once, and discovered the finest stone-screen in the diocese, removed from its place by a barbarous age, and plastered up in the great western wall.

There was little of that hot contention then, which rages now over every stock and stone appertaining to the Church. As the beauty of design, and the skill of execution, grew more and more manifest to his delighted eyes, Mr. Penniloe was troubled with no misgivings as to "graven images." He might do what he liked with this grand piece of work, if the money were forthcoming. And the parish suspected no Popery in it, when after much council with all concerned, and holding the needful faculty, he proposed to set up this magnificent screen as a reredos beneath the great Chancel window, and behind the stone Communion-table, generally called the Altar now.

Yet brave as he was and of ardent faith, some little dismay was natural, when the builders assured him that this could not be done, with all needful repairs and proper finish, for less than three hundred and fifty pounds, and they would not even bind themselves to that; for the original was of the

best Beere stone, difficult to match, and hard to work. Mr. Penniloe went to the quarries, and found that this was no exaggeration; and having some faith in mankind – as all who have much in their Maker must have – he empowered the firm to undertake the task, while he cast about zealously for the cash.

With filial confidence he made sure that his reverend father must rejoice in another opportunity for glorifying God; and to that effect he addressed him. But when the postman wound his horn at the bottom of the village, and the Parson hurried down from the churchyard to meet him, at the expense of eightpence he received the following dry epistle.

"Son Philip, – We are much surprised and pained by your extraordinary letter. You speak very largely of 'duty to God,' which ought to be done, without talking of it; while you think lightly of your duty to your parents, the commandment that carries the blessing. If you had not abandoned your Fellowship, by marrying and having a family, it might have been more in your power to think of Church-windows, and stone-carving. We did not expect to be treated like this, after our very handsome gift, of not more than three months ago. Look for no more money; but for that which a good son values more, and earns by keeping within his income – the love of his affectionate parents,
"Isaac, and Joan Penniloe."

"Ah! ah! Well, well, I dare say I was wrong. But I thought that he could afford it;" said the Curate in his simple way: "'tis a sad day for me altogether. But I will not be cast down, for the Lord knoweth best."

For on this very day, a year ago, he had lost the happiness of his life, and the one love of his manhood. His fair wife (a loyal and tender helpmate, the mother of his three children, and the skilful steward of his small means) had been found lying dead at the foot of the "Horseshoe Pitch," beneath Hagdon Hill. While her husband was obliged to remain in the village, waiting for a funeral, she had set forth, with none but her younger boy Michael, to visit an old woman on the outskirts of the parish, very far advanced in years, but still a very backward Christian.

The old woman was living at the present moment, but could throw no light upon her visitor's sad fate, and indeed denied that she had seen her on that day. And the poor child who must have beheld what happened, though hitherto a very quick and clever little fellow, could never be brought to say a word about it. Having scarcely recovered from a sharp attack of measles, he had lost his wits through terror, and ran all the way home at the top of his speed, shouting "Rabbits! Rabbits! Rabbits!"

From the child's sad condition, and a strict search of the "Horseshoe," it appeared that he had leaped after his poor mother, but had been saved from death by a ledge of brambles and furze which had broken his fall. Even now, though all trace of his bruises was gone, and his blue eyes were as bright as ever, the tender young brain was so dazed and daunted, by the fall, and the fright, and agony, that the children of the village changed his nickname from "Merry Michael," to "Mazed Mikey."

Mr. Penniloe had been fighting bravely against the sad memories of this day. To a deeply religious mind like his, despondency was of the nature of doubt, and sorrow long indulged grew into sin. But now a cloud of darkness fell around him; the waves of the flood went over his soul, his heart was afflicted, and in sore trouble; and there was none to deliver him.

All men have their times of depression; but few feel such agonies of dejection, as the firm believer and lover of his faith, when harrowing doubts assail him. The Rector of Perlycross, Mr. Chevithorne, though by no means a man of vast piety, had a short way of dealing with such attacks, which he always found successful. To his certain knowledge, all debility of faith sprang directly from "lowness of the system;" and his remedy against all such complaints was a glass of hot brandy and water. But his Curate's religion was a less robust, because a far more active power; and his keener mind was not content to repel all such sallies, as temptations of the Devil.

Sensitive, diffident, and soft-hearted, he was apt to feel too acutely any wound to his affections; and of all the world now left to him, the dearest one was his mother. Or at any rate, he thought so for the present; though a certain little tender claim was creeping closer and closer into the inmost cell of love.

"Can mother have forgotten what day it would be, when I should receive these cruel words?" he said to himself, as he went sadly up the hill towards his white-washed dwelling-place, having no heart left for the finest of stone-carvings. "If she did, it was not like her; and if she remembered, it seems still worse. Surely he would not have dared to sign her name, without her knowledge. But whenever he thinks of that Fellowship – well, perhaps it was wrong on my part to attempt so much. It is high time to look more closely into ways and means."

That was the proper thing to do beyond a doubt, and he hastened inside to do it. But when he sat in his lonely bookroom, with the evening shadows of the dark ilex slowly creeping over him, his mind went back into the past, and a mighty sadness conquered him. Instead of the list of subscriptions for the church he had drawn from the long portfolio (which his wife had given him on the last wedding-day they should ever keep together) a copy of a sad despondent hymn, which he had written in the newness of his grief. As he read the forgotten lines, once more their deep gloom encompassed him; even the twinkle of hope, in which they ended, seemed a mockery.

"Will it ever be so, or is it all a dream, inspired by our longings, and our self-conceit? Whatever is pleasant, or good, or precious, is snatched from our grasp; and we call it a trial, and live on, in the belief that we are punished for our good, and shall be rewarded tenfold. If so, it can be for those alone who are able to believe always; who can dismiss every shadow of doubt, and live with their Maker face to face. Oh that I could do so. But I cannot; my shallow mind is vexed by every breeze. When I was a young man, I felt pity, and even contempt for Gowler's unfaith – a man of far superior powers. He gave up his Fellowship, like a conscientious man; while I preach to others, and am myself a castaway. Oh, Ruth, Ruth, if you could only see me!"

This man of holy life, and of pure devotion to his sacred office, bent his head low in the agony of the moment, and clasped his hands over his whitening hair. How far he was out of his proper mind was shown by his sitting in the sacred chair,¹ the old "dropping-chair" of the parish, which had been sent back that morning. Of this, and of all around, he took no heed; for the tide of his life was at the lowest ebb, and his feeble heart was fluttering, like a weed in shallow water.

But his comfort was not far to seek. After sundry soft taps, and a shuffle of the handle, the door was opened quietly, and a little girl came dancing in, bringing a gleam of summer sunshine in a cloud of golden hair. The gloom of the cold room fled, as if it had no business near her, and a thrush outside (who knew her well) broke forth into a gratitude of song. For this was little Faith Penniloe, seven years old last Tuesday, the prettiest and the liveliest soul in all the parish of Perlycross; and Faith being too substantial perhaps, everybody called her "Fay," or "Fairy." Nothing ever troubled her, except the letter *r*, and even that only when it wanted to come first.

"Father, fathery, how much colder is the tea to get?" she cried; "I call it very yude of you, to do what you like, because you happen to be older."

As the little girl ran, with her arms stretched forth, and a smile on her lips that was surety for a kiss – a sudden amazement stopped her. The father of her love and trust and worship, was not even looking at her; his face was cold and turned away; his arms were not spread for a jump and a scream. He might as well have no child at all, or none to whom he was all in all. For a moment her simple heart was daunted, her dimpled hands fell on her pinafore, and the sparkle of her blue eyes became a gleam of tears.

¹ In country parishes an easy-chair, for the use of the sick and elderly, was provided from the Communion offerings, and lent to those most in need of it. When not so required, it was kept under cover, and regarded with some reverence, from its origin and use.

Then she gathered up her courage, which had never known repulse, and came and stood between her father's knees, and looked up at him very tenderly, as if she had grieved him, and yearned to be forgiven.

"Child, you have taught me the secret of faith," he cried, with a sudden light shed on him; "I will go as a little one to my Father, without a word, and look up at Him."

Then, as he lifted her into his lap, and she threw her arms around his neck, he felt that he was not alone in the world, and the warmth of his heart returned to him.

CHAPTER III. THE LYCH-GATE

The old church, standing on a bluff above the river, is well placed for looking up and down the fertile valley. Flashes of the water on its westward course may be caught from this point of vantage, amidst the tranquillity of ancient trees and sunny breadths of pasture. For there the land has smoothed itself into a smiling plain, casting off the wrinkles of hills and gullies, and the frown of shaggy brows of heather. The rigour of the long flinty range is past, and a flower can stand without a bush to back it, and the wind has ceased from shuddering.

But the Perle has not come to these pleasures yet, as it flows on the north of the churchyard, and some hundred feet beneath it. The broad shallow channel is strewn with flint, and the little stream cannot fill it, except in times of heavy flood; for the main of its water has been diverted to work the woollen factory, and rejoins the natural course at the bridge two or three hundred yards below. On the further side, the land rises to the barren height of Beacon Hill, which shelters Sir Thomas Waldron's house, and is by its conical form distinct from other extremities of the Black-down Chain. For the southern barrier of the valley (which is about three miles wide at its mouth) is formed by the long dark chine of Hagdon Hill, which ends abruptly in a steep descent; and seeing that all this part of the vale, and the hills which shape it, are comprised in the parish of Perlycross, it will become clear that a single Parson, if he attempts to go through all his work, must have a very fine pair of legs, and a sound constitution to quicken them.

Mr. Penniloe, now well advanced in the fifth decade, was of very spare habit and active frame, remarkable also for his springy gait, except at those periods of dark depression, with which he was afflicted now and then. But the leading fault of his character was inattention to his victuals, not from any want of common sense, or crude delight in fasting, but rather through self-neglect, and the loss of the one who used to attend to him. To see to that bodily welfare, about which he cared so little, there was no one left, except a careful active and devoted servant, Thyatira Muggridge. Thyatira had been in his employment ever since his marriage, and was now the cook, housekeeper, and general manager at the rectory. But though in the thirty-fifth year of her age, and as steady as a pyramid, she felt herself still too young to urge sound dietary advice upon her master, as she longed to do. The women of the parish blamed her sadly, as they watched his want of fattening; but she could only sigh, and try to tempt him with her simple skill, and zeal.

On the morrow of that sad anniversary which had caused him such distress, the Curate was blest with his usual vigour of faith and courage and philanthropy. An affectionate letter from his mother, enclosing a bank-order for ten pounds, had proved that she was no willing partner in the father's harshness. The day was very bright, his three pupils had left him for their summer holidays, and there happened to be no urgent call for any parochial visits. There was nothing to stop him from a good turn to-day among trowel and chisel and callipers; he would see that every man was at his work, and that every stroke of work was truthful.

Having slurred his early dinner with his usual zest, he was hastening down the passage for his hat and stick, when Thyatira Muggridge came upon him from the pantry, with a jug of toast-and-water in her hand.

"Do'e give me just a minute, sir," she whispered, with a glance at the door of the dining-room where the children had been left; and he followed her into the narrow back-parlour, the head-quarters of his absent pupils.

Mr. Penniloe thought very highly of his housekeeper's judgment and discretion, and the more so perhaps because she had been converted, by a stroke of his own readiness, from the doctrines of the "Antipædo-Baptists" – as they used to call themselves – to those of the Church of England.

Her father, moreover, was one of the chief tenants on the North Devon property of Mr. Penniloe the elder; and simplicity, shrewdness, and honesty were established in that family. So her master was patient with her, though his hat and stick were urgent.

"Would you please to mind, sir," – began Thyatira, with her thick red arms moving over her apron, like rolling-pins upon pie-crust – "if little Master Mike was to sleep with me a bit, till his brother Master Harry cometh back from school?"

"I dare say you have some good reason for asking; but what is it, Mrs. Muggeridge?" The housekeeper was a spinster, but had received brevet-rank from the village.

"Only that he is so lonesome, sir, in that end hattick, by his little self. You know how he hath been, ever since his great scare; and now some brutes of boys in the village have been telling him a lot of stuff about Spring-heel Jack. They say he is coming into this part now, with his bloody heart and dark lantern. And the poor little lamb hath a window that looks right away over the churchyard. Last night he were sobbing so in his sleep, enough to break his little heart. The sound came all across the lumber-room, till I went and fetched him into my bed, and then he were as happy as an Angel."

"Poor little man! I should have thought of it, since he became so nervous. But I have always tried to make my children feel that the Lord is ever near them."

"He compasseth the righteous round about," Mrs. Muggeridge replied with a curtsy, as a pious woman quoting Holy Writ; "but for all that, you can't call Him company, sir; and that's what these little one's lacks of. Master Harry is as brave as a lion, because he is so much older. But hoping no offence, his own dear mother would never have left that little soul all by himself."

"You are right, and I was wrong;" replied the master, concealing the pain her words had caused. "Take him to your room; it is very kind of you. But where will you put Susanna?"

"That will be easy enough, sir. I will make up a bed in the lumber-room, if you have no objection. Less time for her at the looking-glass, I reckon."

Mr. Penniloe smiled gravely – for that grievance was a classic – and had once more possessed himself of his hat and stick, when the earnest housekeeper detained him once again.

"If you please, sir, you don't believe, do you now, in all that they says about that Spring-heeled Jack? It scarcely seemeth reasonable to a Christian mind. And yet when I questioned Mr. Jakes about it, he was not for denying that there might be such a thing – and him the very bravest man in all this parish!"

"Mrs. Muggeridge, it is nonsense. Mr. Jakes knows better. He must have been trying to terrify you. A man who has been through the Peninsular campaign! I hope I may remember to reprove him."

"Oh no, I would beg you, sir, not to do that. It was only said – as one might express it, promiscuous, and in a manner of speaking. I would never have mentioned it, if I had thought –"

Knowing that her face was very red, her master refrained from looking at it, and went his way at last, after promising to let the gallant Jakes escape. It was not much more than a hundred yards, along the chief street of the village, from the rectory to the southern and chief entrance of the churchyard; opposite to which, at a corner of the road and partly in front of the ruined Abbey, stood an old-fashioned Inn, the *Ivy-bush*. This, though a very well conducted house, and quiet enough (except at Fair-time), was not in the Parson's opinion a pleasing induction to the lych-gate; but there it had stood for generations, and the landlord, Walter Haddon, held sound Church-views, for his wife had been a daughter of Channing the clerk, and his premises belonged to the Dean and Chapter.

Mr. Penniloe glanced at the yellow porch, with his usual regret but no ill-will, when a flash of bright colour caught his eye. In the outer corner he described a long scarlet fishing-rod propped against the wall, with the collar and three flies fluttering. All was so bright and spick and span, that a trout's admiration would be quite safe; and the clergyman (having been a skilful angler, till his strict views of duty deprived him of that joy) indulged in a smile of sagacity, as he opened his double eye-glass, and scrutinised this fine object.

"Examining my flies, are you, Reverend? Well, I hope you are satisfied with them."

The gentleman who spoke in this short way came out of the porch, with a pipe in his hand and a large fishing-creel swinging under his left arm.

"I beg your pardon, Dr. Gronow, for the liberty I am taking. Yes, they are very fine flies indeed. I hope you have had good sport with them."

"Pretty fair, sir; pretty fair" – the owner answered cheerfully – "one must not expect much in this weather. But I have had at least three rises."

"It is much to your credit, so far as I can judge, under the circumstances. And you have not had time to know our water yet. You will find it pretty fishing, when you get accustomed to it."

The angler, a tall thin man of sixty, with a keen grave face and wiry gray hair, regarded the Parson steadfastly. This was but the second time they had met, although Dr. Gronow had been for some while an important parishioner of Perlycross, having bought a fair estate at Priestwell, a hamlet little more than a mile from the village. People, who pretended to know all about him, said that he had retired suddenly, for some unknown reason, from long and large medical practice at Bath. There he had been, as they declared, the first authority in all cases of difficulty and danger, but not at all a favourite in the world of fashion, because of his rough and contemptuous manners, and sad want of sympathy with petty ailments. Some pious old lady of rank had called him, in a passionate moment, "the Godless Gronow;" and whether he deserved the description or not, it had cleaved to him like a sand-leech. But the Doctor only smiled, and went his way; the good will of the poor was sweeter to him than the good word of the wealthy.

"Let me say a word to you, Mr. Penniloe," he began, as the Curate was turning away; "I have had it in my mind for some short time. I believe you are much attached to Sir Thomas Waldron."

"He is one of my oldest and most valued friends. I have the highest possible regard for him."

"He is a valuable man in the parish, I suppose – comes to church regularly – sets a good example?"

"If all my parishioners were like him, it would be a comfort to me, and – and a benefit to them."

"Well said – according to your point of view. I like a straightforward man, sir. But I want you to be a little crooked now. You have an old friend, Harrison Gowler."

"Yes," – Mr. Penniloe replied with some surprise, "I was very fond of Gowler at Oxford, and admired him very greatly. But I have not seen him for some years."

"He is now the first man in London in his special line. Could you get him to visit you for a day or two, and see Sir Thomas Waldron, without letting him know why?"

"You astonish me, Dr. Gronow. There is nothing amiss with Sir Thomas, except a little trouble now and then, caused by an ancient wound, I believe."

"Ah, so you think; and so perhaps does he. But I suppose you can keep a thing to yourself. If I tell you something, will you give me your word that it shall go no further?"

The two gentlemen were standing in the shadow of the lych-gate, as a shelter from the July sun, while the clergyman gazed with much alarm at the other, and gave the required promise. Dr. Gronow looked round, and then said in a low voice —

"Sir Thomas is a strong and temperate man, and has great powers of endurance. I hope most heartily that I may be wrong. But I am convinced that within three months, he will be lying upon this stone; while you with your surplice on are standing in that porch, waiting for the bearers to advance."

"Good God!" cried the Parson, with tears rushing to his eyes; then he lifted his hat, and bowed reverently. "May He forgive me for using His holy name. But the shock is too terrible to think of. It would certainly break poor Nicie's heart. What right have you to speak of such a dreadful thing?"

"Is it such a dreadful thing to go to heaven? That of course you guarantee for your good friends. But the point is – how to put off that catastrophe of bliss."

"Flippancy is not the way to meet it, Dr. Gronow. We have every right to try to keep a valuable life, and a life dear to all that have the sense to feel its value. Even a scornful man – such as you appear to be, unable to perceive the childish littleness of scorn – must admire valour, sense of duty,

and simplicity; though they may not be his own leading qualities. And once more I ask you to explain what you have said."

"You know Jemmy Fox pretty well, I think?" Dr. Gronow took a seat upon the coffin-stone, and spoke as if he liked the Parson's vigour – "Jemmy is a very clever fellow in his way, though of course he has no experience yet. We old stagers are always glad to help a young member of our Profession, who has a proper love for it, and is modest, and hard-working. But not until he asks us, you must clearly understand. You see we are not so meddlesome as you Reverends are. Well, from the account young Fox gives me, there can, I fear, be little doubt about the nature of the case. It is not at all a common one; and so far as we know yet, there is but one remedy – a very difficult operation."

Mr. Penniloe was liable to a kind of nervous quivering, when anything happened to excite him, and some of his very best sermons had been spoiled by this visitation.

"I am troubled more than I can tell you, – I am grieved beyond description," – he began with an utterance which trembled more and more; "and you think that Gowler is the only man, to – to –"

"To know the proper course, and to afford him the last chance. Gowler is not a surgeon, as I need not tell you. And at present such a case could be dealt with best in Paris, although we have young men rising now, who will make it otherwise before very long. Sir Thomas will listen to nothing, I fear, from a young practitioner like Fox. He has been so knocked about himself, and so close to death's door more than once, that he looks upon this as a fuss about nothing. But I know better, Mr. Penniloe."

"You are too likely to be right. Fox has told me of several cases of your wonderful penetration. That young man thinks so much of you. Oh, Dr. Gronow, I implore you as a man – whatever your own opinions are – say nothing to unsettle that young fellow's mind. You know not the misery you may cause, and you cannot produce any happiness. I speak – I speak with the strongest feelings. You will think that I should not have spoken at all – and I dare say it is unusual. But you will forgive me, when you remember it is my duty as a clergyman."

"Surely you are responsible for me as well" – replied the doctor with a kinder tone; "but perhaps you regard me as beyond all cure. Well, I will promise what you ask, good sir. Your sheep, or your foxes, shall not stray through me. Will you do what I suggest about Gowler?"

"I will try to get him down. But from all that I hear, he is one of the busiest men in London. And I dislike procuring his opinion on the sly. Excuse me – I know how well you meant it. But perhaps, through Lady Waldron, he may be brought down in the regular course, and have the whole case laid before him."

"That would be the best thing, if it could be managed. Good-bye! I go a-fishing, as your prototypes expressed it."

CHAPTER IV. NICIE

In the bright summer sunshine the old church looked like a ship that had been shattered by the waves, and was hoisted in a dry dock for repairs. To an ignorant eye it appeared to be in peril of foundering and plunging into the depths below, so frequent and large were the rifts and chasms yawning in the ancient frame-work. Especially was there one long gap in the footings of the south chancel wall, where three broad arches were being turned, and a solid buttress rising, to make good the weakness of the Waldron vault. Sacks of lime, and piles of sand, coils of cord and blocks of stone, scaffold-poles and timber-baulks, wheel-barrows grovelling upside-down, shovels and hods and planks and ladders, hats upon tombstones, and jackets on graves, sacred niches garnished with tobacco-pipes, and pious memories enlivened by "Jim Crow" – so cheerful was the British workman, before he was educated.

"Parson coming," was whispered round, while pewter pots jumped under slabs, and jugs had coats thrown over them, for Mr. Penniloe would have none of their drinking in the churchyard, and was loth to believe that they could do it, with all the sad examples beneath them. But now his mind was filled with deeper troubles; and even the purpose of his visit had faded from his memory.

"Just in time, sir. I was waiting for you" – said Mr. Robson Adney, standing in front of the shored-up screen, on the southern side of the tower, – "if it bears the strain of this new plinth, the rest is a matter of detail. Your idea of the brace was capital, and the dovetail will never show at all. Now, Charlie, steady there – not too heavy. Five minutes will show whether we are men or muffs. But don't stand quite so close, sir, I think we have got it all right; but if there should happen to be a bit of cross-grain stone – bear to the left, you lubber there! Beg your pardon, sir – but I never said – 'damn.'"

"I hope not, I hope not, Mr. Adney. You remember where you are, too well for that. Though I trust that you would say it nowhere. Ah, it is a little on the warp, I fear."

"No, sir, no. Go to the end, and look along. It is only the bevel that makes it look so. Could hardly be better if the Lord Himself had made it. Trust Peveril, Gibbs, & Co. for knowing their work. Holloa! not so hard – ease her, ease her! Stand clear for your lives, men! Down she comes."

They were none too quick, for the great stone screen, after bulging and sagging and shaking like a cobweb throughout its massive tracery, parted in the middle and fell mightily.

"Any one hurt? Then you haven't got what you ought" – shouted Adney, with his foot upon a pinnacle – "old Peter made a saint of? Get a roller, and fetch him out. None the worse, old chap, are you now? Take him to the *Ivy-bush*, and get a drop of brandy."

Sudden as the crash had been, no life was lost, no limb broken, and scarcely a bruise received, except by an elderly workman, and he was little the worse, being safely enshrined in the niche where some good saint had stood. Being set upon his feet, he rubbed his elbows, and then swore a little; therefore naturally enough he was known as "St. Peter," for the residue of his life among us.

But no sooner did Mr. Adney see that no one was hurt seriously than he began to swear anything but a little, instead of thanking Providence.

"A pretty job – a fine job, by the holy poker!" he kept on exclaiming, as he danced among the ruins; "why, they'll laugh at us all over Devonshire. And that's not the worst of it. By the Lord, I wish it was. Three or four hundred pounds out of our pockets. A nice set of – fellows you are, aren't you? I wish I might go this very moment –"

"Is this all your gratitude, Robson Adney, for the goodness of the Lord to you?" Mr. Penniloe had been outside the crash, as he happened to be watching from one end the adjustment of the piece inserted. "What are a few bits of broken stone, compared with the life of a human being – cut off perhaps with an oath upon his lips, close to the very house of God? In truth, this is a

merciful deliverance. Down upon your knees, my friends, and follow me in a few simple words of acknowledgment to the Giver of all good. Truly He hath been gracious to us."

"Don't want much more of that sort of grace. *Coup de grace* I call it" – muttered Mr. Adney. Nevertheless he knelt down, with the dust upon his forehead; and the workmen did the like; for here was another month's good wages.

Mr. Penniloe always spoke well and readily, when his heart was urgent; and now as he knelt between two lowly graves, the men were wondering at him. "Never thought a' could have dood it, without his gown!" "Why, a' put up his two hands, as if 'twor money in his pockets!" "Blest if I don't send for he, when my time cometh!" "Faix, sor, but the Almighty must be proud of you to spake for Him!" Thus they received it; and the senior Churchwarden coming in to see the rights of the matter, told every one (when he recovered his wits) that he had never felt so proud of the parish minister before. Even the Parson felt warmly in his heart that he had gone up in their opinions; which made him more diffident in his own.

"Don't 'e be cast down, sir," said one fine fellow, whom the heavy architrave had missed by about an inch, saving a young widow and seven little orphans. "We will put it all to rights, in next to no time. You do put up with it, uncommon fine. Though the Lord may have laboured to tempt 'e, like Job. But I han't heard a single curse come out of your lips – not but what it might, without my knowing. But here coom'th a young man in bright clothes with news for 'e."

Mr. Penniloe turned, and behold it was Bob Cornish, one of his best Sunday-school boys last year, patient and humble in a suit of corduroy; but now gay and lordly in the livery of the Waldrons, buff with blue edgings, and buttons of bright gold. His father sold rushlights at the bottom of the village, but his mother spent her time in thinking.

"From Sir Thomas?" asked the Curate, as the lad with some attempt at a soldier's salute produced a note, folded like a cocked hat, and not easy to undo.

"No, sir, from my lady" – answered Robert, falling back.

Mr. Penniloe was happy enough to believe that all things are ordered and guided for us by supreme goodness and wisdom. But nature insisted that his hands should tremble at anything of gravity to any one he loved; and now after Dr. Gronow's warning, his double eyeglass rattled in its tortoiseshell frame, as he turned it upon the following words.

"Dear Sir, – I am in great uncertainty to trouble you with this, and beg you to accept apologies. But my husband is in pain of the most violent again, and none the less of misery that he conceals it from me. In this country I have no one now from whom to seek good counsel, and the young Dr. Fox is too juvenile to trust in. My husband has so much value for your wise opinion. I therefore take the liberty of imploring you to come, but with discretion not to speak the cause to Sir Thomas Waldron, for he will not permit conversation about it. Sincerely yours,

"Isabel Waldron."

Mr. Penniloe read these words again, and then closed his eyeglass with a heavy sigh. Trusted and beloved friend as he was of the veteran Sir Thomas, he had never been regarded with much favour by the lady of the house. By birth and by blood on the father's side, this lady was a Spaniard; and although she spoke English fluently – much better indeed than she wrote it – the country and people were not to her liking, and she cared not to make herself popular. Hence her fine qualities, and generous nature, were misprised and undervalued, until less and less was seen of them. Without deserving it, she thus obtained the repute of a haughty cold-hearted person, without affection, sympathy, or loving-kindness. Even Mr. Penniloe, the most charitable of men, was inclined to hold this opinion of her.

Therefore he was all the more alarmed by this letter of the stately lady. Leaving Mr. Adney to do his best, he set off at once for Walderscourt, by way of the plank-bridge over the Perle, at no great distance above the church; and then across the meadows and the sloping cornland, with the round

Beacon-hill in front of him. This path, saving nearly half a mile of twisting lanes, would lead him to the house almost as soon as the messenger's horse would be there.

To any one acquainted with the Parson it would prove how much his mind was disturbed that none of the fair sights around him were heeded. The tall wheat reared upon its jointed stalk, with the buff pollen shed, and the triple awns sheltering the infancy of grain, the delicate bells of sky-blue flax quivering on lanced foliage, the glistening cones of teasels pliant yet as tasselled silk, and the burly foxglove in the hedgerow turning back its spotted cuffs – at none of these did he care to glance, nor linger for a moment at the treddled stile, from which the broad valley he had left was shown, studded with brown farm and white cottage, and looped with glittering water.

Neither did he throw his stick into his left hand, and stretch forth the right – as his custom was in the lonely walks of a Saturday – to invigorate a hit he would deliver the next day, at Divine service in the schoolroom.

"What is to become of them? What can be done to help it? Why should such a loving child have such a frightful trial? How shall we let him know his danger, without risk of doubling it? How long will it take, to get Gowler down, and can he do any good, if he comes?" – These and other such questions drove from his mind both sermon and scenery, as he hastened to the home of the Waldrons.

Walderscourt was not so grand as to look uncomfortable, not yet on the other hand so lowly as to seem insignificant. But a large old-fashioned house, built of stone, with depth and variety of light and shade, sobered and toned by the lapse of time, yet cheerful on the whole, as is a well-spent life. For by reason of the trees, and the wavering of the air – flowing gently from hill to valley – the sun seemed to linger in various visits, rather than to plant himself for one long stare. The pleasure-grounds, moreover, and the lawns were large, gifted with surprising little ups and downs, and blest with pretty corners where a man might sit and think, and perhaps espy an old-fashioned flower unseen since he was five years old.

Some of the many philosophers who understand our ways, and can account for everything, declare that we of the human race become of such and such a vein, and turn, and tone of character, according to the flow, and bend, and tinge of early circumstance. If there be any truth in this, it will help to account for a few of the many delightful features and loveable traits in the character of Nicie Waldron. That young lady, the only daughter of the veteran Colonel, had obtained her present Christian name by her own merits, as asserted by herself. Unlike her mother she had taken kindly to this English air and soil, as behoves a native; and her childish lips finding *Inez* hard had softened it into *Nicie*. That name appeared so apt to all who had the pleasure of seeing her toddle, that it quite superseded the grander form, with all except her mother. "*Nicie* indeed!" Lady Waldron used to say, until she found it useless – "I will feel much obliged to you, if you shall call my daughter *Inez* by her proper name, sir." But her ladyship could no more subdue the universal usage, than master the English *wills* and *shalls*.

And though she was now a full-grown maiden, lively, tall, and self-possessed, Nicie had not lost as yet the gentle and confiding manner, with the playful smile, and pleasant glance, which had earned, by offering them, good-will and tender interest. Pity moreover had some share in her general popularity, inasmuch as her mother was known to be sometimes harsh, and nearly always cold and distant to her. Women, who should know best, declared that this was the result of jealousy, because Sir Thomas made such an idol of his loving daughter. On the other hand the Spanish lady had her idol also – her only son, despatched of late with his regiment towards India; his father always called him *Tom*, and his mother *Rodrigo*.

Mr. Penniloe had a very soft place in his heart for this young lady; but now, for the first time in his life, he was vexed to see her white chip hat, and pink summer-frock between the trees. She was sitting on a bench, with a book upon her lap, while the sunlight, broken by the gentle play of leafage, wavered and flickered in her rich brown hair. Corkscrew ringlets were the fashion of the

time; but Nicie would have none of them, with the bashful knowledge of the rose, that Nature had done enough for her.

And here came her father to take her part, with his usual decision; daring even to pronounce, in presence of the noblest fashion, that his pet should do what he chose, and nothing else. At this the pet smiled very sweetly, the words being put into his lips by hers, and dutifully obeyed her own behest; sweeping back the flowing curves into a graceful coronet, in the manner of a Laconian maid.

Now the sly Penniloe made endeavour to pass her with a friendly smile and bow; but her little pug *Pixie* would not hear of such a slight. This was a thorough busybody, not always quite right in his mind, according to some good authorities, though not easily outwitted. Having scarcely attained much obesity yet, in spite of never-flagging efforts, he could run at a good pace, though not so very far; and sometimes, at sight of any highly valued friend, he would chase himself at full gallop round a giddy circle, with his reasoning powers lost in rapture.

Even now he indulged in this expression of good-will, for he dearly loved Mr. Penniloe; and then he ran up, with such antics of delight, that the rudest of mankind could not well have passed unheeding. And behind him came his fair young mistress, smiling pleasantly at his tricks, although her gentle eyes were glistening with a shower scarcely blown away.

"Uncle Penniloe," she began, having thus entitled him in early days, and doing so still at coaxing times; "you will not think me a sly girl, will you? But I found out that mother had sent for you; and as nothing would make her tell me why, I made up my mind to come and ask you myself, if I could only catch you here. I was sure you could never refuse me."

"Nice assurance indeed, and nice manners, to try to steal a march upon your mother!" The Parson did his utmost to look stern; but his eyes meeting hers failed to carry it out.

"Oh, but you know better, you could never fancy that! And your trying to turn it off like that, only frightens me ten times more. I am sure it is something about my father. You had better tell me all. I must know all. I am too old now, to be treated like a child. Who can have half the right I have, to know all about my darling dad? Is he very ill? Is his precious life in danger? Don't look at me like that. I know more than you imagine. Is he going to die? I will never believe it. God could never do such a cruel wicked thing."

"My dear, what would your dear father say, to hear you talk like that? A man so humble, and brave, and pious –"

"As humble and brave as you please, Uncle Penniloe. But I don't want him to be pious for a long time yet. He swore a little yesterday, – that is one comfort, – when he had no idea I was near him. And he would not have done that, if there had been any – oh, don't go away so! I won't let you go, until you have answered my question. Why were you sent for in such haste?"

"How can I tell you, my dear child, until I have had time to ask about it? You know there is to be the cricket-match on Tuesday, the north against the south side of the valley, and even the sides are not quite settled yet; because Mr. Jakes will not play against his Colonel, though quite ready to play against his Parson."

"Will you give me your word, Uncle Penniloe, that you really believe you were sent for about that?"

The clergyman saw that there was no escape, and as he looked into her beseeching eyes, it was all that he could do to refrain his own from tears.

"I will not cry – or at least not if I can help it," she whispered, as he led her to the seat, and sat by her.

"My darling Nicie," he began in a low voice, and as tenderly as if he were her father; "it has pleased the Lord to visit us with a very sad trial; but we may hope that it will yet pass away. Your dear father is seriously ill; and the worst of it is that, with his wonderful courage and spirit, he makes light of it, and will not be persuaded. He could scarcely be induced to say a word to Dr. Fox, although he is so fond of him; and nobody knows what the malady is, except that it is painful and wearing. My

object to-day is to do my very utmost to get your dear father to listen to us, and see a medical man of very large experience and very great ability. And much as it has grieved me to tell you this, perhaps it is better upon the whole; for now you will do all you can, to help us."

"Sometimes father will listen to me," Miss Waldron answered between her sobs; "when he won't – when he won't let anybody else – because I never argue with him. But I thought Dr. Fox was exceedingly clever."

"So he is, my dear; but he is so young, and this is a case of great perplexity. I have reason to believe that he wishes just as we do. So now with God's help let us all do our best."

She tried to look cheerful; but when he was gone, a cold terror fell upon her. Little *Pixie* tugged at her frock unheeded, and made himself a whirligig in chase of his own tail.

CHAPTER V. A FAIR BARGAIN

The Parson had a little shake in his system; and his faith in Higher Providence was weaker in his friend's case than in his own, which is contrary perhaps to the general rule. As he passed through the large gloomy hall, his hat was quivering in his hand, like a leaf that has caught the syringe; and when he stood face to face with Lady Waldron, he would have given up a small subscription, to be as calm as she was.

But her self-possession was the style of pride and habit, rather than the gift of nature. No one could look into her very handsome face, or watch her dark eyes as she spoke, without perceiving that her nature was strong, and warm, and generous. Pride of birth taught her to control her temper; but education had been insufficient to complete the mastery. And so she remained in a foreign country, vehement, prejudiced, and indifferent to things too large for her to understand, jealous, exacting, and quick to take offence; but at the same time a lover of justice, truthful, free-handed, and loyal to friends, kind to those in trouble, and devoted to her husband. Her father had been of Spanish, and her mother of Irish birth, and her early memories were of tumult, war, distress, and anarchy.

All English clergymen were to her as heretics and usurpers; and being intensely patriotic, she disliked the English nation for its services to her country. Mr. Penniloe had felt himself kept throughout at a very well measured distance; but like a large-hearted, and humble man, had concerned himself little about such trifles; though his wife had been very indignant. And he met the lady now, as he had always done, with a pleasant look, and a gentle smile. But she was a little annoyed at her own confession of his influence.

"It is good of you to come so soon," she said, "and to break your very nice engagements. But I have been so anxious, so consumed with great anxiety. And everything grows worse and worse. What can I do? There is none to help me. The only one I could trust entirely, my dear brother, is far away."

"There are many who would do their best to help you," the Curate answered with a faltering voice, for her strange humility surprised him. "You know without any words of mine –"

"Is it that you really love Sir Thomas, or only that you find him useful? Pardon me; I put not the question rudely. But all are so selfish in this England."

"I hope not. I think not," he answered very gently, having learned to allow for the petulance of grief. "Your dear husband is not of that nature, Lady Waldron; and he does not suppose that his friends are so."

"No. It is true he makes the best of everybody. Even of that young Dr. Fox, who is ill-treating him. That is the very thing I come to speak of. If he had a good physician – but he is so resolute."

"But you will persuade him. It is a thing he owes to you. And in one little way I can help you perhaps a little. He fancies, I dare say, that to call in a man of larger experience would be unkind to Fox, and might even seem a sort of slur upon him. But I think I can get Fox himself to propose it, and even to insist upon it for his own sake. I believe that he has been thinking of it."

"What is he, that his opinions should be consulted? He cannot see. But I see things that agitate me – oh darker, darker – I cannot discover any consolation anywhere. And my husband will not hear a word! It is so – this reason one day, and then some other, to excuse that he is not better; and his strong hands going, and his shoulders growing round, and his great knees beginning to quiver, and his face – so what you call cheerful, lively, jolly, turning to whiter than mine, and blue with cups, and cords, and channels in it – oh, I will not have my husband long; and where shall I be without him?"

As she turned away her face, and waved her hand for the visitor to leave her, Mr. Penniloe discovered one more reason for doubting his own judgment.

"I will go and see him. He is always glad to see me;" he said, as if talking to himself alone. "The hand of the Lord is over us, and His mercy is on the righteous."

The old soldier was not the man to stay indoors, or dwell upon his ailments. As long as he had leg to move, or foot at all to carry him, no easy-chair or study-lounge held any temptation for him. The open air, and the breezy fields, or sunny breadth of garden full of ever-changing incident, the hill-top, or the river-side, were his delight, while his steps were strong; and even now, whenever bodily pain relaxed.

Mr. Penniloe found him in his kitchen-garden, walking slowly, as behoves a man of large frame and great stature, and leaning on a staff of twisted Spanish oak, which had stood him in good stead, some five and twenty years ago. Following every uncertain step, with her nose as close as if she had been a spur upon either boot, and yet escaping contact as a dog alone can do, was his favourite little black spaniel *Jess*, as loving a creature as ever lived.

"What makes you look at me in that way, Jumps?" the Colonel enquired, while shaking hands. "I hope you are not setting up for a doctor too. One is quite enough for the parish."

"Talking about doctors," replied the Parson, who thought it no scorn when his old schoolmate revived the nickname of early days (conferred perhaps by some young observer, in recognition of his springy step) – "talking about doctors, I think it very likely that my old friend Gowler – you have heard me speak of him – will pay me a little visit, perhaps next week."

"Gowler? Was he at Peter's, after my time? It scarcely sounds like a West country name. No, I remember now. It was at Oxford you fell in with him."

"Yes. He got his Fellowship two years after I got mine. The cleverest man in the College, and one of the best scholars I ever met with. I was nowhere with him, though I read so much harder."

"Come now, Jumps – don't tell me that!" Sir Thomas exclaimed, looking down with admiration at the laureate of his boyhood; "why, you knew everything as pat as butter, when you were no more than a hop o' my thumb! I remember arguing with Gus Browne, that it must be because you were small enough to jump into the skulls of those old codgers, Homer, and Horace, and the rest of them. But how you must have grown since then, my friend! I suppose they gave you more to eat at Oxford. But I don't believe in any man alive being a finer scholar than you are."

"Gowler was, I tell you, Tom; and many, many others; as I soon discovered in the larger world. He had a much keener and deeper mind, far more enquiring and penetrating, more subtle and logical, and comprehensive, together with a smaller share perhaps of – of –"

"Humility – that's the word you mean; although you don't like to say it."

"No, that is not what I mean exactly. What I mean is docility, ductility, sequacity – if there is any such word. The acceptance of what has been discovered, or at any rate acknowledged, by the highest human intellect. Gowler would be content with nothing, because it had satisfied the highest human intellect. It must satisfy his own, or be rejected."

"I am very sorry for him," said Sir Thomas Waldron; "such a man must be drummed out of any useful regiment."

"Well, and he was drummed out of Oxford; or at any rate would follow no drum there. He threw up his Fellowship, rather than take orders, and for some years we heard nothing of him. But he was making his way in London, and winning reputation in minute anatomy. He became the first authority in what is called *histology*, a comparatively new branch of medical science –"

"Don't Phil, I beg of you. You make me creep. I think of Burke, and Hare, and all those wretches. Fellows who disturb a man's last rest! I have a deep respect for an honest wholesome surgeon; and wonderful things I have seen them do. But the best of them are gone. It was the war that made them; and, thank God, we have no occasion for such carvers now."

"Come and sit down, Tom. You look – at least, I mean, I have been upon my legs many hours to-day, and there is nothing like the jump in them of thirty years ago. Well, you are a kind man, the kindest of the kind, to allow your kitchen-gardeners such a comfortable bench."

"You know what I think," replied Sir Thomas, as he made believe to walk with great steadiness and vigour, "that we don't behave half well enough to those who do all the work for us. And I am quite sure that we Tories feel it, ay and try to better it, ten times as much as all those spouting radical reformers do. Why, who is at the bottom of all these shocking riots, and rick-burnings? The man who puts iron, and boiling water, to rob a poor fellow of his bread and bacon. You'll see none of that on any land of mine. But if anything happens to me, who knows?"

"My dear friend," Mr. Penniloe began, while the hand which he laid upon his friend's was shaking, "may I say a word to you, as an ancient chum? You know that I would not intrude, I am sure."

"I am sure that you would not do anything which a gentleman would not do, Phil."

"It is simply this – we are most anxious about you. You are not in good health, and you will not confess it. This is not at all fair to those who love you. Courage, and carelessness about oneself, are very fine things, but may be carried too far. In a case like yours they are sinful, Tom. Your life is of very great importance, and you have no right to neglect it. And can you not see that it is downright cruelty to your wife and children, if you allow yourself to get worse and worse, while their anxiety increases, and you do nothing, and won't listen to advice, and fling bottles of medicine into the bonfire? I saw one just now, as we came down the walk – as full as when Fox put the cork in. Is that even fair to a young practitioner?"

"Well, I never thought of that. That's a new light altogether. You can see well enough, it seems, when it is not wanted. But don't tell Jemmy, about that bottle. Mind, you are upon your honour. But oh, Phil, if you only knew the taste of that stuff! I give you my word – "

"You shall not laugh it off. You may say what you like, but you know in your heart that you are not acting kindly, or even fairly, by us. Would you like your wife, or daughter, to feel seriously ill, and hide it as if it was no concern of yours? I put aside higher considerations, Tom I speak to you simply as an old and true friend."

It was not the power of his words, so much as the trembling of his voice, and the softness of his eyes, that vanquished the tough old soldier.

"I don't want to make any fuss about it, Phil," Sir Thomas answered quietly; "and I would rather have kept it to myself, a little longer. But the simple truth is, that I am dying."

There was no sign of fear, or of sorrow, in his gaze; and he smiled very cheerfully while offering his hand, as if to be forgiven for the past concealment. Mr. Penniloe could not speak, but fell back on the bench, and feared to look at him.

"My dear friend, I see that I was wrong to tell you," the sick man continued in a feebler tone; "but you must have found it out very shortly; and I know that Jemmy Fox is well aware of it. But not a word, of course, to my wife or daughter, until – until it can't be helped. Poor things – what a blow it will be to them! The thought of that makes me rebel sometimes. But it is in your power to help me greatly, to help me, as no other man on earth can do. It has long been in my thoughts, but I scarcely dared to ask you. Perhaps that was partly why I told you this. But you are too good and kind, to call me selfish."

"Whatever it is, I will do it for you readily, if God gives me power, and ordains it so."

"Never make rash promises. What was it you used to construe to me in the *Delectus*? This is a long and a troublesome job, and will place you in a delicate position. It is no less a trouble than to undertake, for a time at least, the management of my affairs, and see to the interests of my Nicie."

"But surely your wife – surely Lady Waldron – so resolute, ready, and capable – "

"Yes, she is all that, and a great deal more – honourable, upright, warm, and loving. She is not at all valued as she should be here, because she cannot come to like our country, or our people. But that would be no obstacle; the obstacle is this – she has a twin-brother, a certain Count de Varcas, whom she loves ardently, and I will not speak against him; but he must have no chance of interfering here. My son Tom —*Rodrigo* his mother calls him, after her beloved brother – is barely of age, as

you know, and sent off with his regiment to India; a very fine fellow in many ways, but as for business – excuse me a moment, Phil; I will finish, when this is over."

With one broad hand upon the bench, he contrived to rise, and to steady himself upon his staff, and stood for a little while thus, with his head thrown back, and his forehead like a block of stone. No groan from the chest, or contortion of the face, was allowed to show his agony; though every drawn muscle, and wan hollow, told what he was enduring. And the blue scar of some ancient wound grew vivid upon his strong countenance, from the left cheek-bone to the corner of the mouth, with the pallid damp on either side. Little *Jess* came and watched him, with wistful eyes, and a soft interrogative tremble of tail; while the clergyman rose to support him; but he would have no assistance.

"Thank God, it is over. I am all right now, for another three hours, I dare say. What a coward you must think me, Phil! I have been through a good deal of pain, in my time. But this beats me, I must confess. The worst of it is, when it comes at night, to keep it from poor Isabel. Sit down again now, and let me go on with my story."

"Not now, Tom. Not just yet, I implore you," cried the Parson, himself more overcome than the sufferer of all that anguish. "Wait till you find yourself a little stronger."

"No. That may never be. If you could only know the relief it will be to me. I have not a great mind. I cannot leave things to the Lord, except as concerns my own old self. Now that I have broken the matter to you, I must go through with it. I cannot die, until my mind is easy about poor Nicie. Her mother would be good to her, of course. But – well, Tom is her idol; and there is that blessed Count. Tom is very simple, just as I was, at his age. I have many old friends; but all easy-going fellows, who would leave everything to their lawyers – none at all to trust, like you. And I know how fond you are of Nicie."

"To be sure I am. How could I help it? But remember that I am not at all a man of business."

"What does that matter? You are very clear-headed, and prudent – at any rate for other people. And you will have Webber, a careful and clever Solicitor, to back you up. And mind, I am not asking you to supersede my wife, or take what should be her position. She is quite unacquainted with English ways, she does not think as an Englishwoman would. She must have an Englishman to act with her, in the trusts that will arise upon my death; and when we were married in Spain, as you know, there was no chance of any marriage-settlement. In fact there was nothing to settle as yet, for I was not even heir to this property, until poor Jack was killed at Quatrebras. And as for herself, all the family affairs were at sixes and sevens, as you may suppose, during the French occupation. Her father had been a very wealthy man and the head of an ancient race, which claimed descent from the old Carthaginian Barcas, of whom you know more than I do. But he had been too patriotic, and advanced immense sums to the State without security, and in other ways dipped his fine property, so that it would not recover for a generation. At any rate nothing came to her then, though she ought to have had a good sum afterwards. But whatever there may have been, her noble twin-brother took good care that none of it came this way. And I was glad to get her without a *peseta*; and what is more, I have never repented of it; for a nobler and more affectionate woman never trod the earth."

As the sick man passed his hand before his eyes, in sad recollection of the bygone bliss, Mr. Penniloe thought of his own dear wife – a far sweeter woman in his mild opinion; and, if less noble, none the worse for that.

"But the point of it is this, Tom," the clergyman said firmly, for he began to feel already like a man of business, however sad and mournful the business must become; "does Lady Waldron consent to receive me, as – as co-trustee, or whatever it is called, if, if – which God forbid – it should ever prove to be necessary?"

"My dear friend, I spoke to her about it yesterday, in such a way as not to cause anxiety or alarm: and she made no objection, but left everything to me. So you have only to agree; and all is settled."

"In that case, Tom," said Mr. Penniloe arising, and offering both hands to his friend, "I will not shirk my duty to a man I love so much. May the Lord be with me, for I am not a man of business

– or at least, I have not attained that reputation yet! But I will do my best, and your Nicie's interests shall be as sacred to me, as my own child's. Is there anything you would like to say about her?"

"Yes, Phil, one thing most important. She is a very loving girl; and I trust that she will marry a good man, who will value her. I have fancied, more than once, that Jemmy Fox is very fond of her. He is a manly straightforward fellow, and of a very good old family, quite equal to ours, so far as that goes. He has not much of this world's goods at present; and her mother would naturally look higher. But when a man is in my condition, he takes truer views of life. If Jemmy loves her, and she comes to love him, I believe that they would have a very happy life. He is very cheerful, and of the sweetest temper – the first of all things in married life – and he is as upright as yourself. In a few years he will be very well off. I could wish no better fortune for her – supposing that she gives her heart to him."

"He is a great favourite of mine as well;" the Curate replied, though surprised not a little. "But as I have agreed to all that you wish, Tom, you must yield a little to my most earnest wish, and at the same time discharge a simple duty. I cannot help hoping that your fears – or I will not call them that, for you fear nothing – but your views of your own case are all wrong. You must promise to take the highest medical opinion. If I bring Gowler over, with Fox's full approval, will you allow him to examine you?"

"You are too bad, Phil. But you have caught me there. If you let me put you into the hands of lawyers, it is tit for tat that you should drive me into those of doctors."

CHAPTER VI. DOCTORS THREE

Public opinion at Perlycross was stirred, as with a many-bladed egg-whisk, by the sudden arrival of Dr. Gowler. A man, who cared nothing about the crops, and never touched bacon, or clotted cream, nor even replied to the salutation of the largest farmer, but glided along with his eyes on the ground, and a broad hat whelmed down upon his hairless white face; yet seemed to know every lane and footpath, as if he had been born among them – no wonder that in that unsettled time, when frightful tales hung about the eaves of every cottage, and every leathern latch-thong was drawn inside at nightfall, very strange suspicions were in the air about him. Even the friendship of the well-beloved Parson, and the frank admiration of Dr. Fox, could not stem the current against him. The children of the village ran away at his shadow, and the mothers in the doorway turned their babies' faces from him.

Every one who loved Sir Thomas Waldron, and that meant everybody in the parish, shuddered at hearing that this strange man had paid two visits at Walderscourt, and had even remained there a great part of one night. And when it was known that the yearly cricket-match, between the north side of the Perle and the south, had been quenched by this doctor's stern decree, the wrath of the younger men was rebuked by the sorrow of the elder. Jakes the schoolmaster, that veteran sergeant (known as "High Jarks," from the lofty flourish of his one remaining arm, and thus distinct from his younger brother, "Low Jarks," a good but not extraordinary butcher), firm as he was, and inured to fields of death, found himself unable to refuse his iron cheeks the drop, that he was better fitted to produce on others.

Now that brave descendant of Mars, and Minerva, feared one thing, and one alone, in all this wicked world; and that was holy wedlock. It was rumoured that something had befallen him in Spain, or some other foreign outlands, of a nature to make a good Christian doubt whether woman was meant as a helpmate for him, under the New Covenant. The Sergeant was not given to much talking, but rigid, and resolute, and self-contained; more apt to point, and be, the moral of his vast experience, than to adorn it with long tales. Many people said that having heard so much of the roar of cannon and the roll of drums, he could never come to care again for any toast-and-butter; while others believed that he felt it his duty to maintain the stern silence, which he imposed in school.

There was however one person in the parish, with whom he indulged in brief colloquy sometimes; and strange to say, that was a woman. Mrs. Muggridge, the Curate's housekeeper, felt more indignation than she could express, if anybody whispered that she was fond of gossip. But according to her own account, she smiled at such a charge, coming as it only could from the lowest quarters, because she was bound for her master's sake, to have some acquaintance with her neighbours' doings; for they found it too easy to impose on him. And too often little Fay would run, with the best part of his dinner to some widow, mourning deeply over an empty pot of beer. For that mighty police-force of charity, the district-visitors, were not established then.

Thyatira, though not perhaps unduly nervous – for the times were sadly out of joint – was lacking to some extent in that very quality, which the Sergeant possessed in such remarkable degree. And ever since that shocking day, when her dear mistress had been brought home from the cliff, stone-dead, the housekeeper had realised the perils of this life, even more deeply than its daily blessings. Susanna, the maid, was of a very timid nature, and when piously rebuked for her want of faith in Providence, had a knack of justifying her distrust by a course of very creepy narratives. Mrs. Muggridge would sternly command her to leave off, and yet contrive to extract every horror, down to its dying whisper.

Moreover the rectory, a long and rambling house, was not a cheerful place to sit alone in after dark. Although the high, and whitewashed, back abutted on the village street, there was no door there,

and no window looking outwards in the basement; and the walls being very thick, you might almost as well be fifty miles from any company. Worst of all, and even cruel on the ancient builder's part, the only access to the kitchen and the rooms adjoining it was through a narrow and dark passage, arched with rough flints set in mortar, which ran like a tunnel beneath the first-floor rooms, from one end of the building to the other. The front of the house was on a higher level, facing southwards upon a grass-plot and flower-garden, and as pretty as the back was ugly.

Even the stoutest heart in Perlycross might flutter a little in the groping process, for the tunnel was pitch-dark at night, before emerging into the candlelight twinkling in the paved yard beside the kitchen-door. While the servants themselves would have thought it a crime, if the butcher, or baker, or anyone coming for them (except the Postman) had kept the front way up the open gravel walk, and ventured to knock at the front door itself. There was no bell outside to call them, and the green-baize door at the end of the passage, leading to the kitchen stairs, deadened the sound of the knocker so much, that sometimes a visitor might thunder away for a quarter of an hour, with intervals for conscientious study of his own temper, unless little Fay's quick ears were reached, and her pink little palms and chest began to struggle with the mighty knob.

So it happened, one evening in the first week of August, when Mr. Penniloe was engaged in a distant part of the parish, somebody or other came and knocked – it was never known how many times or how long, – at the upper-folk door of the rectory.

There was not any deafness about Thyatira; and as for Susanna, she could hear too much; neither was little Fay to blame, although the rest were rather fond of leaving things to her. If the pupils had returned, it could not have happened so; for although they made quite enough noise of their own in the little back-parlour allotted to them, they never failed to hear any other person's noise, and to complain of it next morning, when they did not know their lessons.

But the present case was, that the whole live force of the rectory, now on the premises, was established quite happily in the kitchen yard; with a high wall between it and the village street, and a higher wall topped with shrubs between it and the garden. Master Harry, now at home for his holidays (a tiger by day, but a lion at night, for protection of the household), was away with his father, and sleeping soundly through a Bible-lecture. And so it came to pass that the tall dark man knocked, and knocked; and at last departed, muttering uncourteous expressions through his beard.

Even that might never have been known inside, without the good offices of Mrs. Channing, the wife of the baker, whose premises adjoined the rectory garden, and the drive from the front gate.

"'Twas nort but them Gelany fowls," she explained, before she had her breakfast, because her husband was the son of old Channing, the clerk, and sexton; "them Gelany birds of ours, as drew my notice to it. They kept up such a screeching in the big lincage just at dusk, instead of sticking their heads inside their wings, that I thought they must be worriting about a dog, or cat. And so out of house I runs; but I couldn't see nort, till I hears a girt knocking at Passon's front-door. Thinks I – 'What's up now?' For I knowed a' wurn't at home, but away to they Bible-readings. So I claps the little barn-steps again your big wall, and takes the liberty of peeping over, just between the lalac bush and old holly. You must understand, Mrs. Muggridge, that the light wurn't very clear; but I could make out a big tall man a-standing, with a long furrin cloak, atwixt the pillars of your porch.

"'Passon's not at home,' says I; 'can us give any message?'

"'Then a' turns round sudden like, and stands just like a pictur', with the postesses to either side of him, and his beard falling down the same as Aaron's. But if a' said ort, 'twaz beyond my comprehension.

"'Did you please to be looking for the Doctor, sir?' I said – 'the Doctor as is biding now with Mr. Penniloe? I did hear that he was 'gone to Squire Waldron's house.' For I thought that he was more the sort to belong to that old Gowler.

"'But he only shook his head, and turned away; and presently, off he walks most majestic, like the image of a man the same as I have seen to Exeter. I felt myself in that alarm, that go away I

couldn't, until I heard your gate fall to behind him. Then I thought to come and tell you, but I hadn't got the nerves to face your black passage, after what had come across me. For to my mind it must have been the Evil One himself. May the Lord save us from his roarings and devourings!"

When Mrs. Muggridge heard this tale, she thought that it had better go no further, and she saw no occasion to repeat it to her master; because no message had been left, and he might imagine that she had not attended to her duty very well.

For it had chanced, that at the very moment when somebody wanted to disturb them, the housekeeper was giving a most pleasant tea-party to the two little dears, Master Michael, and Miss Fay.

And by accident, of course, Sergeant Jakes had just dropped in. No black passage could be anything but a joke to a man of his valour; and no rapping at the door could have passed unchallenged, if it reached such ears. But the hospitable Thyatira offered such a distraction of good things, far beyond the largest larder-dreams of a dry-tongued lonely bachelor, that the coarser, and seldom desirable, gift of the ears lay in deep abeyance. For the Sergeant had felt quite enough of hardship to know a good time, when he tasted it.

"Now, my precious little dears," Thyatira had whispered with a sigh, when the veteran would be helped no more; "there is light enough still for a game of hop-scotch, down at the bottom of the yard. Susanna will mark out the bed for you. You will find the chalk under the knife-board."

Away ran the children; and their merry voices rang sweetly to the dancing of their golden hair.

"Sergeant Schoolmaster," continued the lady, for she knew that he liked this combination of honours, "how pleasant it is, when the shadows are falling, to see the little innocents delighting in their games? It seems to be no more than yesterday, when I was as full of play as any of them."

"A good many yesterdays have passed since that," Mr. Jakes thought as he looked at her; but he was far too gallant and polite to say so. "In your case, ma'am, it is so," he replied: "yesterday, only yesterday! The last time I was here, I was saying to myself that you ladies have the command of time. You make it pass for us so quickly, while it is standing still with you!"

"What a fine thing it is to have been abroad! You do learn such things from the gift of tongues. But it do seem a pity you should have to say them so much to yourself, Mr. Sergeant."

"Ma'am," replied the veteran, in some fear of becoming too complimentary; "I take it that some of us are meant to live apart, and to work for the good of others. But have you heard how the Colonel is to-day? Ah, he is a man indeed!"

"There are doctors enough to kill him now. And they are going to do it, this very night." Mrs. Muggridge spoke rather sharply, for she was a little put out with her visitor.

"What?" cried the man of sword and ferule. "To operate, ma'am, and I not there – I, who know all about operations!"

"No, Mr. Sergeant; but to hold a council. And in this very house, I believe; the room is to be ready at ten o'clock. Dr. Fox, Dr. Gronow, and Dr. Gowler. It is more than I can understand. But not a word about it to any one. For Sir Thomas would be very angry. To frighten his people, and make such a fuss – they durst not propose it at his own house. And Gronow has never been called in, as you know. But Dr. Jemmy made a favour of it, for he thinks very highly of that man; and the gentleman from London did not object. Only he said that if it must be so, and everything was to be out of proper form, he would like my master to be present with them."

"Three doctors, and a parson to sit upon him! The Lord have mercy on the Colonel's soul! There is no hope left for his poor body. I will tell you, ma'am, what I saw once at Turry Vardoes – but no, it is not fit for you to hear. Well, my heart is like a lump of lead. I would sooner have lost my other arm, than heard such a thing of the Colonel. Good night, ma'am; and thanking you for all your kindness, I'm no fit company for any one, no longer."

He was gone in a moment. His many-angled form sank into the darkness of the flinty tunnel, as swiftly as ever a schoolboy vanished, when that form became too conspicuous. Thyatira heaved

a deep sigh, and sat down in the many-railed beechen chair at the head of her cruelly vacant table. She began to count the empty dishes, and with less than her usual charity mused upon the voracity of man. But her heart was kind, and the tear she wiped away was not wholly of selfish tincture.

"The hand of the Lord is upon us now. My master will lose the best friend he has got," she was thinking, as the darkness gathered; "faithful as he is, it will try him hard again; for Satan has prevailed against us. And this will be a worse snare than any he has laid. To have in Parsonage house a man, as chooseth not to come to prayers; or at any rate standeth up at mantel-piece, with his back turned on the kneelers; till my master told him, like the Christian he is, that he would not desire him, as his guest, to go contrary to his principles, – and pretty principles they must be, I reckon, – but would beg him to walk in the garden, rather than set such example to his household! Alas the day that such a man came here, to the house of a holy minister! No blessing can ever attend his medicine. Ah, the times are not as they was! No wonder that Spring-heeled Jack is allowed to carry on, when such a heathen is encouraged in the land. It would not go out of my grains, if he was Spring-heeled Jack himself!"

Much against her liking, and with a trembling hand, this excellent woman brought in the candles, and prepared the sitting-room, for the consultation of unholy science.

But the first to arrive was a favourite of hers, and indeed of all the parish, a young man of very cheerful aspect, and of brisk and ready speech. No man had ever known Jemmy Fox despair of anything he undertook; and there were few things he would not undertake; only he must tackle them in his own way. A square-built, thickset, resolute young fellow, of no great stature, but good frame and fibre, and as nimble as a pea in a frying-pan. There was nothing very wonderful about his face; and at first sight a woman would have called him plain, for his nose was too short, and his chin too square, and his mouth too wide for elegance. But the more he was looked at, the better he was liked by any honest person; for he was never on the watch for fault in others, as haters of humbug are too apt to be.

And yet without intending, or knowing it at all, this son of Chiron had given deep offence to many of his brethren around Perlycross, and it told upon him sadly afterwards. For he loved his Profession, and looked upon it as the highest and noblest in the world, and had worked at it too thoroughly not to have learned how often it is mere profession. By choice he would have dropped all general practice, and become a surgeon only; but this was impossible except in some large place, and cities were not to his liking. As the only son of a wealthy banker he might have led an idle life, if he pleased; but that he could not bear, and resolved to keep himself; for the old man was often too exacting, and the younger had some little income of his own. Perlycross suited him well, and he had taken a long and rambling house, which had formerly been a barn, about half a mile from the village.

"Seen anything of Spring-heeled Jack, the last night or two, Mrs. Muggridge?" he enquired too lightly, as he flung down his hat in similar style at a corner. "Have you heard the last thing that has come to light about him?"

"No, sir, no! But I hope it is no harm," replied the palpitating Thyatira.

"Well, that depends upon how you take it. We have discovered for certain, that he is a medical man from a country parish, not such a very long way from here, who found his practice too small for the slaughter on the wholesale style he delights in. And so he turned his instruments into patent jumpers, tore the heart out of his last patient – he was obliged to choose a poor one, or it would have been too small – then he fitted a Bude-light to his biggest dark lantern. And you know better than I do what he shows you at the window, exactly as the Church-clock strikes twelve."

"Oh, Dr. Jemmy, how you do make one creep! Then after all he is not, as everybody says, even a dissolute nobleman?"

"No. That is where the disappointment lies. He set that story afoot no doubt, to comfort the relatives of the folk he kills. By the by, what a place this old house would be for him! He likes a broad window-sill, just like yours, and the weather is the very thing for him."

"I shall nail up a green baize every night. Oh, Dr. Jemmy, there is a knock at the door! Would you mind seeing who it is – that's a dear?"

Dr. Fox, with a pleasant smile, admitted Dr. Gronow, on his very first visit to the rectory.

"Others not come yet?" asked the elder gentleman, as the trembling housekeeper offered him a chair; "his Reverence would hardly like a pipe here, I suppose. Well, Jemmy, what is your opinion of all this strange affair?"

Mrs. Muggridge had hurried off, with a shiver and a prayer.

"I am mum, before my betters," the young man replied. "The case is gone out of my hands altogether."

"And a good thing for you. I am glad of it for your sake. But we must not anticipate Gowler. I have no business here, except as what the lawyers call *Amicus curiae*. By the by, I suppose you have never seen the smallest ground for suspicion of foul play?"

"Never. I should have come to you first, if I had. There could be no possible motive, to begin with; and everybody loves him like a father."

"A man is too fatherly sometimes. One never can understand those foreign women. But you know the family, and I do not. Excuse me for a horrible suggestion. But I have had some very dark experiences."

"And so, no doubt, has Gowler. The idea crossed his brain; but was scattered immediately, when he knew the facts. Hush, here they come! Let us think no more of that."

Mr. Penniloe was tired, and in very low spirits; for he looked upon this meeting as the fatal crisis. After seeing to his visitors, and offering refreshment – which none of them accepted – he took a chair apart, being present as a listener only.

Thereupon Dr. Gowler in very few words gave his view of the case, premising only that he spoke with some doubt, and might well be mistaken, for the symptoms were perplexing, and the malady was one which had not as yet been studied at all exhaustively. His conclusion agreed in the main with that of his young and sagacious coadjutor, though he was enabled, by longer experience, to be perhaps a little more definite. He spoke very well, and with a diffidence which particularly impressed the others, on the part of a man whose judgment was of the very highest authority.

Dr. Gronow immediately confirmed his view, so far as the details at second hand could warrant, and gave his own account of a similar case, where the injury was caused by the handle of a barrow, and continued latent for several years. The unanimous decision was that no hope remained; unless the poor patient would submit to a surgical operation of great difficulty and danger, in the then condition of medical science; and for which it was advisable to have recourse to Paris.

"I know him too well. He will never consent," Mr. Penniloe came forward, and sought from face to face for some gleam of encouragement; "surely there must be some other course, something at least to alleviate –"

"There may be: but we do not know it yet, and I fear that we never shall do so. And for this very sufficient reason" – here Dr. Gowler took a glove from his pocket, and presented a most simple and convincing explanation of the mischief that had happened, and the consequence that must of necessity ensue, without surgical redress. Even that he admitted was of very doubtful issue, in plain English – "either kill, or cure."

The Parson sighed heavily, and even Dr. Fox was too much affected to say a word; but the elder physicians seemed to think it right and natural, and a credit to their science, that they knew so much about it. Gowler and Gronow were becoming mighty friends – so far as two men of the world care to indulge – and the great London doctor accepted with pleasure the offer of a day's fly-fishing.

"I have not thrown a fly, since I was quite a boy," he said.

"And I never threw a fly, till I was an old man," said the other; and their host knew well which would have the better chance, though he felt a little vexed at their light arrangements.

"It is not for the sake of the fishing, my dear fellow," Dr. Gowler assured him, when the other two were gone; "I was to have left you in the morning, as you know; and I have not had such a holiday for seven years. I positively needed it, and shall be twice the man. But I felt that I ought to stay one

day longer, to give you one more chance of persuading poor Sir Thomas. See how handsomely he has behaved – I mean, according to country notions; though I often make more in one day, in Town. He slipped this into my hand, sealed up; and I did not refuse it, for fear of a fuss. But you will return it, when I am in the coach, and explain, with my kind regards, that it is against my rule to take any fee, upon a visit to a friend. I came to renew our old friendship only, and from my great regard for you. We do not think alike, upon the greatest of all matters. Perhaps that is better for your happiness than mine. But after all my knowledge of the world, I do believe that the best friends are those, who are like you."

Mr. Penniloe took the cheque for fifty guineas, and placed it in his desk, without a word; for he knew his friend's character too well to argue. Then he shook him very warmly by the hand, and said "Good night."

But as he sank back in his chair to reflect, and examine himself of the bygone day, he hoped that his ears had deceived him that night, in a matter which had shocked him sadly. Unless they had erred, Dr. Gronow had said – "In a case of this kind, for the advance of knowledge, autopsy should be compulsory." And Harrison Gowler had replied – "Exactly so; but in this benighted part, I suppose it is impossible."

CHAPTER VII.

R. I. P

"Oh, Mr. Sergeant, how you did alarm me!" cried a very pretty damsel one fine October evening, as she almost fell upon the breast of "High Jarks," from some narrow stone steps at the corner of a lane. She was coming by the nearest way to the upper village, from the side-entrance to Walderscourt, a picturesque way but a rough one. For the lane was overhung, and even overwhelmed, with every kind of hindrance to the proper course of trade. Out of the sides, and especially at corners, where the right of way should have been most sacred, jutted forth obstacles most inconsiderate, or even of set purpose, malicious. If a great stool of fern could be treated as nothing, even with its jagged saws quivering, or a flexible ash could be shoved aside lightly, with the cowardly knowledge that it had no thorns; yet in ambush with their spears couched, would be the files of furze, the barbed brigade of holly, or the stiff picket of blackthorn. And any man, engaged with these deliveries of the moment, might thank his stars (when visible through the tangle overhead) if by any chance he missed a blinding thump in both his eyes.

Alas, it would have been indeed a blessing, as well as a just correction, for the well-seasoned master of the youth of Perlycross, if a benevolent switch from the hedgerow had taken him sharply in the eyes, that had so long descried nothing but motes in more tender orbs. As the young maid drew back from the warlike arm, which had been quite obliged to encircle her, one flash of her eyes entered those of Mr. Jakes; and he never saw again as he had seen before.

But his usual composure was not gone yet. A true schoolmaster is well assured, whatever the circumstance may be, that he is in the right, and all others in the wrong.

"I beg you will offer no apologies, Miss," he began with a very gracious smile, as he rubbed up the nap of his old velvet coat where a wicked boy had tallow-candled it: "I take it that you are a stranger here, and not quite familiar with our kind of road. The roads about here have a manner of showing that they know not in what direction they are going?"

"But, Mr. Sergeant, don't you know me? Not so very long ago, I ran up this very lane, over the plank-bridge, and up to this heling, because of the temper you were in. It was my brother Watty you wanted to catch: but you flourished your cane so, that the girls ran too. But you would not have beaten poor me, Mr. Sergeant?"

She skipped back a step or two, as if still afraid, and curtsied to show her pretty figure, and managed to let her bright hair fall down over the blush of her soft round cheeks. Then she lifted her eyes with the sweetest appeal; for the fair Tamar Haddon was a born coquette.

"Why, Tamar, my dear, can it possibly be you? I could never have supposed that you would come to this. You were always the prettiest child among the girls. But, as you know, I had nothing to do with them. My business has always been with the boys."

"And quite right, Mr. Sergeant – they are so much better, so much quicker to learn, as well as better-looking, and more interesting!"

"That depends upon who it may be," said Mr. Jakes judicially; "some girls are much better at round-hand, as well as arithmetic. But why have I lost sight of you all these years? And why have you grown such a – well, such a size?"

"Oh, you *are* rude! I am not a size at all. I thought that you always learned politeness in the wars. I am only seventeen round the waist – but you shan't see. No, no, stick you to the boys, Mr. Sergeant. I must be off. I didn't come out for pleasure. Good evening, sir; good evening to you!"

"Don't be in such a hurry, Miss Haddon. Don't you know when I used to give you sugar-plums out of this horn box? And if I may say it without offence, you are much too pretty to be in this dark place, without somebody to take care of you."

"Ah, now you are more like the Army again. There is nothing like a warrior, in my opinion. Oh, what a plague these brambles are! Would you mind just holding my hat for a moment? I mustn't go into the village, such a fright, or everybody will stare at me. My hair is such a trouble, I have half a mind sometimes to cut off every snip of it. No, no, you can't help me; men are much too clumsy."

Mr. Jakes was lost in deep admiration, and Tamar Haddon knew it well, and turned away to smile, as she sat upon a bank of moss, drawing her long tresses through the supple play of fingers and the rosy curve of palms; while her cherry lips were pouting and her brown eyes sparkling, in and out the golden shower from her saucy forehead. The schoolmaster held her little hat, and watched every movement of her hands and eyes, and wondered; for the gaiety of girlhood, and the blushes and the glances were as the opening of a new world to him.

"I know what you are thinking now, it's no good to deny it," she cried as she jumped up, and snatched her hat away; "you are saying to yourself – 'What a poor vain creature! Servants' hats are not allowed in well-conducted households.' But you must understand that I am not a common servant. I am a private lady's-maid to her ladyship, the Countess; and she has none of your old-fashioned English ways about her. She likes to see me look – well, perhaps you would not call it 'pretty,' for that depends upon the wearer, and I have no pretension to it – but tidy, and decent, and tolerably nice – "

"Wonderfully nice, and as lovely as a rose."

"Oh, Mr. Sergeant, you who must know so much better! But I have no time for such compliments, and they would turn my little head, from such a learned man as you are. How can I think of myself for a moment, when things are so dreadful? Poor Sir Thomas – you know how ill he is; he is longing for something, and I am sent to fetch it on the sly, so that Dr. Fox should have no idea, but her ladyship says that it can do no harm, now."

"What, the poor Colonel waiting, Miss, and I have kept you all this time? I was just on my way to enquire for him, when – when I happened to meet you. I can scarcely believe in any doctor conquering him."

"They are though – they are doing it. He is very low to-day. They seem to have brought him down to a flat knock-under, just as you do with the schoolboys. I can't hardly think of it, without crying."

The fair Tamar dropped her eyes, and hung her head a little, and then looked softly at the veteran, to plead for his warmest sympathy.

"There, I declare to you, I have cried so much that I can't cry no more," she continued with a sigh; "but it is a calf's sweetbread that I be bound to get; and where from, I'd like to know, unless it is to Mr. Robert's."

A pang shot through the heart of Mr. Jakes, and if his cane had been at hand he would have grasped it. For Mr. Robert was his own brother, the only butcher in the village, a man of festive nature (as a butcher ought to be), of no habitual dignity – and therefore known as "Low Jarks" – a favourite with the fair sex, and worst of all, some twenty years the junior of "High Jarks."

"What, young Bobby!" cried the Sergeant, striking out, "there is nothing that he knows worth speaking of. And what is more to the purpose, he never will know nothing. I mean to say 'anything.' Sometimes I go back from all my instructions all over the world, to the way – to the way you talk, in this part of the world."

"But, Mr. Sergeant, that is only natural; considering that you belong to this part of the world. Now, you do – don't you? However learned you may be."

"Well, I will not deny that it comes up sometimes. A man of my years – I mean, a young man by age, and yet one who has partaken in great motions, feels himself so very much above butchers' shops, and the like of them. And all the women – or as they call themselves now – all the ladies of the neighbourhood, have now been so well educated, that they think a great deal of the difference."

"To be sure," said Tamar Haddon, "I can quite see that. But how could they get their meat, without the butchers' shops? Some people are too learned, Mr. Sergeant."

"I know it, Miss. But I am very particular, not to let any one say it of me. I could quote Latin, if I chose: but who would put a spill to my pipe afterwards? One must never indulge in all one knows."

"Well, it does seem a pity, after spending years about it. But here we are, come to the river-side at last. You mustn't think of coming across the plank with me. It would never do to have you drowned; and you know what Betty Cork is. Why, all the boys to Perlycross would be making mouths to-morrow? And I shall go home along the turnpike-road."

The schoolmaster saw the discretion of this. Charmed as he was with this gay young maid, he must never forget what was thought of him.

For she was the daughter of Walter Haddon, the landlord of the *Ivy-bush*, a highly respectable place, and therefore jealous of the parish reputation. Moreover the handrail of the footbridge was now on the side of his empty sleeve; and the plank being very light and tremulous, he feared to recross it without stepping backward, which was better done without spectators. So he stayed where he was, while she tripped across, without even touching the handrail; and the dark gleam of the limpid Perle, in the twilight of gray branches, fluttered with her passing shadow.

Just as she turned on the opposite bank, where cart-ruts ridged the water's brink, and was kissing her hand to the ancient soldier, with a gay "Good evening!" – the deep boom of a big bell rang, and quivered throughout the valley. Cattle in the meadows ceased from browsing, and looked up as if they were called, birds made wing for the distant wood, and sere leaves in the stillness rustled, as the solemn thrill trembled in the darkening air.

"For God's sake, count," the old soldier cried, raising the hat from his grizzled head, and mounting a hillock clear of bushes; "it is the big bell tolling!"

But the frolicsome maiden had disappeared, and he was left to count alone.

At intervals of a minute, while the fall of night grew heavier, the burden of the passing-bell was laid on mortal ears and hearts.

"Time is over for one more,"

was graven on the front of it, and was borne along the valley; while the echo of the hills brought home the lesson of the reverse —

"Soon shall thy own life be o'er."

Keeping throbbing count, the listener spread the fingers of his one hand upon his threadbare waistcoat; and they trembled more and more, as the number grew towards the fatal forty-nine. When the forty-ninth stroke ceased to ring, and the last pulsation died away, he stood as if his own life depended on the number fifty. But the knell was finished; the years it told of were but forty-nine – gone by, like the minutes between the strokes.

"Old Channing perhaps is looking at the tower-clock. Hark! In a moment, he will strike another stroke." But old Channing knew his arithmetic too well.

"Now God forgive me for a sinful man – or worse than a man, an ungrateful beast!" cried the Sergeant, falling upon his knees, with sorrow embittered by the shameful thought, that while his old chief was at the latest gasp, himself had been flirting merrily with a handmaid of the house, and sniggering like a raw recruit. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and the lesson of the bell fell on him.

It had fallen at the same time upon ears more heedful, and less needful of it. Mr. Penniloe, on his homeward road, received the mournful message, and met the groom who had ridden so hard to save the angelical hour. And truly, if there be any value in the ancient saying —

"Happy is the soul
That hath a speedy toll,"

the flight of Sir Thomas Waldron's spirit was in the right direction.

The clergyman turned from his homeward path, and hastened to the house of mourning. He scarcely expected that any one as yet would care to come down, or speak to him; but the least he could do was to offer his help. In the hush of the dusk, he was shown through the hall, and into a little sitting-room favoured by the ladies. Believing that he was quite alone, for no one moved, and the light was nearly spent, he took a seat by the curtained window, and sank into a train of sombre thoughts. But presently a lapping sound aroused him, and going to the sofa, there he found his favourite Nicie overcome with sorrow, her head drooping back, like a wind-tossed flower; while *Pixie*, with a piteous gaze, was nestling to her side, and offering every now and then the silent comfort of his tongue.

"What is it, my dear?" The Parson asked, as if he did not know too well. But who knows what to say sometimes? Then, shocked at himself, he said – "Don't, my dear." But she went on sobbing, as if he had not spoken; and he thought of his little Fay, when she lost her mother.

He was too kind to try any consolations, or press the sense of duty yet; but he put on his glasses, and took little *Pixie*, and began to stroke his wrinkled brow.

"This dear little thing is crying too," he whispered; and certainly there were tears, his own or another's, on the velvet nose. Then Nicie rose slowly, and put back her hair, and tried to look bravely at both of them.

"If mother could only cry," she said; "but she has not moved once, and she will not come away. There is one thing she ought to do, but she cannot; and I am afraid that I should never do it right. Oh, will you do it, Uncle Penniloe? It would be an excuse to get her out of the room; and then we might make her lie down, and be better. My father is gone; and will mother go too?"

Speaking as steadily as she could, but breaking down every now and then, she told him, that there was a certain old ring, of no great value, but very curious, which her father had said many years ago he would like to have buried with him. He seemed to have forgotten it, throughout his long illness; but his wife had remembered it suddenly, and had told them where to find it. It was found by a trusty servant now; and she was present, while Mr. Penniloe placed it on the icy finger, and dropped a tear on the forehead of his friend, holy now in the last repose.

On his homeward path that night, the Curate saw through the gloom of lonely sorrow many a storm impending. Who was there now to hold the parish in the bonds of amity, to reconcile the farmers' feuds, to help the struggling tradesman, to bury the aged cripple, to do any of those countless deeds of good-will and humanity, which are less than the discount of the interest of the debt, due from the wealthy to the poor?

And who would cheer him now with bold decision, and kind deference, in all those difficulties which beset the country clergyman, who hates to strain his duty, yet is fearful of relaxing it? Such difficulties must arise; and though there certainly was in those days, a great deal more fair give-and-take than can be now expected, there was less of settled rule and guidance for a peaceful parson. Moreover, he felt the important charge which he had undertaken, as co-trustee of large estates, as well as a nervous dread of being involved in heavy outlay, with no rich friend to back him now, concerning the repairs, and in some measure the rebuilding, of the large and noble parish church.

But all these personal troubles vanished, in the memories of true friendship, and in holy confidence, when he performed that last sad duty in the dismantled church, and then in the eastern nook of the long graveyard. He had dreaded this trial not a little, but knew what his dear friend would have wished; and the needful strength was given him.

It has been said, and is true too often (through our present usages) that one funeral makes many. A strong east wind of unwonted bitterness at this time of year – it was now the last day of October – whistled through the crowd of mourners, fluttered scarf, and crape, and veil, and set old Channing's last tooth raging, and tossed the minister's whitening locks, and the leaves of the Office for the Dead. So cold was the air, that people of real pity and good feeling, if they had no friends in the village, hied to the *Ivy-bush*, when all was over, and called for hot brandy and water.

But among them was not Mr. Jakes, though he needed a stimulus as much as any. He lingered in the churchyard, till the banking up was done, and every one else had quitted it. When all alone, he scooped a hole at the head of the grave, and filled it with a bunch of white chrysanthemums, imbedded firmly to defy the wind. Then he returned to the sombre school-room, at the west end of the churchyard, and with one window looking into it. There, although he had flint and tinder, he did not even light a dip, but sat for hours in his chair of office, with his head laid on the old oak desk. Rough, and sad, and tumbled memories passed before his gray-thatched eyes, and stirred the recesses of his rugged heart.

Suddenly a shadow fell across his desk. He rose from his dream of the past, and turning saw the half-moon quivering aslant, through the diamond panes of the lattice. For a minute he listened, but there was nothing to be heard, except a long low melancholy wail. Then he buttoned his coat, his best Sunday black, and was ashamed to find the empty cuff wet, as the bib of an infant, but with the tears of motherless old age.

After his manner – when no boys were nigh – he condemned himself for an ancient fool, and was about to strike a light, when the sad low sound fell again upon his ears. Determined to know what the meaning of it was, he groped for his hat, and stout oak staff, and entered the churchyard by the little iron gate, the private way from the school premises.

The silence was as deep as the stillness of the dead; but, by the light of the westering moon, he made his way among the white tombstones, and the rubbish of the builders, to the eastern corner where Sir Thomas Waldron lay. His old chief's grave was fair and smooth, and the crisp earth glistened in the moonlight, for the wind had fallen, and a frost was setting in; but a small black figure lay on the crown, close to the bunch of flowers. A low growl met him; and then a dismal wail of anguish, beyond any power of words or tears, trembled along the wan alleys of the dead, and lingered in the shadowy recesses of the church.

"Good little *Jess*, thou art truer than mankind," said the Sergeant, and marched away to his lonely bed.

CHAPTER VIII. THE POTATO-FIELD

Live who may, and die who must, the work of the world shall be carried on. Of all these works, the one that can never be long in arrears is eating; and of all British victuals, next to bread, the potato claims perhaps the foremost place. Where the soil is light towards Hagdon Hill, on the property of the Dean and Chapter, potatoes, meet for any dignitary of the Church, could be dug by the ton, in those days. In these democratic and epidemic times, it is hard to find a good potato; and the reason is too near to seek. The finer the quality of fruit or root, the fiercer are they that fall on it; and the nemesis of excellence already was impending. But the fatal blow had not fallen yet; the ripe leaves strewed the earth with vivid gold, instead of reeking weltering smut; and the berries were sound, for boys and girls to pelt one another across the field; while at the lift of the glistening fork across the crumbling ridges, up sprang a cluster of rosy globes, clean as a codlin, and chubby as a cherub.

Farmer John Horner, the senior Churchwarden, and the largest ratepayer on the south side of the Perle, would never have got on as he did, without some knowledge of the weather. The bitter east wind of the previous night, and the keen frost of the morning, had made up his mind that it was high time to lift his best field of potatoes. He had two large butts to receive the filled sacks – assorted into ware and chats – and every working man on the farm, as well as his wife and children, had been ordered to stick at this job, and clear this four-acre field before nightfall. The field was a good step from the village, as well as from Farmer Horner's house; and the lower end (where the gate was) abutted on the Susscot lane, leading from the ford to Perlycross.

It was now All-Hallows day, accounted generally the farewell of autumn, and arrival of the winter. Birds, and beasts, that know their time without recourse to calendar, had made the best use of that knowledge, and followed suit of wisdom. Some from the hills were seeking downwards, not to abide in earnest yet, but to see for themselves what men had done for their comfort when the pinch should come; some of more tender kind were gone with a whistle at the storms they left behind; and others had taken their winter apparel, and meant to hold fast to the homes they understood.

Farmer John, who was getting rather short of breath from the fatness of his bacon, stirred about steadfastly among the rows, exhorting, ordering, now and then upbraiding, when a digger stuck his fork into the finest of the clump. He had put his hunting gaiters on, because the ground would clog as soon as the rime began to melt; and the fog, which still lingered in the hollows of the slopes, made him pull his triple chin out of his comforter to cough, as often as he opened his big mouth to scold. For he was not (like farmers of the present day) too thankful for anything that can be called a crop, to utter a cross word over it.

Old Mr. Channing, the clerk, came in by the gate from the lane, when the sun was getting high. Not that he meant to do much work – for anything but graves, his digging time was past, and it suited him better to make breeches – but simply that he liked to know how things were going on, and thought it not impossible that if he praised the 'tatures, Churchwarden might say – "Bob, you shall taste them; we'll drop you a bushel, when the butt comes by your door." So he took up a root or two here and there, and "hefted it," (that is to say, poised it carefully to judge the weight, as one does a letter for the post) and then stroked the sleek skin lovingly, and put it down gingerly for fear of any bruise. Farmer John watched him, with a dry little grin; for he knew what the old gentleman was up to.

"Never see'd such 'tatures in all my life," Mr. Channing declared with a sigh of admiration. "Talk of varmers! There be nobody fit to hold a can'le to our Measter John. I reckon them would fry even better than they biled; and that's where to judge of a 'tatur, I contends."

"Holloa, Mr. Clerk! How be you then, this fine morning?" The farmer shouted out, as if no muttering would do for him, while he straddled over a two-foot ridge, with the rime thawing down his gaiters. "Glad to see 'e here, old veller. What difference do 'e reckon now, betwixt a man and a 'tatur?"

Farmer John was famous for his riddles. He made them all himself, in conversation with his wife – for he had not married early – and there was no man in the parish yet with brains enough to solve them. And if any one attempted it, the farmer always snubbed him.

"There now, ye be too deep for me!" Mr. Channing made a hole in the ground with his stick, as if Mr. Horner was at the bottom of it. "It requireth a good deal more than us have got, to get underneath your meaning, sir."

"No, Bob, no! It be very zimple, and zuitable too for your trade. A 'tatur cometh out of ground, when a' be ripe; but a man the zame way goeth underground. And a good thing for him, if he 'bideth there, according to what hath been done in these here parts, or a little way up country. No call for thee to laugh, Bob, at thy time of life, when behooveth thee to think over it. But I'll give thee an order for a pair of corduroys, and thou shalt have a few 'tatures, when the butt comes by. Us, as belongs to the Church, is bound to keep her agoing, when the hogs won't miss it! But there, Lord now, I want a score of nose-rings? Have 'e see'd anything of Joe Crang, this morning? We never heer'd nort of his anvil all the time! Reckon Joe had a drop too much at the *Bush*, last night."

"Why, here a' coom'th!" exclaimed the clerk. "Look, a' be claimbin' of an open gate! Whatever can possess the man? A' couldn't look more mazed and weist, if a hunderd ghostesses was after him?"

Joseph Crang, the blacksmith at Susscot ford, where the Susscot brook passed on its way to the Perle, was by nature of a merry turn, and showed it in his face. But he had no red now, nor even any black about him, and the resolute aspect, with which he shod a horse, or swung a big hammer, was changed into a quivering ghastly stare; his lips were of an ashy blue, like a ring of tobacco smoke; and as for his body, and legs, and clothes, they seemed to have nothing to do with one another.

"What aileth the man?" cried Mr. Channing, standing across, as he had the right to do, after bestraddling so many burials; "Master Joe Crang, I call upon thee to collect thy wits, and out with it."

"Joe, thy biggest customer hath a right to know thy meaning." Farmer John had been expecting to have to run away; but was put in courage by the clerk, and brought up his heels in a line with the old man's.

"Coompany, coompany is all I axes for," the blacksmith gasped weakly, as if talking to himself – "coompany of living volk, as rightly is alive."

"Us be all alive, old chap. But how can us tell as you be?" The clerk was a seasoned man of fourscore years, and knew all the tricks of mortality.

"I wish I wadn't. A'most I wish I wadn't, after all I zee'd last night. But veel of me, veel of me, Measter Channin', if you please to veel of me."

"Tull 'e what," the Churchwarden interposed; "gie 'un a drink of zider, Bob. If a' be Joe Crang, a' won't say no to thickey. There be my own little zup over by the hedge, Joe."

Without any scruple the blacksmith afforded this proof of vitality. The cider was of the finest strain – "three stang three," as they called it – and Joe looked almost like himself, as he put down the little wooden keg, with a deep sigh of comfort.

"Maketh one veel like a man again," he exclaimed, as he flapped himself on the chest. "Master Hornder, I owe 'e a good turn for this. Lord only knoweth where I maight a' been, after a' visited me zo last night. It was a visit of the wicked one, by kitums." Master Crang hitched up his trousers, and seemed ready to be off again. But the Churchwarden gripped him by the collar.

"Nay, man. Shan't have it thy own way. After what us have doed for thy throat, us have a call upon thy breath. Strange ways with strangers; open breast with bellyful."

The honest blacksmith stood in doubt, and some of his terror crept back again. "Bain't for me to zettle. Be a job for Passon Penniloe. Swore upon my knees I did. Here be the mark on my small-clothes. Passon is the only man can set my soul to liberty."

"What odds to us about thy soul? 'Tis thy tongue we want, lad?" the senior Churchwarden cried impatiently. "Thou shalt never see a groat of mine again, unless thou speakest."

"Passon hath a chill in's bones, and the doctor hath been called to him," Mr. Channing added, with a look of upper wisdom. "Clerk and Churchwarden, in council assembled, hath all the godliness of a rubric."

The blacksmith was moved, and began to scratch his head. "If a' could only see it so?" he muttered – "howsomever, horder they women vessels out o' zight. A woman hath no need to hear, if her can zee – according as the wise man sayeth. And come where us can see the sun a shinin'; for my words will make 'e shiver, if ye both was tombstones. I feel myself a busting to be rid of them."

Master Crang's tale – with his speech fetched up to the manner of the east of England, and his flinty words broken into our road-metal – may fairly be taken for spoken as follows: —

"No longer agone than last night, I tell you, I went to bed, pretty much as usual, with nothing to dwell upon in my mind; without it was poor Squire's funeral, because I had been attending of it. I stayed pretty nearly to the last of that, and saw the ground going in again; and then I just looked in at the *Bush*, because my heart was downsome. All the company was lonesome, and the room was like a barn after a bad cold harvest, with a musty nose to it. There was nobody with spirit to stand glasses round, and nobody with heart to call for them. The Squire was that friendly-minded, that all of us were thinking – 'The Lord always taketh the best of us. I may be the one to be called for next.' Then an old man in the corner, who could scarcely hold his pipe, began in a low voice about burials, and doctors, and the way they strip the graves up the country; and the others fell in about their experience; and with only two candles and no snuffers but the tongs, any one might take us for a company of sextons.

"The night was cruel cold, when I come out, and everything looking weist and unkid, and the big bear was right across the jags of church-tower; and with nothing inside to keep me up to the mark, and no neighbour making company, the sound of my own heels was forced upon my ears, as you might say, by reason of the gloomy road, and a spark of flint sometimes coming up like steel-filings, when I ran to keep heat, for I had not so much as a stick with me. And when I got home I roused up the forge-fire, so as to make sure where I was, and comfort my knuckles; and then I brashed it down, with coals at present figure, for the morning.

"As it happened, my wife had been a little put out, about something or other in the morning; you know how the women-folk get into ways, and come out of them again, without no cause. But when she gets into that frame of mind, she never saith much, to justify it, as evil-tempered women do, but keeps herself quiet, and looks away bigly, and leaves me to do things for myself; until such time as she comes round again. So I took a drink of water from the shoot, instead of warming up the teapot, and got into bed like a lamb, without a word; leaving her to begin again, by such time as she should find repentance. And before I went to sleep, there was no sound to be heard in the house, or in the shop below; without it was a rat or two, and the children snoring in the inner room, and the baby breathing very peaceful in the cradle to the other side of the bed, that was strapped on, to come at for nursing of her.

"Well, I can't say how long it may have been, because I sleep rather heartily, before I was roused up by a thundering noise going through the house, like the roaring of a bull. Sally had caught up the baby, and was hugging and talking, as if they would rob her of it; and when I asked what all this hubbub was, 'You had better go and see,' was all she said. Something told me it was no right thing; and my heart began beating as loud as a flail, when I crept through the dark to the window in the thatch; for the place was as black almost as the bottom of my dipping-trough, and I undid the window, and called out, 'Who is there?' with as much strength as ever I was master of, just then.

"'Come down, or we'll roast you alive,' says a great gruff voice that I never heard the like of; and there I saw a red-hot clinker in my own tongs, a sputtering within an inch of my own smithy thatch.

"'For God's sake, hold hard!' says I, a thinking of the little ones. 'In less than two minutes I'll be with you.' I couldn't spare time to strike a light, and my hands were too shaky for to do it. I huddled

on my working clothes anyhow, going by the feel of them; and then I groped my way downstairs, and felt along the wall to the backway into workshop, and there was a little light throwing a kind of shadow from the fire being bellowsed up; but not enough to see things advisedly. The door had been kicked open, and the bar bulged in; and there in the dark stood a terrible great fellow, bigger than Dascombe, the wrestler, by a foot; so far as I could make out by the stars, and the glimmer from the water. Over his face he had a brown thing fixed, like the front of a fiddle with holes cut through it, and something I could not make out was strapped under one of his arms like a holster.

"Just you look here, man, and look at nothing else, or it will be worse for you. Bring your hammer and pincers, while I show a light.'

"Let me light a lantern, sir,' I said, as well as I could speak for shivering; 'if it is a shoeing job, I must see what I am about.'

"Do what I say, blacksmith; or I'll squash you under your anvil.'

"He could have done it as soon as looked; and I can't tell you how I put my apron on, and rose the step out of shop after him. He had got a little case of light in one hand, such as I never saw before, all black when he chose, but as light as the sun whenever he chose to flash it, and he flashed it suddenly into my eyes, so that I jumped back, like a pig before the knife. But he caught me by the arm, where you see this big blue mark, and handed me across the road like that.

"Blast the horse! Put his rotten foot right,' he says. And sure enough there was a fine nag before me, quaking and shaking with pain and fright, and dancing his near fore-foot in the air, like a Christian disciple with a bad fit of the gout.

"That made me feel a bit like myself again; for there never was no harm in a horse, and you always know what you are speaking to. I took his poor foot gently, as if I had kid gloves on, and he put his frothy lips into my whiskers, as if he had found a friend at last.

"The big man threw the light upon the poor thing's foot, and it was oozing with blood and black stuff like tar. 'What a d – d fuss he makes about nothing!' says the man, or the brute I should call him, that stood behind me. But I answered him quite spirity, for the poor thing was trying to lick my hand with thankfulness, 'You'd make a d – der, if it was your foot,' I said; 'he hath got a bit of iron driven right up through his frog. Have him out of shafts. He isn't fit to go no further.' For I saw that he had a light spring-cart behind him, with a tarpaulin tucked in along the rails.

"Do him where he stands, or I'll knock your brains out;' said the fellow pushing in, so as to keep me from the cart. 'Jem, stand by his head. So, steady, steady!'

"As I stooped to feel my pincers, I caught just a glimpse under the nag's ribs of a man on his off-side, with black clothes on, a short square man, so far as I could tell: but he never spoke a word, and seemed ever so much more afraid to show himself than the big fellow was, though he was shy enough. Then I got a good grip on the splinter of the shoe, which felt to me more like steel than iron, and pulled it out steadily and smoothly as I could, and a little flow of blood came after it. Then the naggie put his foot down, very tenderly at first, the same as you put down an over-filled pint.

"Gee-wugg's the word now,' says the big man to the other; and sorry I am to my dying bones that I stopped them from doing it. But I felt somehow too curious, through the thicket of my fright, and wise folks say that the Lord hath anger with men that sleep too heartily.

"Bide a bit,' I told him, 'till I kill the inflammation, or he won't go a quarter of a mile before he drops;' and before he could stop me, I ran back, and blew up a merry little blaze in the shop, as if to make a search for something, and then out I came again with a bottle in my hand, and the light going flickering across the road. The big man stood across, as if to hide the cart; but the man behind the horse skitted back into a bush, very nimble and clever, but not quite smart enough.

"The pretty nag – for he was a pretty one and kind, and now I could swear to him anywhere – was twitching his bad foot up and down, as if to ask how it was getting on; and I got it in my hand, and he gave it like a lamb, while I poured in a little of the stuff I always keep ready for their troubles, when they have them so. For the moment I was bold, in the sense of knowing something, and called

out to the man I was so mortal frit of – 'Master, just lend a hand for a second, will you; stand at his head in case it stingeth him a bit.' Horse was tossing of his head a little, and the chap came round me, and took him by the nose, the same as he had squeezed me by the arm.

"I must have one hind-foot up, or he will bolt,' says I; though the Lord knows that was nonsense; and I slipped along the shaft, and put my hand inside the wheel, and twitched up the tarpaulin that was tucked below the rail. At the risk of my life it was; and I knew that much, although I was out of the big man's sight. And what think you I saw, in the flickering of the light? A flicker it was, like the lick of a tongue; but it's bound to abide as long as I do. As sure as I am a living sinner, what I saw was a dead man's shroud. Soft, and delicate, and white it was, like the fine linen that Dives wore, and frilled with rare lace, like a wealthy baby's christening; no poor man, even in the world to come, could afford himself such a winding-sheet. Tamsin Tamlin's work it was; the very same that we saw in her window, and you know what that was bought for. What there was inside of it was left for me to guess.

"I had just time to tuck the tarpaulin back, when the big man comes at me with his light turned on. 'What the – are you doing with that wheel?' says he, and he caught me by the scruff of the neck, and swung me across the road with one hand, and into my shop, like a sack with the corn shot out of it. 'Down on your knees!' he said, with no call to say it, for my legs were gone from under me, and I sprawled against my own dipping-trough, and looked up to be brained with my own big hammer. 'No need for that,' he saith, for he saw me glancing at it; 'my fist would be enough for a slip such as you. But you be a little too peart, Master Smith. What right have you to call a pair of honest men sheep-stealers?'

"I was so astonished that I could not answer, for the thought of that had never come nigh me. But I may have said —*Shish—shish!* to soothe the nag; and if I did, it saved my life, I reckon.

"Now swear, as you hoped to be saved,' says he, 'that never a word shall pass your lips about this here little job to-night.' I swore it by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; but I knew that I never could stick to it. 'You break it,' says he, 'and I'll burn you in your bed, and every soul that belongs to you. Here's your dibs, blacksmith! I always pay handsome.' He flung me a crown of King George and the Dragon, and before I could get up again, the cart was gone away.

"Now, I give you my word, Farmer Hornder, and the very same to you Clerk Channing, it was no use of me to go to bed again, and there never was a nightcap would stay on my head without double-webbing girths to it. By the mercy of the Lord, I found a thimbleful of gin, and then I roused up light enough to try to make it cheerful; and down comes Sally, like a faithful wife, to find out whatever I was up to. You may trust me for telling her a cock-and-bull affair; for 'twas no woman's business, and it might have killed the baby."

CHAPTER IX. THE NARROW PATH

"Now, Master Joe Crang," the Churchwarden said firmly, but not quite as sternly as he meant to put it, because he met the blacksmith's eyes coming out of head; "how are we to know that you have not told us what you call a cock-and-bull affair? Like enough you had a very fearsome dream, after listening to a lot about those resurrection-men, and running home at night with the liquor in your head."

"Go and see my door ahanging on the hinges, master, and the mark of the big man's feet in the pilm, and the track of wheels under the hedge, and the blood from the poor nag's frog, and the splinter of shoe I pulled out with the pincers. But mercy upon me, I be mazed almost! I forgot I put the iron in my pocket. Here it is?"

There it was sure enough, with dried blood on the jag of it, and the dint from a stone which had driven it, like a knife through an oyster-shell, into the quick. Such is the nature of human faith, that the men, handling this, were convinced of every word. They looked at each other silently, and shook their heads with one accord, and gave the shivering blacksmith another draught of cider.

"Joe, I beg your pardon for doubting of your word," Farmer John answered, as his own terror grew; "you have been through a most awesome night. But tell us a thing or two you have left out. What way do you reckon the cart came from, and what was the colour, and was there any name on it, and by the sound, which way did it drive off?"

"Ay, ay, he hath hit it," the clerk chimed in; "the finest head-piece in all the county belongeth to the hat of our Master John Horner."

"I'll tell 'e every blessed thing I knows, but one," Joe Crang was growing braver, after handing horrors on; "can't say which way the cart come from, because I was sound in my bed just then. But her hadn't been through the ford, by the look of wheels, and so it seems her must have come from Perlycrass direction. The colour was dark; I should say, a reddish brown, so far as the light supported me. There was no name to see; but I was on her near side, and the name would be t'other side of course, if there wur one. Her drove off the way her was standing, I believe; at least according to the sound of it; and I should have heard the splash, if they had driven through the ford. Any other questions, master?"

"There may be some more, Joe, when I come to think. But I don't see clearly how you could have been on the near side of horse, to the other side of lane, in case they were coming from our village way."

"You'm right enough there, sir, if so be they hadn't turned. I could see by the marks that they went by my shop, and then turned the poor horse, who was glad enough to stop; and then bided under hedge, in a sort of dark cornder. Might a' come down the lane a' purpose like, seeking of me to do the job. Seemeth as if they had heard of my shop, but not ezactly where it waz."

"When you come to think of it, might be so." Farmer John was pretty safe in his conclusions, because they never hurried him. "And if that was the meaning, we should all have reason to be very joyful, Joe. You cannot see it yet; nor even Master Channing. But to my mind it proveth that the chaps in this queer job – mind, I don't say but what they may have been respectable, and driving about because they could afford it – but to my mind it showeth they were none of our own parish. Nor next parish either, so far as reason goes. Every child in Perlycross, with legs to go on, knows afore his alphabet, where Susscot forge be."

"A' knoweth it too well, afore he gets his breeches. Three quarters of a mile makes no odds to they childer, when they take it in their heads to come playing with the sparks. And then their mothers after 'em, and all the blame on me!"

"It is the way of human nature, when it is too young. Master Clerk, a word with you, before we go too far. Sit down upon this sack, Joe, and try to eat a bit, while the wiser heads be considering."

The Churchwarden took the ancient clerk aside, and the blacksmith beginning to be in better heart, renewed his faith in human nature upon bread and bacon.

Before he was sure that he had finished, the elder twain came back to him, fortified by each other's sense of right, and high position in the parish. But Channing was to put the questions now, because they were unpleasant, and he was poor.

"According to my opinion, Master Crang, you have told us everything wonderful clear, as clear as if we had been there to see it, considering of the time of night. But still there is one thing you've kept behind, causally perhaps, and without any harm. But Churchwarden Horner saith, and everybody knows the value of his opinion, that the law is such, that every subject of the King, whatever his own opinion may be, hath to give it the upper course, and do no more harm than grumble."

"Big or little, old or young, male or female, no distinction, baronet or blacksmith;" said Farmer John, impressively.

"And therefore, Joe, in bounden duty we must put the question, and you must answer. Who was the man according to your judgment, that kept so close behind the horse, and jumped away so suddenlike, when the light of your fire shone into the lane? You said that the big man called him 'Jem,' and you as good as told us that you certified his identity."

"I don't understand 'e, Master Channing. I never was no hand at big words." The blacksmith began to edge away, till the farmer took the old man's staff, and hooked him by the elbow.

"No lies, Crang! You know me pretty well. I am not the man to stand nonsense. Out of this potato-field you don't budge, till you've told us who the short man was."

"A' worn't short, sir; a' worn't short at all – taller than I be, I reckon; but nort to what the other were. Do 'e let go of me, Farmer Hornder. How could I see the man, through the nag?"

"That's your own business, Crang. See him you did. Horse or no horse, you saw the man; and you knew him, and you were astonished. Who was he, if you please, Master Joseph Crang?"

"I can't tell 'e, sir, if I was to drop down dead this minute. And if I said ort to make 'e vancy that I knowed the gentleman, I must a' been mazed as a drummeldrone."

"Oh, a gentleman, was it? A queer place for a gentleman! No wonder you cockle yourself to keep it dark. A five-pound note to be made out of that, Joe; if the officers of justice was agreeable."

"Master Hornder, you'm a rich man, and I be but a poor one. I wouldn't like to say that you behaved below yourself, by means of what I thought; without knowing more than vancy."

"Joe, you are right, and I was wrong;" the farmer was a just man, whenever he caught sight of it; "I was going to terrify of 'e, according to the orders of the evil-thinkers, that can't believe good, because it bain't inside theirselves. But I put it to you now, Joe, as a bit of dooty; and it must tell up for you, in t'other way as well. For the sake of all good Christians, and the peace of this here parish, you be held to bail by your own conscience, the Lord having placed you in that position, to tell us the full names of this man, gentleman or ploughboy, gipsy or home-liver."

The blacksmith was watching Mr. Horner's eyes, and saw not a shadow of relenting. Then he turned to the old man, for appeal. But the Clerk, with the wisdom of fourscore years, said, – "Truth goes the furthest. Who would go to jail for you, Joe?"

"Mind that you wouldn't give me no peace; and that I says it against my will, under fear of the King and religion" – Master Crang protested, with a twist, as if a clod-crusher went over him – "likewise that I look to you to bear me harmless, as a man who speaketh doubtful of the sight of his own eyes. But unless they was wrong, and misguided by the Devil, who were abroad last night and no mistake, t'other man – in the flesh, or out of it, and a' might very well a' been out of it upon such occasion, and with that there thing behind him, and they say that the Devil doth get into a bush, as my own grandmother zee'd he once – 'twixt a Rosemary tree, which goes far to prove it, being the very last a' would have chosen – "

"None of that stuff," cried the Churchwarden sternly; and the Clerk said, "No beating about the bush, Joe! As if us didn't know all the tricks of Zatan!"

"Well then, I tell 'e – it waz Doctor Jemmy Vox."

They both stood, and stared at him, as if to ask whether his brain was out of order, or their own ears. But he met their gaze steadily, and grew more positive, on the strength of being doubted.

"If ever I zee'd a living man, I tell 'e that man, t'other side of the nag, waz Doctor Jemmy Vox, and no other man."

The men of Devon have earned their place (and to their own knowledge the foremost one) in the records of this country, by taking their time about what they do, and thinking of a thing before they say it. Shallow folk, having none of this gift, are apt to denounce it as slowness of brain, and even to become impatient with the sage deliberators.

Both Horner, and Channing, had excellent reasons for thinking very highly of Dr. Fox. The Churchwarden, because the doctor had saved the life of his pet child Sally, under Providence; and the Clerk, inasmuch as he had the privilege of making the gentleman's trousers, for working and for rustic use.

"Now I tell 'e what it is," said Farmer John, looking wrathful, because he saw nothing else to do, and Channing shrank back from doing anything; "either thou art a born liar, Joe; or the Devil hath gotten hold of thee."

"That's the very thing I been afeared of. But would un let me spake the truth, without contempt of persons?"

"Will 'e stand to it, Joe, afore a Justice of the Peace?" The Clerk thought it was high time to put in a word. "Upon occasion, I mean, and if the law requireth."

"There now! Look at that! The right thing cometh, soon or late;" cried the persecuted blacksmith. "Take me afore Squire Walders himself – no, no, can't be, considerin' I were at his funeral yesterday – well take me afore Squire Mockham, if be fitty; and ax of him to putt, I don't care what it be, stocks, or dead water, or shears atop of me; and I'll tell un the very zame words I telled to thee. Can't hev no relief from gospel, if the Passon's by the heels; shall have some relief by law, if the Lord hath left it living. No man can't spake no vairer than that there be."

This adjuration was of great effect. "To Zeiser shalt thou go?" replied the senior Churchwarden; "us have no right to take the matter out of Zeiser's hands. I was dwelling in my mind of that all along, and so was you, Clerk."

Mr. Channing nodded, with his conscience coming forward; and after some directions at the upper end of field – where the men had been taking it easily, and the women putting heads together – the two authorities set off along the lane, with the witness between them, towards Perlycross.

But, as if they had not had enough of excitement to last them for a month of thoughts and words, no sooner did they turn the corner at the four-cross roads (where the rectory stands, with the school across the way), than they came full butt upon a wondrous crowd of people hurrying from the Churchyard.

"Never heard the like of it!" "Can't believe my eyes a'most." "Whatever be us a'coming to?" "The Lord in heaven have mercy on the dead!" "The blessed dead, as can't help themselves!"

These, and wilder cries, and shrieks, from weeping women along the cottage-fronts; while in the middle of the street came slowly men with hot faces, and stern eyes. Foremost of all was Sergeant Jakes, with his head thrown back, and his gray locks waving, and his visage as hard as when he scaled the ramparts, and leaped into the smoke and swordflash. Behind him was a man upon a foaming horse, and the strength of the village fiercely silent.

"Where be all agoing to? What's up now? Can't any of 'e spake a word of sense?" cried Farmer John, as the crowd stopped short, and formed a ring around him.

"High Jarks, tell un."

"Us was going to your house."

"Hold your tongue, will 'e, and let High Jarks speak."

The Sergeant took discipline, and told his tale in a few strong words, which made the Farmer's hair stand up.

"Let me see the proof," was all he said; for his brain was going round, being still unseasoned to any whirl fiercer than rotation of farm-crops. All the others fell behind him, with that sense of order which still swayed the impulse of an English crowd; for he was now the foremost layman in the parish, and everybody knew that the Parson was laid up. The gloom of some black deed fell upon them; and they passed along the street like a funeral.

"Clap the big gate to, and shoot the iron bar across. No tramping inside more than hath been a'ready."

Master Horner gave this order, and it was obeyed, even by those who excluded themselves. At the west end, round the tower, was a group of "foreign" workmen – as the artisans from Exeter were called – but under orders from Mr. Adney they held back, and left the parish matter to the natives thereof.

"Now come along with me, the men I call for;" commanded the Churchwarden, with his hand upon the bars, as he rose to the authority conferred upon him; "and they be Sergeant Jakes, Clerk Channing, Bob that hath ridden from Walderscourt, and Constable Tapscott, if so be he hath arrived."

"I be here, sure enough, and my staff along o' me – hath the pictur' of His Majesty upon him. Make way, wull 'e, for the Officer of the King?"

Then these men, all in a cold sweat more or less – except Sergeant Jakes, who was in a hot one – backing up one another, took the narrow path which branched to the right from the Churchyard cross, to the corner where brave Colonel Waldron had been laid.

CHAPTER X. IN CHARGE

"My young friend, I must get up," Mr. Penniloe exclaimed, if so feeble a sound could be called an exclamation. "It is useless to talk about my pulse, and look so wise. Here have I been perhaps three days. I am not quite certain, but it must be that. And who is there to see to the parish, or even the service of the Church, while I lie like this? It was most kind of you – I have sense enough to feel it – to hurry from your long ride, without a bit to eat – Mrs. Muggridge said as much, and you could not deny it. But up I must get; and more than that, I must get out. It will soon be dark again, by the shadows on the blind, and I am sure that there is something gone amiss, I know not what. But my duty is to know it, and to see what I can do. Now go, and have some dinner, while I just put on my clothes."

"Nothing of that sort, sir, will you do to-day. You are weaker than a cat – as that stupid saying goes. That idiot Jackson has bled you to a skeleton, put a seton in your neck, and starved you. And he has plied you with drastics, by day and by night. Why, the moment I heard of that Perliton booby getting you in his clutches – but thank God I was in time! It is almost enough to make one believe in special Providences."

"Hush, Jemmy, hush? You cannot want to vex me now."

"Neither now, nor ever, sir; as you are well aware. So you must do likewise, and not vex me. I have trouble enough of my own, without rebellion by my patients."

"I forgot that, Jemmy. It was not kind of me. But I am not quite clear in my head just now. I fear I am neglecting some great duty. But just for the moment, I am not sure what it is. In a minute or two, I shall remember what it is."

"No, you won't, my good friend, not for twenty hours yet;" the young doctor whispered to himself. "You have had a narrow shave, and another day of Jackson would have sent you to the world you think too much of. There never was a man who dwelt in shadows – or in glory, as you take it – with his whole great heart, as you do. Well, I wish there were more of them, and that I could just be one."

The peace that had settled on the Parson's face was such as no lineaments of man can win, without the large labours of a pure life past, and the surety of recompense full in view. Fox kept his eye on him, and found his pulse improve, as hovering slumber deepened into tranquil sleep. "Rare stuff that!" he said, referring not to faith, but to a little phial-bottle he had placed upon the drawers; "he shan't go to glory yet, however fit he may be. It is high time, – I take it, for me to have a little peck."

The young man was right. He had ridden thirty miles from his father's house that afternoon, and hearing at the "Old Barn," as he called his present home, of poor Mr. Penniloe's serious illness, had mounted his weary mare again, and spurred her back to the rectory. Of the story with which all the parish was ringing he had not heard a word as yet, being called away by his anxious mother, on the very night after the Squire was buried. But one thing had puzzled him, as he passed and repassed the quiet streets of Perlycross – the people looked at him, as if he were a stranger, and whispered to one another as he trotted by. Could they have known what had happened to his father?

With the brown tops still upon his sturdy legs, and spurs thickly clotted with Somerset mud (crustier even than that of Devon) Fox left the bedroom with the door ajar, and found little Fay in a beehive chair, kneeling with her palms put together on the back, and striving hard to pray, but disabled by deep sobs. Her lovely little cheeks and thick bright curls were dabbled into one another by the flood of tears; as a moss-rose, after a thundershower, has its petals tangled in the broidery of its sheath.

"Will he die, because I am so wicked? Will he die, because I cannot see the face of God?" She was whispering, with streaming eyes intent upon the sky-light, as if she were looking for a healthy Father there.

"No, my little darling, he will not die at all. Not for many years, I mean, when Fay is a great tall woman."

The child turned round with a flash of sudden joy, and leaped into his arms, and flung her hair upon his shoulders, and kissed him, vehemently, like a true tiny queen of the nursery. Many little girls were very fond of Dr. Fox; although their pretty loves might end in a sombre potion.

"With a one, two, three!

If you want any more, you must kiss me."

"Now shall I tell you what to do, my dear?" said the truly starving doctor, with the smell of fine chops coming up the stairs, sweeter than even riper lips; "you want to help your dear daddy, don't you?"

Little Fay nodded, for her heart was full again, and the heel-tap of a sob would have been behind her words.

"Then go in very quietly, and sit upon that chair, and don't make any noise, even with your hair. Keep the door as it is, or a little wider; and never take your eyes from your dear father's face. If he keeps on sleeping, you stay quiet as a mouse; if he opens his eyes, slip out softly, and tell me. Now you understand all that, but you must not say a word."

The child was gazing at him, with her whole soul in her eyes, and her red lips working up and down across her teeth; as if her father's life hung upon her self-control. Dr. Fox was hard put to it to look the proper gravity. As if he would have put this little thing in charge, if there had been any real charge in it!

"Grand is the faith of childhood. What a pity it gets rubbed out so soon!" he said to himself, as he went down the stairs, and the child crept into her father's room, as if the whole world hung upon her pretty little head.

Mrs. Muggridge had lighted two new candles, of a size considered gigantic then – for eight of them weighed a pound almost – and not only that, but also of materials scarcely yet accepted as orthodox. For "Composites" was their name, and their nature was neither sound tallow, nor steadfast wax. Grocer Wood had sent them upon trial gratis; but he was a Dissenter, though a godly man; and the housekeeper, being a convert to the Church, was not at all sure that they would not blow up. Therefore she lit them first for Dr. Fox, as a hardy young man, with some knowledge of mixtures.

"He is going on famously, as well as can be, Muggridge;" the doctor replied to her anxious glance. "He will not wake till twelve, or one o'clock, to-morrow; and then I shall be here, if possible. The great point then will be to feed him well. Beef-tea, and arrow-root, every two hours, with a little port wine in the arrow-root. No port wine in the house? Then I will send some, that came from my father's own cellar. Steal all his clothes, and keep a female in the room. The Parson is a modest man, and that will keep him down. But here comes my mutton chop. Well done, Susanna! What a cook! What skill and science, at the early age of ten!"

This was one of Dr. Jemmy's little jokes; for he knew that Susanna was at least seventeen, and had not a vestige of cookery. But a doctor, like a sexton, must be jolly, and leave the gravity to the middleman – the parson.

But instead of cutting in with her usual protest, and claim to the triumph, whatever it might be, Mrs. Muggridge to his surprise held back, and considered his countenance, from the neighbourhood of the door. She had always been ready with her tit-for-tat, or lifting of her hand in soft remonstrance at his youthful levity. But now the good woman, from behind the candles, seemed to want snuffing, as they began to do.

"Anything gone wrong in Perlycross, since I went away, Mrs. Muggridge? I don't mean the great loss the parish has sustained, or this bad attack of Mr. Penniloe's. That will be over, in a few days' time, now his proper adviser is come back again. By the way, if you let Jackson come in at this front door – no, it mustn't lie with you, I will write a little note, polite but firm, as the papers say; it shall go

to his house by my boy Jack, to save professional amenities: but if he comes before he gets it, meet him at the door with another, which I will leave with you. But what makes you look so glum at me, my good woman? Out with it, if I have hurt your feelings. You may be sure that I never meant to do so."

"Oh sir, is it possible that you don't know what has happened?" Thyatira came forward, with her apron to her eyes. She was very kind-hearted, and liked this young man; but she knew how young men may be carried away, especially when puffed up with worldly wisdom.

"I have not the least idea what you mean, Mrs. Muggridge." Fox spoke rather sternly, for his nature was strong, and combative enough upon occasion, though his temper was sweet and playful; and he knew that many lies had been spread abroad about him, chiefly by members of his own profession. "My ears are pretty sharp, as suits my name, and I heard you muttering once or twice – 'He can't have done it. I won't believe it of him.' Now if you please, what is it I am charged with doing?"

"Oh sir, you frighten me when you look like that. I could never have believed that you had such eyes."

"Never mind my eyes. Look here, my good woman. Would you like to have wicked lies told about you? I have been away for three days, called suddenly from home, before daylight on Saturday morning. My father was seized with a sudden attack, for the first time in his life. He is getting old; and I suppose a son's duty was to go. Very well, I leave him on Tuesday morning, because I have urgent cases here; and he has his own excellent doctor. I pass up the village, and everybody looks as if I had cut his throat. I go home, concluding that I must be mazed – as you people call it – from want of food and sleep. But when I get home, my own man, and boy, and old Betty, all rush out, and stare at me. 'Are you mad?' I call out, and instead of answering, they tell me the Parson is dying, and at the mercy of Jervis Jackson. I know what that means, and without quitting saddle come back here and rout the evil one. Then what happens? Why, my very first mouthful is poisoned by the black looks of a thoroughly good woman. Tell me what it is, or by George and the Dragon, I'll ride home, and drag it out of my own people."

"Can you prove you were away, sir? Can you show when you left home?" Thyatira began to draw nearer, and forgot to keep a full-sized chair 'twixt the Doctor and herself.

"To be sure, I can prove that I have been at Foxden, by at least a score of witnesses, if needful."

"Thank the Lord in heaven, that He hath not quite forgotten us! Susanna, have another plate hot, but be sure you don't meddle with the grid-iron. Bad enough for Perlycross it must be anyhow; a disgrace the old parish can never get over – but ever so much better than if you, our own doctor – "

"Good-bye, Mrs. Muggridge! You'll see me to-morrow."

"Oh no, sir, no. I will tell you now just. How could I begin, when I thought you had done it? At least I never thought that, I am sure. But how was I to contradict it? And the rudest thing ever done outside of London! The poor Squire's grave hath been robbed by somebody, and all Perlycross is mad about it."

"What!" cried Jemmy Fox. "Do you mean Sir Thomas Waldron? It cannot be. No one would dare to do such a thing."

"But some one hath, sir, sure enough. Mr. Jakes it was, sir, as first found it out, and a more truthfuller man never lived in any parish. My master doth not know a word of it yet. Thank the Lord almost for this chill upon his lungs; for the blow might have killed him, if he had been there, with such a disorderly thing on his back. We must hide it from him, as long as ever we can. To tell the truth, I was frightened to let you go up to him, with every one so positive about the one who did it. But you wouldn't take no denial, and I am very glad you wouldn't. But do have t'other chop, sir; it's a better one than this was. Oh, I beg your pardon. I forgot to draw the blind down."

The truth was that she had been afraid till now to sever herself from the outer world, and had kept Susanna on the kitchen stairs; but now she felt as certain of the young man's innocence, as she had been of his guilt before.

"Nothing more, thank you," said Fox, sitting back, and clenching his hand upon the long bread-knife; "and so all the parish, and even you, were only too delighted to believe that I, who have worked among you nearly three years now, chiefly for the good of the poor and helpless, and never taken sixpence when it was hard to spare – that I would rob the grave of a man, whom I revered and loved, as if he were my father. This is what you call Christianity, is it? And no one can be saved except such Christians as yourselves! The only Christian in the parish is your parson. Excuse me – I have no right to be angry with – with a woman, for any want of charity. Come tell me this precious tale, and I'll forgive you. No doubt the evidence is very strong against me."

Thyatira was not pleased with this way of taking it. She thought that the charity was on her side, for accepting the doctor's own tale so frankly. So she fell back upon her main buttress.

"If you please, Dr. Fox," she said with some precision; "as women be lacking in charity, therefore the foremost of all godly graces, you might think it fairer to see Sergeant Jakes, a military man and upright. And being the first as he was to discover, I reckon he hath the first right to speak out. Susanna seeth light in the schoolroom still though all the boys be gone, and books into the cupboards. Ah, he is the true branch for discipline. Do 'e good to look in at the window after dusk, and the candles as straight as if the French was coming. 'I am the Vine,' saith the Lord, 'and ye' – but you know what it is, Dr. Jemmy, though seldom to be found, whether Church it be, or Chapel. Only if you make a point of seeing the man that knoweth more than all of us put together, the new pupil, Master Peckover, is a very obliging young gentleman, and one as finds it hard upon him to keep still."

"Oh, he is come, is he? I have heard some tales of him. It struck me there was more noise than usual in the pupils' room. Let me think a moment, if you please. Yes, I had better see Sergeant Jakes. He may be a queer old codger, but he will stick to what he sees and says. Tell those noisy fellows, that they must keep quiet. They want High Jarks among them with his biggest vine, as you seem to call his cane."

CHAPTER XI. AT THE CHARGE

Strenuous vitality, strong pulse, thick skin, tough bone, and steadfast brain, all elements of force and fortitude, were united in this Dr. Fox; and being thus endowed, and with ready money too, he felt more of anger than of fear, when a quarrel was thrust upon him. While he waited alone for the schoolmaster, he struck Mr. Penniloe's best dining-table with a heavy fist that made the dishes ring, and the new-fashioned candles throw spots of grease upon the coarse white diaper. Then he laughed at himself, and put a calm face on, as he heard the strong steps in the passage.

"Sit here, Mr. Jakes," he said, pointing to a chair, as the Sergeant offered him a stiff salute. "Mrs. Muggridge, you had better leave the room. This is not a nice matter for ladies. Now Sergeant, what is all this rotten stuff about me?"

"Not about you, sir, I hope with all my heart."

Mr. Jakes met the young man's flashing eyes, with a gaze that replied – "You don't scare me," and drew his chair close enough to study every feature. If the young man was full of wrath, so was the old man – implacable wrath, at the outrage to his Colonel.

"Well, tell your pack of lies" – Fox was driven beyond himself, by the other's suspicious scrutiny – "oh, I beg your pardon, you believe them true, of course. But out with your stuff, like a man, sir!"

"It is your place to prove it a pack of lies," said the old man, with his shaggy eyebrows rigid as a line of British bayonets; "and if you can't, by the God who made me, I'll run my old sword through your heart."

"Rather hard upon me. Not got it here, I hope. Half an hour for repentance, while you fetch it out of some cheese-toasting rack. A nice man to teach the youth of Perlycross! What a fool you are, Jakes! But that you can't help. Even a fool though may try to be fair. During your long time in the wars, were you ever accused wrongfully, my friend?"

"Yes, sir, a score of times. And I like your spirit. If you did what they say of you, you would be a cur. Every evil name you call me makes me think the better of you."

"I will call you no more; for I want no favour. All I want is truth about this cursed outrage. Am I to wait all night for it? Now just tell your tale, as if your were sitting at the *Ivy-bush*. You have been in command of men, no doubt – just command yourself."

"That I will," said the veteran with an upward glance – "not like the *Ivy-bush*, but as before the Lord. Sir, I will command myself, as you recommend; and perhaps you would be none the worse, for taking your own medicine."

"Jakes, you are right. It is enough to turn me savage. But you shall not hear me speak again, until you have finished."

"It was just like this, sir," began the Sergeant, looking round for a glass, by force of habit, and then ashamed of himself for such a thought just now; "everybody in this parish knows how much I thought of Colonel Waldron; for a better and a braver man never trod this earth. Even Parson Penniloe will have to stand behind him, when the last muster cometh; because he hath not served his country. But I never was satisfied with any of you doctors. You may be very well in your way, Mr. Fox, for tooting, or measles, or any young complaint; but where is your experience in times of peace? And as for that hang-dog looking chap from London – well, I won't say what I thought of him; for I always keep my own opinions to myself. But I knew it was all over with our poor Colonel, the moment I clapped eyes on that fellow. Why, I went myself at once, and begged the Colonel to have him drummed out of the parish to the rogue's tattoo. But the good Colonel only laughed, and shook my hand – the last time it was, sir, the very last time."

"You were at the funeral, and there never was a truer one. I was proud to my heart, though it felt like lead, to see three old Officers come from miles away, brave men as ever led a storming column, with tears in their eyes, and not a thought of their own ends. There was no firing-party as should have been, being nothing but peace going on nowadays, and only country bumpkins about here. But I see you are impatient; because you know all that.

"As soon as all were gone away, and the ground put tidy, I brought a few of my own white flowers, as they do in Spanish land, and put them in very carefully with a bit of moss below them, and fastened them so as not to blow away, although there was a strong east wind up. Later on at night, I came again by the little wicket from the schoolroom, just to see that all was right; for my mind was uneasy somehow.

"The moon was going low, and it was getting very cold, and not a soul about, that I could see. The flowers showed bright, at the head of the mound; and close by was a little guardian – the Colonel's pet dog, that could never bear to leave him – she was lying there all in the cold by herself, sobbing every now and then, or as it were bewailing, with her chin along the ground, as if her heart was broken. It struck me so sad, that I could look at her no more.

"In the morning I slept past the usual time, being up so late, and out of spirits. But I saw the white frost on the ground, and I had a few boys to correct before school began, and then lessons to see to till twelve o'clock; and it must have been turned the half hour, when I went to Churchyard again, to see how my flowers had stood the frost. I had brought a bit of victuals in my pocket, for the dog; but little *Jess* was gone; and I could not blame her, considering how easily a man forgets his dog; and yet I was vexed with her, for being so like us; for the poor things have no religion, such as we make smooth with. My flowers were there; but not exactly as I thought I had put them; and the bank appeared to me to be made up sharper.

"Well, Mr. Fox, I am not one of them that notice little things upon the earth so much, (as if there was never any sky above them,) and make more fuss about a blade of grass, than the nature of men and good metal. I thought that old Channing had been at work again, not satisfied with his understrapper's job. Then I drew forth my flowers; and they looked almost, as if they had been tossed about the yard – crumpled almost anyhow, as well as scorched with frost.

"At this, I was angry, when I thought how kind the poor Colonel had been to that old stick of a clerk, and even let him muck up their liveries; and so I set off for the old man's cottage, to have a word or two with him, about it. But he was not at home; and little Polly, his grand-daughter, was sure that he had not been near the church that day, but was gone to help dig Farmer John's potatoes.

"Then back I went again, in a terrible quandary, remembering the wicked doings up the country, and the things that had come across my fancy in the night.

"The first thing I saw, when I came back by south-gate, was a young man, red in the face, and out of breath, jumping, in and out, over graves and tombstones, from the west end, where the contractor's work is. 'What are you doing, Bob?' said I, rebuking of him pretty strongly; for I saw that it was one of my old boys, now become a trusty sort of groom at Walderscourt.

"'Sergeant, what have you been doing here?' says he 'Our little *Jess* has just come home, with one leg cut in two.'

"All my blood seemed to stand still, and I should have dropped, if I hadn't laid hold of that very tombstone, which the Parson can't endure. The whole of it flashed upon me, in a moment; and a fool I must have been not to see it all before. But wicked as our men were, and wicked I myself was – as I will not deny it, in the rough-and-tumble times – such a blackguard dastard crime was out of my conception. Considering who the Colonel was; considering what he was, sir!"

The Sergeant turned away his face, and desired to snuff the candles. No snuffers were there, for this new invention was warranted not to want them. So he fumbled with his empty sleeve; but it would not come up to order; and then he turned back, as if brought to bay, and reckless of public

opinion; with his best new handkerchief in his hand – a piece of cotton goods imprinted with the Union-Jack in colours.

"My friend, you are a noble fellow," said Fox, with his own wrongs out of date, in the movement of large feeling. "Would to God, that I had any one as true to me, as you are!"

"It is not that," resumed the Sergeant, trying to look stern again. "It is the cursed cruelty, that makes me hate mankind, sir. That a man should kill a poor dumb thing, because it loved its master – there, there, the Almighty will smite the brute; for all helpless things belong to Him.

"Well, sir, I hardly know what happened next, or what I said to Bob Cornish. But he went round the wall, to fetch his horse; and the news must have spread, like wildfire. A young man, who had helped to make up the grave, was going to his dinner through the Churchyard; and seeing us there, he came and looked, and turned like a ghost, and followed us. Presently we were in the street, with half the village after us, going to the chief Churchwarden's house; for we knew how ill the Parson was. At the cross-roads, we met Farmer John, and old Clerk Channing along of him, looking doiled as bad as we were, and between them the blacksmith from Susscot ford; and a terrible tale we had from them.

"Farmer John, as the head of the parish now, took the lead; and well he did it. We went back by the big iron gate, and there we kept the outsiders back; and Mr. Adney was as good with his, who were working near the tower. I was ordered to the eastern end, where the stone stile leads into Perlycombe lane, by which the villains must have got in; with no house there in view of it, but only the tumble-down Abbey. Somebody was sent for my old sword, that I knocked away from the French officer, and now hangeth over the Commandments; and I swore that I would slash off any hand, that was laid on the edge of the riser; while Adney brought a pile of scaffold-cords, and enclosed all the likelihood of footprints.

"By this time the other Churchwarden was come, and they all put their heads together, and asked what my opinion was; and I said – 'Make no bones of it.' But they had done a wiser thing than that, with an eye to the law, and the penalties. They had sent Bob Cornish on the fast young horse, the Colonel thought so much of, to fetch the nearest Justice of the Peace, from his house this side of Perliton. Squire Mockham came, as strong as he could ride, with his mind made up about it; and four digging men were set to work at once. Squire Mockham was as sharp about it, as if he had just had the lid taken off of him, by death of superior officer; and I, who had seen him on the Bench knock under, to half a wink from the Colonel's eye, was vexed with the dignity he took over, by reason of being survivor.

"Clerk Channing will tell you more about the condition of things underground, for I never made them my study; though I have helped to bury a many brave men, in the rough, both French and English. My business it was to keep people away; and while I was putting a stern face on, and looking fit to kill any of the bumpkins, the Lord knows I could never have touched them, for my blood was as cold as snow-water. And when they sang up – 'No Colonel here!' just as if it made no difference – I dropped the French sword, and my flesh clave to my bones, the same as it did to King David. And ever since that, I have been fit for Bedlam; and the boys may stand and make mouths at me."

"I can understand that," said Dr. Fox, with his medical instincts moving – generously, as they always do with a man worthy of that high calling – "Jakes, you are in a depressed condition; and this exertion has made it worse. What you want is a course of carminatives. I will send you a bottle this very night. No more excitement for you at present. Lay aside all thought of this sad matter."

"As if I could, sir; as if I could!"

"No, I am a fool for suggesting that. But think of it, as little as you can. Above all things, go in for more physical exertion. Cane half-a-dozen boys, before breakfast."

"There's a dozen and a half, sir, that have been neglected sadly."

"That will be a noble tonic. Making mouths at Sergeant Jakes! You look better already, at the thought of doing duty, and restoring discipline."

"Talk about duty, sir! Where was I? Oh, if I had only gone out again; if I had only gone out again, instead of turning into my bed, like a sluggard! I shall never forgive myself for that."

"You would just have been killed; as poor *Jess* was. Such scoundrels think nothing of adding murder to a crime still worse. But before you go home – which is the best thing you can do, and have a dish of hot kidneys from your brother's shop – one thing I must ask; and you must answer. What lunatic has dared to say, that I had anything to do with this?"

"The whole parish is lunatic; if it comes to that, sir."

"And all the world, sometimes. But who began it? Jakes, you are a just man; or you could not be so loyal. Is it fair, to keep me in the dark, about the black things they are saying of me?"

"Sir, it is not. And I will tell you all I know; whatever enemies I may make. When a thing flares about, you can seldom lay your hand on the man, or the woman, who fired the train. It was Crang, the shoeing smith at Susscot ford, who first brought your name into it."

"Crang is an honest, and a simple-minded man. He would never speak against me, of his own will. He has been most grateful for what I did, when his little girl had scarlet fever. How could he have started this cursed tale?"

"From the evidence of his own eyes, sir; according at least to his use of them."

"Tell me what he saw, or thought he saw. He is not the man to tell a lie. Whatever he said, he believed in."

Fox spoke without any anger now; for this could be no scheme of his enemies.

"You are wonderful fair, sir;" said Sergeant Jakes. "You deserve to have all above board; and you shall have it."

Tired as he was, and beginning to feel poorly at the threat of medicine, the old soldier told the blacksmith's tale, with as few variations as can contrive to keep themselves out of a repetition. Fox began to see that the case was not by any means so easy, as he first supposed. Here was evidence direct against him, from an impartial witness; a tale coherent, and confirmed by facts independent of it, a motive easily assigned; and the public eager to accept it, after recent horrors. But he was young, and warm of faith in friendship, candour, and good-will; or (if the worst should come to the worst) in absolute pure justice.

"It will not take long to put this to rights," he said, when the Sergeant had finished his account. "No one can really have believed it, except that blockhead of a blacksmith. He was in a blue funk all the time, and no need to be ashamed of it. There are two people I must see to-night – Mr. Mockham, and that Joe Crang himself. I shall borrow a horse from Walter Haddon; my young mare has had enough of it. I shall see how the Parson looks before I go. Now go to bed, Sergeant, as I told you. Tomorrow you will find all the wiseacres saying, what fools they have made of one another."

But the veteran shook his head, and said, "If a cat has nine lives, sir; a lie has ninety-nine."

CHAPTER XII. A FOOL'S ERRAND

Mr. John Mockham was a short stout man, about five or six and forty years of age, ruddy, kind-hearted, and jocular. He thought very highly of Jemmy Fox, both as a man and a doctor; moreover he had been a guest at Foxden, several times, and had met with the greatest hospitality. But for all that, he doubted not a little, in his heart – though his tongue was not allowed to know it – concerning the young doctor's innocence of this most atrocious outrage. He bore in mind how the good and gentle mother had bemoaned (while Jemmy was in turn-down collars) the very sad perversity of his mind, towards anything bony and splintery. Nothing could keep him from cutting up, even when his thumb was done round with oozing rag, anything jointed or cellular; and the smell of the bones he collected was dreadful, even in the drawer where his frilled shirts werelaid.

The time was not come yet, and happily shall never – in spite of all morbid suisection – when a man shall anatomise his own mind, and trace every film of its histology. Squire Mockham would have laughed any one to scorn, who had dared to suggest, that in the process of his brain, there was any connexion of the frills in Jemmy's drawer with the blacksmith's description of what he had seen; and yet without his knowledge, it may even have been so. But whatever his opinion on the subject was, he did not refuse to see this young friend; although he was entertaining guests, and the evening was now far advanced.

Fox was shown into the library, by a very pale footman, who glanced at the visitor, as if he feared instant dissection, and evidently longed to lock him in. "Is it come to this already?" thought poor Fox.

"Excuse me for not asking you to join us in there," Mr. Mockham began rather stiffly, as he pointed to the dining-room; "but I thought you might wish to see me privately."

"I care not how it is. I have come to you, as a Magistrate, and – and – " "an old friend of the family," was what he meant to say, but substituted – "as a gentleman, and a sensible and clear-sighted one, to receive my deposition on oath, concerning the wicked lies spread abroad about me."

"Of what use will it be? The proper course is for you to wait, till the other side move in the matter; and then prove your innocence, if possible; and then proceed against them."

"That is to say, I am to lie, for six months, perhaps twelve months, under this horrible imputation, and be grateful for escaping at last from it! I see that even you are half inclined to think me guilty."

"All this to a Magistrate is quite improper. It happens that I have resolved not to act, to take no share in any proceedings that may follow; on account of my acquaintance with your family. But that you could not know, until I told you. I am truly sorry for you; but you must even bear it."

"You say that so calmly, because you think I deserve it. Now as you are not going to act in the matter, and have referred to your friendship with my family, I will tell you a little thing in confidence, which will prove to you at once that I am innocent – that I never could by any possibility have done it."

Before Mr. Mockham could draw back, the visitor had whispered a few words in his ear, which entirely changed the whole expression of his face.

"Well, I am surprised! I had no idea of it. How could that fool Crang have made such a mistake? But I saw from first how absurd it was, to listen to such fellows. I refused to give a warrant. I said that no connexion could be shown, between the two occurrences. How strange that I should have hit the mark so well! But I seem to have that luck generally. Well, I am pleased, for your dear mother's sake, as well as your own, Master Jemmy. There may be a lot of trouble; but you must keep your heart up, and the winning card is yours. After all, what a thing it is to be a doctor!"

"Not so very fine, unless your nature drives you into it. And everybody thinks you make the worst of him, to exalt your blessed self. So they came for a warrant against me, did they? Is it lawful to ask who they were?"

"To be sure it is, my boy. Everybody has a right to that piece of information. Tapscott was the man that came to swear – strong reason for believing, etc., with two or three witnesses, all from your parish; Crang among the others, hauled in by the neck, and each foremost in his own opinion. But Crang wanted to be last, for he kept on shouting, that if he had to swear against Doctor Jemmy, the Lord would know that he never meant it. This of course made it all the worse for your case; and every one was grieved, yet gratified. You are too young to know the noise, which the newspapers begin to call 'public opinion,' – worth about as much as a blue-bottle's buzz, and as eager to pitch upon nastiness. I refused a warrant – as my duty was. Even if the blacksmith's tale was true – and there was no doubt that he believed it – what legal connexion could they show betwixt that, and the matter at the churchyard? In a case of urgency, and risk of disappearance of the suspected person, I might have felt bound to grant it. But I knew that you would stand it out; and unless they could show any others implicated, their application was premature."

"Then, unless you had ventured to stem the I tide, I suppose that I should have been arrested, when I came back to-day from my father's sick-bed. A pretty state of law, in this free country!"

"The law is not to blame. It must act promptly, in cases of strong suspicion. Probably they will apply to-morrow, to some younger magistrate. But your father is ill? How long have you been with him? They made a great deal out of your disappearance."

"My father has had a paralytic stroke. I trust that he will get over it; and I have left him in excellent hands. But to hear of this would kill him. His mind is much weakened, of course; and he loves me. I had no idea that he cared much for me. I thought he only cared for my sister."

"Excuse me for a moment. I must go to my guests;" Mr. Mockham perceived that the young man was overcome for the moment, and would rather be alone. "I will make it all right with them, and be back directly."

Fox was an active, and resolute young fellow, with great powers of endurance, as behoved a man of medicine. Honest indignation, and strong sense of injustice, had stirred up his energy for some hours; but since last Thursday night he had slept very little, and the whole waking time had been worry and exertion. So that now when he was left alone, and had no foe to fire at, bodily weariness began to tell upon him, and he fell back in an easy chair into a peaceful slumber.

When the guests had all departed, and the Magistrate came back, he stopped short for a moment, with a broad smile on his face, and felt proud of his own discretion, in refusing to launch any criminal process against this trustful visitor. For the culprit of the outcry looked so placid, gentle, good-natured, and forgiving – with the natural expression restored by deep oblivion – that a woman would have longed to kiss his forehead, if she had known of his terrible mishap.

"I have brought you a little drop of cordial, Master Jemmy. I am sure you must want something good, to keep you up." Mr. Mockham put a spirit-stand and glass upon the table, as Fox arose, and shook himself.

"That is very kind of you. But I never take spirits, though I prescribe them sometimes for old folk when much depressed. But a glass of your old port wine, sir, would help me very much – if I am not giving you a lot of trouble."

"You shall have a glass, almost as good as your father has given me. There it is! How sorry I am to hear about his illness! But I will do what he would have wished. I will talk to you as a friend, and one who knows the world better than you can. First, however, you must forgive me, for my vile suspicions. They were founded partly on your good mother's account of your early doings. And I have known certain instances of the zeal of your Profession, how in the name of science and the benefits to humanity – but I won't go on about that just now. The question is, how shall we clear you to the world? The fact that I doubted you, is enough to show what others are likely to conclude. Unluckily

the story has had three days' start, and has fallen upon fruitful ground. Your brother doctors about here are doing their best to clench the nail" – Mr. Mockham, like almost everybody else, was apt to mix metaphors in talking – "by making lame excuses for you, instead of attempting to deny it."

"Such fellows as Jervis Jackson, I suppose. Several of them hate me, because I am not a humbug. Perhaps they will get up a testimonial to me, for fear there should be any doubt of my guilt."

"That is the very thing they talk of doing. How well you understand them, my young friend! Now, what have you to show, against this general conclusion? For of course you cannot mention what you confessed to me."

"I can just do this – I can prove an alibi. You forget that I can show where I have been, and prove the receipt of the letter, which compelled me to leave home. Surely that will convince everybody, who has a fair mind. And for the rest, what do I care?"

"I don't see exactly what to say to that." Mr. Mockham was beginning to feel tired also, after going through all his best stories to his guests. "But what says Cicero, or some other fellow that old Dr. Richards used to drive into my skin? 'To neglect what everyone thinks of oneself, is the proof not only of an arrogant, but even of a dissolute man.' You are neither of these. You must contend with it, and confound your foes; or else run away. And upon the whole, as you don't belong here, but up the country – as we call it – and your father wants your attention, the wisest thing you can do is, to bolt."

"Would you do that, if it were your own case?" Fox had not much knowledge of Squire Mockham, except as a visitor at his father's house; and whether he should respect, or despise him, depended upon the answer.

"I would see them all d – d first;" the Magistrate replied, looking as if he would be glad to do it; "but that is because I am a Devonshire man. You are over the border; and not to be blamed."

"Well, there are some things one cannot get over," Dr. Jemmy answered, with a pleasant smile; "and the worst of them all is, to be born outside of Devon. If I had been of true Devonshire birth, I believe you would never have held me guilty."

"Others may take that view; but I do not;" said the Magistrate very magnanimously. "It would have been better for you, no doubt. But we are not narrow-minded. And your mother was a Devonshire woman, connected with our oldest families. No, no, the question is now of evidence; and the law does not recognise the difference. The point is – to prove that you were really away."

"Outside the holy county, where this outrage was committed? Foxden is thirty miles from Perlycross, even by the shortest cuts, and nearer thirty-five, to all who are particular about good roads. I was at my father's bed-side, some minutes before ten o'clock, on Saturday morning."

"That is not enough to show. We all know in common sense, that the ride would have taken at least four hours. Probably more, over those bad roads, in the darkness of a November morning. The simplest thing will be for you to tell me the whole of your movements, on the night of this affair."

"That I will, as nearly as I can remember; though I had no reason then, for keeping any special record. To begin with – I was at the funeral of course, and saw you there, but did not cross over to speak to you. Then I walked home to the Old Barn where I live, which stands as you know at the foot of Hagdon Hill. It was nearly dark then, perhaps half-past five; and I felt out of spirits, and sadly cut up, for I was very fond of Sir Thomas. I sat thinking of him for an hour or so; and then I changed my clothes for riding togs, and had a morsel of cold beef and a pipe, and went to look for the boy that brings my letters; for old Walker, the postman, never comes near the Barn. There was no sign of the boy, so I saddled *Old Rock* – for my man was 'keeping funeral' still, as they express it – and I rode to North-end, the furthest corner of the parish, to see to a little girl, who has had a dangerous attack of croup. Then I crossed Maiden Down by the gravel-pits, to see an old stager at Old Bait, who abuses me every time, and expects a shilling. Then homewards through Priestwell, and knocked at Gronow's door, having a general permission to come in at night. But he was not at home, or did not want to be disturbed; so I lost very little time by that. It must have been now at least nine o'clock,

with the moon in the south-west, and getting very cold; but I had managed to leave my watch on the drawers, when I pulled my mourning clothes off.

"From Priestwell, I came back to Perlycross, and was going straight home to see about my letters – for I knew that my father had been slightly out of sorts, when I saw a man waiting at the cross-roads for me, to say that I was wanted at the Whetstone-pits; for a man had tumbled down a hole, and broken both his legs. Without asking the name, I put spurs to *Old Rock*, and set off at a spanking pace for the Whetstone-pits, expecting to find the foreman there, to show me where it was. It is a long roundabout way from our village, at least, for any one on horseback, though not more than three miles perhaps in a straight line, because you have to go all round the butt of Hagdon Hill, which no one would think of riding over in the dark. I should say it must be five miles at least, from our cross-roads."

"Every yard of that distance," says the Magistrate, who was following the doctor's tale intently, and making notes in his pocket-book; "five miles at least, and road out of repair. Your parish ought to be indicted."

"Very well. *Old Rock* was getting rather tired. A better horse never looked through a bridle; but he can't be less than sixteen years of age. My father had him eight years, and I have had him three; and even for a man with both legs broken, I could not drive a willing horse to death. However, we let no grass grow beneath our feet; and dark as the lanes were, and wonderfully rough, even for this favoured county, I got to the pit at the corner of the hill, as soon as a man could get there, without breaking his neck."

"In that case he never would get there at all."

"Perhaps not. Or at least, not in working condition. Well, you know what a queer sort of place it is. I had been there before, about a year ago. But then it was daylight; and that makes all the difference. I am not so very fidgetty where I go, when I know that a man is in agony; but how to get along there in the dark, with the white grit up to my horse's knees, and black pines barring out the moonshine, was – I don't mind confessing it – a thing beyond me. And the strangest thing of all was, that nobody came near me. I had the whole place to myself; so far as I could see – and I did not want it.

"I sat on *Old Rock*; and I had to sit close; for the old beauty's spirit was up, in spite of all his weariness. His hunting days came to his memory perhaps; and you should have seen how he jumped about. At the risk of his dear old bones of course; but a horse is much pluckier than we are. What got into his old head, who shall say? But I failed to see the fun of it, as he did. There was all the white stuff, that comes out of the pits, like a great cascade of diamonds, glittering in the level moonlight, with broad bars of black thrown across it by the pines, all trembling, and sparkling, and seeming to move.

"Those things tell upon a man somehow, and he seems to have no right to disturb them. But I felt that I was not brought here for nothing, and began to get vexed at seeing nobody. So I set up a shout, with a hand to my mouth, and then a shrill whistle between my nails. The echo came back, very punctually; but nothing else, except a little gliding of the shale, and shivering of black branches. Then I jumped off my horse, and made him fast to a tree, and scrambled along the rough bottom of the hill.

"There are eight pits on the south side, and seven upon the north, besides the three big ones at the west end of the hill, which are pretty well worked out, according to report. Their mouths are pretty nearly at a level, about a hundred and fifty feet below the chine of hill. But the tumbledown – I forget what the proper name is – the excavated waste, that comes down, like a great beard, to the foot where the pine-trees stop it – "

"*Brekkles* is their name for it;" interrupted Mr. Mockham; "*brekkles*, or *brokkles* – I am not sure which. You know they are a colony of Cornishmen."

"Yes, and a strange outlandish lot, having nothing to do with the people around, whenever they can help it. It is useless for any man to seek work there. They push him down the *brekkles* – if that is what they call them. However, they did not push me down, although I made my way up to the top, when I had shouted in vain along the bottom. I could not get up the stuff itself; I knew better than to

make the trial. But I circumvented them at the further end; and there I found a sort of terrace, where a cart could get along from one pit-mouth to another. And from mouth to mouth, I passed along this rough and stony gallery, under the furzy crest of hill, without discovering a sign of life, while the low moon across the broad western plains seemed to look up, rather than down at me. Into every black pit-mouth, broad or narrow, bratticed with timber or arched with flint, I sent a loud shout, but the only reply was like the dead murmuring of a shell. And yet all the time, I felt somehow, as if I were watched by invisible eyes, as a man upon a cliff is observed from the sea.

"This increased my anger, which was rising at the thought that some one had made a great fool of me; and forgetting all the ludicrous side of the thing – as a man out of temper is apt to do – I mounted the most conspicuous pile at the end of the hill, and threw up my arms, and shouted to the moon, 'Is this the way to treat a doctor?'

"The distant echoes answered – 'Doctor! Doctor!' as if they were conferring a degree upon me; and that made me laugh, and grow rational again, and resolved to have one more try, instead of giving in. So I climbed upon a ridge, where I could see along the chine, through patches of white among the blackness of the furze; and in the distance there seemed to be a low fire smouldering. For a moment I doubted about going on, for I have heard that these people are uncommonly fierce, with any one they take for a spy upon them; and here I was entirely at their mercy. But whenever I have done a cowardly thing, I have always been miserable afterwards; and so I went cautiously forward towards the fire, with a sharp look-out, and my hunting-crop ready. Suddenly a man rose in front of me, almost as if he jumped out of the ground, a wild-looking fellow, stretching out both arms. I thought I was in for a nasty sort of fight, and he seemed a very ugly customer. But he only stepped back, and made some enquiry, so far as I could gather from his tone, for his words were beyond my intelligence.

"Then I told him who I was, and what had brought me there; and he touched his rough hat, and seemed astonished. He had not the least difficulty in making out my meaning; but I could not return the compliment. 'Naw hoort along o' yussen' – was his nearest approach to English; which I took to mean – 'no accident among us;' and I saw by his gestures that he meant this. In spite of some acquaintance with the Mendip miners, and pretty fair mastery of their brogue, this Whetstoner went beyond my linguistic powers, and I was naturally put out with him. Especially when in reply to my conclusion that I had been made a fool of, he answered 'yaw, yaw,' as if the thing was done with the greatest ease, and must be familiar to me. But, in his rough style, he was particularly civil, as if he valued our Profession, and was sorry that any one should play with it. He seemed to have nothing whatever to conceal; and so far as I could interpret, he was anxious to entertain me as his guest, supposing that time permitted it. But I showed him where my horse was, and he led me to him by a better way, and helped me with him, and declined the good shilling which I offered him. This made me consider him a superior sort of fellow; though to refuse a shilling shows neglected education.

"When I got back to the Ancient Barn – as I call my place, because it is in reality nothing else – it was two o'clock in the morning, and all my authorities were locked in slumber. George was on a truss of hay up in the tallat, making more noise than Perle-weir in a flood, although with less melody in it; and old Betty was under her 'Mark, Luke, and John' – as they called the four-poster, when one is gone. So I let them 'bide, as you would say; gave *Old Rock* a mash myself, because he was coughing; and went in pretty well tired, I can assure you, to get a bit of bread and cheese, and then embrace the downy.

"But there on my table was a letter from my mother; which I ought to have received before I started; but the funeral had even thrown the Post out, it appears. I don't believe that my boy was at all to blame. But you know what Walker the Postman is, when anything of interest is moving. He simply stands still, to see the end of it; sounding his horn every now and again, to show his right to look over other folk's heads. Every one respects him, because he walks so far. Thirty miles a day, by his own account; but it must be eighteen, even when he gets no beer."

"A worthy old soul!" said the Magistrate. "And he had a lot of troubles, last winter. Nobody likes to complain, on that account. He is welcome to get his peck of nuts upon the road, and to sell them next day at Pumpington, to eke out his miserable wages. But this is an age of progress; and a strict line must be drawn some where. The Post is important sometimes, as you know; though we pay so many eightpences, for nothing. Why, my friends were saying, only this very evening, that Walker must submit henceforth to a rule to keep him out of the coppices. When he once gets there, all his sense of time is gone. And people are now so impatient."

"But the nutting-time is over, and he has not that excuse. He must have been four hours late on Friday, and no doubt he was as happy as ever. But to me it would have made all the difference; for I should have started that evening for Foxden. My mother's letter begged me to come at once; for she feared that my father would never speak again. There had been some little trifles between us; as I don't mind telling you, who are acquainted with the family. No doubt I was to blame; and you may suppose, how much I was cut up by this sad news. It was folly to start in that tangle of cross-lanes, with the moon gone down, and my horse worn out. I threw myself down upon my bed, and sobbed, as I thought of all the best parts of the Governor.

"What a fool a man is, when a big blow falls upon him. For two or three hours, I must have lain like that, as if all the world were in league against me, and nothing to be done but feel helpless, and rebel. I knew that there was no horse near the place, to be hired for the ride to Foxden, even if the owner could be fetched out of his bed. And all the time, I was forgetting the young mare that I had bought about a month ago – a sweet little thing, but not thoroughly broken, and I did not mean to use her much, until the Spring. She was loose in a straw-run at the top of my home-meadow, with a nice bit of aftermath still pretty fresh, and a feed of corn at night, which I generally took to her myself. Now she came to the gate, and whinnied for me, because she had been forgotten; and hearing the sound I went downstairs, and lit a lantern to go to the corn-bin. But she had better have gone without her supper, for I said to myself – why not try her? It was a long way for a young thing just off grass; but if only she would take me to the great London road, I might hire on, if she became distressed.

"Of course I went gently and carefully at first, for I found her a little raw and bridle-shy; but she carried me beautifully, when the daylight came, and would have gone like a bird, if I had let her. She will make a rare trotter, in my opinion, and I only gave fifteen pounds for her. I would not look at fifty now, after the style she brought me back – a mouth like a French kid-glove, and the kindest of the kind."

"You deserve a good horse, because you treat them well, Jemmy. But what about your good father?"

"Well, sir, thank God, he is in no danger now; but he must be kept very quiet. If he were to hear of this lying tale, it might be fatal to him. And even my mother must not know it. Your Exeter paper never goes that way; but the Bristol ones might copy it. My only sister, Christie, is a wonderful girl, very firm, and quick, and sensible. Some say that she has got more sense than I have; though I don't quite see it. I shall write to her to-morrow, just to put her upon guard, with a line for Dr. Freeborn too – my father's old friend and director, who knows exactly how to treat him. What a rage they will be in, when they hear of this! But they will keep it as close as a limpet. Now what do you advise me to do, about myself?"

"You must look it in the face, like a man, of course; though it is enough to sour you for life almost, after all your good works among the poor."

"No fear of that, sir. It is the way of the world. 'Fair before fierce' is my family motto; and I shall try to act up to it. Though I daresay my temper will give out sometimes, especially with brother pill-box."

"You take it much better than I should, I fear;" Mr. Mockham spoke the truth in this; "you know that I will do my utmost for you; and if you keep your head, you will tide over this, and be the idol of all who have abused you – I mean, who have abused you honestly. You seem to have solid

stuff inside you, as is natural to your father's son. But it will take a lot out of your life; and it seems very hard upon a fine young fellow. Especially after what you have told me. Things will be very black there; as you must see."

"Certainly they will. But I am not a boy. I know a noble nature, when I come across it. And if ever there was – but I won't go on with that. If she believes in me, I am content, whatever the low world may say. I have never been romantic."

"I am not at all sure of that, my boy. But I felt that sort of wildness, before I was married. Now let me put one or two questions to you; just to get up your case, as if I was your Counsel. Did any of your people at the Old Barn see you, after your return from the Whetstone Pits?"

"Not one, to my knowledge. My household is small, in that ramshackle place. Old Betty upstairs, and George over the stables, and the boy who goes home to his mother at night. I have only those three in the domestic line, except upon great occasions. Old Betty was snoring in her bed, George doing the like upon a truss of hay, and the boy of course off the premises. They must have found in the morning that I had been there, but without knowing when, or how long I stayed."

"That is most unlucky. Did you pass near the church? Did you meet any people who would know you, anywhere between midnight and morning?"

"Neither man, woman, nor child did I see, from the time I left the Whetstone Hill, until I passed Perlycombe next morning. It was either too late, or too early, for our very quiet folk to be stirring."

"Bad again. Very bad. You cannot show your whereabouts, during any part of the critical time. I suppose you would know the man on the Whetstone Hill; but that was too early to help you much. The man at the cross-roads – would you know him?"

"Not to be certain. He kept in the shadow, and spoke as if he were short of breath. And the message was so urgent, that I never stopped to examine him."

"Very little comfort anywhere. Is it usual for Dr. Gronow to be from home at night?"

Mr. Mockham put this question abruptly, and pronounced the Doctor's name, as if he did not love him.

"Not very usual. But I have known it happen. He is wild about fishing, though he cannot fish a bit; and he sometimes goes late to his night-lines."

"He would scarcely have night-lines laid in November, however big a poacher he may be. Betwixt you and me, Jemmy, in the very strictest confidence, I believe he is at the bottom of all this."

"I will answer for it, that he is not. In the first place, he is a gentleman, though rough in his manners, and very odd. And again he had no motive – none whatever. He has given up his practice, and cares more for Walton and Cotton, than for all the Hunterian Museum. And he knew, as well as I do, the nature of the case. No, sir, you must not suspect him for a moment."

"Well, then it must be that man – I forget his name – who was staying with Mr. Penniloe. A very sarcastic, unpleasant fellow, as several people said who spoke to him. He would take good care to leave no trace. He looked as crafty as Old Nick himself. It will never be found out, if that man did it. No, no, Jemmy, don't attempt to argue. It must be one of you three. It is neither you, nor Gronow; then it must be that Harrison Gowler."

CHAPTER XIII. THE LAW OF THE LAND

One comfort there was among all this trouble, and terror, and perplexity – little *Jess* was not dead, as reported; nor even inclined to die, just at present. It was true that she had been horribly slashed with a spade, or shovel, or whatever it might have been; and had made her way home on three legs by slow stages, and perhaps with many a fainting fit. But when she had brought her evil tidings, and thrown down her staunch little frame to die, at the spot where she was wont to meet her master, it happened that Mr. Sharland crossed the garden from the stables. This was a Veterinary Surgeon, full of skill, and large of heart, awake to the many pangs he caused in systems finer than the human, and pitiful to the drooping head, and the legs worn out in man's service. In a moment he had gathered up the story of poor *Jess*, and he said, "if any dog deserves to be saved, it is this faithful little dear."

Then he pulled off his coat, and tucked up his sleeves, and pronounced with a little pomposity – for a good man should make his impression —

"Deep cut across the humerus. Compound fracture of the ulna. Will never do much with that limb again. But if the little thing is only half as sagacious as she is faithful, and pyretic action does not supervene, we shall save her life; and it is worth saving."

Jess licked his hand, as if she understood it all, and resigned herself to human wisdom. And now she had a sweet bed in a basket, airy and buoyant, yet proof against cold draughts; and there she was delighted to receive old friends, with a soft look of gratitude in large black eyes, and a pretty little quiver of the tail too wise to wag, for fear of arousing their anxiety. *Pixie*, the pug, had many qualms of jealousy, as well as some pangs of deep interest – for what dog, however healthy, could feel certain in his heart that he might not be reduced to the same condition? And he was apt to get a human kick, when he pressed his kind enquiries.

But upon the loftier level of anthropic interests, less of harmony prevailed, and more of hot contention. The widowed lady of the house had felt her loss intensely; and with the deeper pain, because her generous nature told her of many a time when she had played a part a little over the duty of a loyal wife. Her strong will, and rather imperious style, and widely different view-point, had sometimes caused slight disagreements between the Spanish lady and the English squire; and now she could not claim the pleasure of having waived herself to please him. But she had the sorrow of recalling how often she had won the victory, and pushed it to the utmost, and how seldom she had owned herself in the wrong, even when she had perceived it. A kinder and a nobler husband no woman was ever blessed with; and having lost him, how could she help disparaging every other man, as a tribute to his memory?

Even with her daughter *Inez*, she was frequently provoked, when she saw the tears of filial love, or heard the unconsidered sigh. "What is her loss, compared with mine?" "But for this child, he would have loved me more." "Shallow young creature, like a tinkling zither – she will start a new tune, in a week or two." Such were her thoughts; but she kept them to herself, and was angry with herself for forming them.

So it may be supposed, what her fury was, or rather her boundless and everlasting rage, when she heard of the miscreant villainy, which could not long be concealed from her. Her favourite maid, *Tamar Haddon*, was the one who first let fall an unwary word; and that young woman received a shock, which ought to have disciplined her tongue for life. With a gaze, and a gesture, there was no withstanding, her mistress tore out of her everything she knew, and then with a power of self-control which few men could have equalled, she ordered the terrified damsel away, and sat down alone, to think miserably.

How long she stayed thus, was unknown to any; for Tamar made off with all speed to her room, and was seized with a fit of hysterics. But the lady's only movement was to press one hand upon her labouring heart. By and by she rose, and unlocked the door of her little oratory – a place not very often favoured with her presence. There she took down a crucifix of ivory – not the Indian, but the African, which hardens and whitens with the lapse of years, though green at first, as truth is – and she set it upon a velvet shelf, and looked at it without much reverence. In the stormy times, when Spain was writhing under the heel of an infidel, her daughters lost their religious grounding, and gained fierce patriotism. "My Country is my God," was a copy set in schools.

At first she looked with scorn and pity at such meek abandonment. What had her will and heart to do with mild submission, drooping head, and brow of wan benignity? But the sculptor had told more than that. He had filled the sufferer's face with love, and thrilled the gaze of death with sweet celestial compassion. So well had the human hand conveyed the tender heart of heaven.

The sting of mortal injuries began to grow less venomous. The rancorous glare was compelled to soften, and suffused with quivering tears. She had come to have a curse attested, and a black vow sanctified; but earthly wrong and human wrath were quelled before the ruth of heaven, and conquest of the Tortured One. She fell upon her knees, and laid her hands upon the spike-torn feet; and her face became that of a stricken woman, devoted to sorrow, but not to hate.

How long this higher influence would last is quite another point, especially with a woman. But it proved at least that she was not altogether narrow, and hard, and arrogant. Then she went to her bed, and wept for hours; and perhaps her reason was saved thereby. At any rate her household, which had been in wretched panic, was saved from the fearful outburst, and the timid cast-up of their wages.

On the following morning, she was calm, at least to all outward semblance, and said not a word to any one of the shock she had suffered yesterday. But as soon as business-time allowed, she sent for Mr. Webber, the most active member of the steady firm, in which her husband had placed confidence. He was good enough to come at once, although, as he told his nervous wife, he would have preferred an interview with the lioness, who had just escaped from a travelling menagerie.

But like all other terrors, when confronted, this proved tolerably docile; and upon his return he described this foreign lady's majestic beauty, and angelic fortitude, in warmer terms than his wife thought needful over his own mahogany. After recounting all he knew, and being heard with patience, he had taken instructions which he thought sagacious and to the purpose, for they were chiefly of his own suggestion.

Now this Mr. Webber was a shrewd, as well as a very upright man, but of rather hasty temperament, and in many of his conclusions led astray, without the least suspicion of it, by prejudices and private feelings. One of his favourite proverbs was – "A straw will show how the wind blows;" and the guiding straw for him was prone to float on the breath of his own favour. Although he knew little of Dr. Fox, he was partly prepared to think ill of him, according to the following inclination.

Waldron Webber, the lawyer's eldest son, and Godson of the brave Sir Thomas, had shown no capacity for the law, and little for anything else, except a good thumb for the gallipots. Good friends said – "What a doctor he will make!" and his excellent mother perceived the genius, and felt how low it would be to lament that such gifts were seldom lucrative, till half the life is over. So the second son took to the ruler, and the elder to the pestle, instruments of equal honour, but of different value. And Waldron, although his kind father had bought him a snug little practice at Perlycombe, was nibbling at the bottom of the bag at home, while his brother cast in at the top of it.

Why was this? Simply because young Fox, the heir of a wealthy family, had taken it into his wicked head to drop down from the clouds at Perlycross. It was true that he had bought a practice there; but his predecessor had been a decent fellow, observing the rules of the Profession. If a man could not pay for it, let him not be ill; or at any rate go to the workhouse, and be done for in the lump. But this interloper was addicted to giving tick unlimited, or even remission of all charges, and a cure – when nature would not be denied – without the patient paying for it, if he had no money. One thing

was certain – this could not last long. But meanwhile a doctor of common sense was compelled to appeal to his parents.

"All cannot be right," Mr. Webber senior had observed with emphasis, when he heard the same tale from his son's bosom friend, Jervis Jackson of Perliton; "there are certain rules, my dear, essential to the existence of all sound Professions; and one of the most fundamental is, to encourage nobody who cannot pay. This Fox must be a sadly Radical young man, though his family is most respectable. Mischief will come of it, in my firm opinion."

The mischief was come, and in a darker form than the soundest lawyer could anticipate. Mr. Webber lamented it; and his wife (who had seen Jemmy waltzing at a Taunton ball with one of her pretty daughters, and been edified with castles in the air) lifted up her hands, and refused to listen to it; until she thought of her dear son. "If it is the will of God," she said, "we must accept it, Theodore."

But this resignation is not enough for an Attorney with a criminal case in hand. Lady Waldron had urged despatch; and he knew that she was not to be trifled with. He had taken the blacksmith's deposition, which began as if his head were on the anvil, as well as Farmer John's, and Channing's, and that of Mr. Jakes the schoolmaster. And now it was come to Monday night; and nothing had been heard of Fox.

But it was not so easy to know what to do. There was no Police-force as yet to be invoked with certainty of some energy, and the Bow-Street-Runners, as they were called – possibly because they never ran – had been of no service in such cases, even when induced to take them up. Recourse must be had to the ancient gear of Magistrate and constable; for to move any higher authorities would require time and travel. Strong suspicion there might be, but no strong chain of evidence; for no connexion could be established (whatever might be the inference) between the occurrence at Susscot and the sacrilege at Perlycross.

Moreover, our ancient laws are generally rough, and brisk, and able-bodied to stick out bravely for the purse, but leave the person to defend itself. If it cannot do this after death, let it settle the question with its Maker; for it cannot contribute to the Realm, and belongs to the Resurrection. This larger view of the matter will explain to the live content how it came to pass that the legislature (while providing, for the healthy use of anatomy, the thousands of criminal bodies despatched for the good of their choicer brethren) failed to perceive any duty towards those who departed this life in the fear of God, after paying their rates and taxes, for the term prescribed by Heavenly Statute. In a word, when the wicked began to fall short – through clemency human or Divine – no man of the highest respectability could make sure of what he left behind. Only, by the ancient Common Law, to dig him up again, without a Faculty, was indictable as a Misdemeanour.

Mr. Webber was familiar with all these truths, and obliged to be careful of their import. If the theft of a sheep could be brought home to Fox, the proceeding would have been more simple, and the penalties far heavier. But, for his enemies, the social outrage was the thing to look at. As it stood, there was small chance yet of saddling the culprit with legal guilt; nevertheless if the tide of general opinion set against him, even the noblest medical science must fail to make head against it. And the first step was to give some public form to the heinous accusation, without risk of enormous damages. Hence the application to Mr. Mockham, under the name of Tapscott, as before related, and justly refused by that Magistrate.

Mr. Webber of course did not appear, nor allow his name to be quoted, knowing how small the prospect was of the issue of a warrant. But his end was gained, for all who were present – including the Magistrate himself – left the place with dark and strong suspicion against the absent Doctor. The question was certain now to be taken up by County Journals; whereupon the accused might well be trusted to do something foolish, even if nothing more were learned from the stealthy watch kept on him.

There was much to justify this view; for Fox did many foolish things, and even committed blunders, such as none but the sagest of the sage could avoid in his position. He was young, and hot

of blood, and raging at the sweet readiness of his friends – as such dastards dared to call themselves – to accept the wicked charge against him, on such worthless evidence. Now was the time for any generous nature to assert itself; for any one with a grain of faith, or even of common charity, to look him in the face, and grasp his hand, and exclaim with honest anger – "Not a word of those cursed lies do I believe. You are an honest fellow, Jemmy, whatever skulks and sneaks may say; and if any one says it in my presence, down he goes like a dabchick."

Did any one do this, of all who had been so much obliged to him, or even of those who without that had praised him in his prosperous days, and been proud of his acquaintance? It made his young heart cold with bitterness, and his kind eyes flash with scorn, when even young fellows of healthy nature, jovial manners, and careless spirit, spied something of deepest interest across the road, as he came by; or favoured him with a distant nod, and a passing – "How doo, Doctor?" perhaps with an emphasis on the title, suggestive of dissection. It was enough to sour any man of even bright intelligence, and fair discrimination; for large indeed is the heart of him, and heavenly his nature, who does not judge of his brethren, by their behaviour to this brother.

Yet there were some few, who did behave to this poor brother, as if they had heard of the name of Christ, or deserved, in a way, to do so. These were the very poor, who feel some gratitude for kindness; because it comes not as a right, but a piece of rare luck to them. "'Tis nort to I, what the lad hath dooed, and I'll never belave a' dooed it. If it worn't for he, our little Johnny would be in Churchyard, instead of 's cot." So spake one or two; and if the reasoning was unsound, why then, so much the worse for reason.

But a fine young farmer, of the name of Gilham (a man who worked hard for his widowed mother, at the North West end of the parish) came forward like a brave Englishman, and left no doubt about his opinion. This young man was no clod-hopper; but had been at a Latin school, founded by a great High-Priest of the Muses in the woollen line, and worthy of the *infula*. Gilham had shown some aptness there, and power in the resurrection of languages, called dead by those who would have no life without them. His farm was known as the "White Post," because it began with a grand old proof of the wisdom of our ancestors. Upon the mighty turnpike road from London even to Devonport, no trumpery stick of foreign fir, but a massive column of British oak had been erected in solid times, for the benefit of wayfarers. If a couple of them had been hanged there, as tradition calmly said of them, it was only because they stopped the others, and owed them this enlightenment.

Frank Gilham knew little of Doctor Fox, and had never swallowed physic; which may have had something to do perhaps with his genial view of the subject.

"A man is a man," he said to his mother, as if she were an expert in the matter; "and Fox rides as straight as any man I ever saw, when his horse has not done too much parish-work. What should I do, if people went against me like this, and wouldn't even stand up to their own lies? That old John Horner is a pompous ass; and Crang loses his head with a young horse, by daylight. Where would his wits be, pulled out of bed at night, with a resurrection-man standing over him? I am thoroughly ashamed of the parish, mother; and though some of our land is under Lady Waldron, I shall go and see Fox, and stick up for him."

So he did; and though he was a younger man than Jemmy, and made no pretence of even offering advice, his love of fair play, and fine healthy courage, were more than a houseful of silver and gold, or a legion of soldiers direct from heaven.

CHAPTER XIV. REASONING WITHOUT REASON

One of the most unlucky things, that could befall an unlucky man, in the hour of tribulation, had befallen that slandered Fox; to wit the helpless condition of the leading spirit, and most active head, in the troubled parish of Perlycross. Mr. Penniloe was mending slowly; but his illness had been serious, and the violent chill in a low state of health had threatened to cause inflammation of the lungs. To that it would have led, there can be little doubt, but for the opportune return of Fox, and the speedy expulsion of Jackson. Now the difficulty was to keep the curate quiet; and his great anxiety to get to work prolonged the disability, even as a broken arm in splinters is not likely to do without them, while the owner works a pump.

The Doctor caught his patient, on the Friday morning, groping his way through the long dark tunnel which underran the rectory, and just emerging, with crafty triumph, into the drive by his own main gate. Thyatira was gone to Jakes the butcher, after locking the front door and carrying off the key. The parson looked miserably thin and wan, but proud of this successful sortie. He was dressed as if for action in his Sunday clothes, though tottering on his black-varnished stick; while his tortoise-shell eyeglass upon its watered ribbon dangled across his shrunken chest. But suddenly all his scheme collapsed.

"Ah, ah, ah!" he began with his usual exclamation, while his delicate face fell sadly, and his proud simper waned into a nervous smile; "fine morning, Fox; I hope you are quite well – pleasant morning for a walk."

"It may be pleasant," returned the Doctor, trying to look most awful; "but like many other pleasant things it is wrong. Will you do me the honour to take my arm?"

Fox hooked the baffled parson by the elbow, and gently led him towards his own front door, guilty-looking, sadly smiling, striving vainly to walk as if he were fit to contest a hurdle-race. But the cup of his shame was not full yet.

"Oh sir, oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Muggridge, rushing in from the street with a dish of lamb's fry reposing among its parsley. "I never would have believed it, sir, if an Angel was to speak the words. To think that he have come to this!"

"She refers to my moral condition, I fear;" Mr. Penniloe held his head down, while the key he had thought to elude was used to restore him to safer durance. "Well perhaps I was wrong; but I only meant to go a very short way, I assure you; only as far as the spot where my dear old friend is sleeping."

"What a blessing as we caught you, sir!" cried the impulsive Muggridge; while her master looked up in sharp wonder, and the Doctor frowned at her clumsiness.

"Not to the repairs, sir? Oh come, come, come!" Jemmy cut in rapidly, with this attractive subject.

"No, not even to the repairs, or I might even say – the arrest of ruin. Without the generosity of my dear friend, we never should have achieved so much for the glory of – I will not speak proudly – for the doing up of our old church. Those who should have been foremost – but no doubt they had good reason for buttoning up their pockets. Comparatively, I mean, comparatively; for they really did give something. Possibly, all that they could afford."

"Or all they thought they couldn't help. It was very hard upon them, sir. But you are getting into a rebellious humour. Sit down by the fire, and allow me to examine you."

"I will carry my rebellion further," said the invalid, after sitting down. "I know how kind you have been to me, kinder by far than I ever could deserve. And I believe it was the goodness of the Lord that delivered me from Jackson. He meant well; but he can not be positive whether the lungs should be higher up, or deeper down than the liver. I have been examined, and examiner as well, at

Oxford, and in some public schools; but the question has never arisen; and I felt myself unable to throw any light on it. Still it struck me that he ought to know, as a properly qualified medical man."

"No, sir, no. That is quite a trifle. That should never have lessened your confidence in him." Dr. Fox spoke so gravely, that Mr. Penniloe was angry with his own inside.

"Well, after all, the mind and soul are the parts that we should study. I see that I have wronged poor Jackson, and I will apologise. But what I have to say to you is this – even if I am not to take a walk, I must be allowed some communication with people of the parish. I have no idea what is going on. I am isolated as if I had the plague, or the cholera of three years ago. Let me see Channing, or Jakes, or Mr. Horner, or even Robson Adney."

"In a day or two, sir. You are getting stronger fast; and we must not throw you back. You must have a little patience. Not a service has been missed; and you can do no good."

"That may be true," said the parson with a sigh. "Unhappily they always tell me that; but it does not absolve me. All my duties are neglected now. Three pupils, and not a lesson have I heard them. How can that new boy get on without me? A very odd youth, from all that I am told. He will require much attention. No, no, it will never do, Fox. I know how kind everybody has been, in doing with only one sermon; and the Lord has provided an uncommonly good man. But I feel as if there was something wrong. I am sure you are hiding something from me. I am not allowed to see anybody; and even Fay looks odd sometimes, as if the others were puzzling her. And the pupils too must have heard of something bad; for poor little Michael has been forbidden to talk to any of them. What is it? It would hurt me less to know, than to keep on wondering, and probably imagine it worse than it is. And good or bad for my bodily health, my first duty is not to myself, but to those entrusted to me."

Mr. Penniloe had spoken with more excitement than he often showed when in his usual health, and the doctor had observed it with some alarm. But he had long foreseen that this must come; and it might come in a more abrupt and dangerous manner, when he was out of reach. So he made up his mind at once, and spoke without further hesitation.

"Yes, sir, a most disgraceful thing has happened in this parish; and it is better perhaps that you should know it, than be kept in the dark any longer. But you must not be angry with me, though I have given all the orders which puzzled you. It was not for my own sake, you may be sure; for God only knows how much I have longed for your advice in this miserable affair. And yet, before I tell you, you must promise to do nothing whatever about it, for at least three days. By that time you will be yourself again, if we can keep you quiet, and if you take this sad blow with your usual strength of mind – and piety."

The parson began to tremble, and the blue lines on his delicate forehead shone, like little clues of silk. He fingered his open glasses, and began to raise them, until it struck him that he might seem rude, if he thus inspected Fox throughout his narrative. A rude act was impossible to him; so he leaned back in his ancient chair, and simply said – "Be quick, my friend, if you can thus oblige me."

The young man watched him very narrowly, while he told his dreadful tale; and Thyatira in the passage sobbed, and opened her smelling-bottle, for she had been making urgent signs and piteous appeals from the background to the doctor to postpone this trial. But her master only clasped his hands, and closed his quivering eyelids. Without a word he heard the whole; though little starts, and twitching lips, and jerkings of his gaiter'd foot, made manifest that self-control was working at high pressure.

"And who has done this inhuman thing?" asked Mr. Penniloe at last; after hoping that he need not speak, until he felt that he could speak. "Such things have been done about Bristol; but never in our county. And my dear friend, my best friend Tom! We dare not limit the mercy of God; for what are we? Ah, what are we? But speaking as a frail man should, if there is any crime on earth – " He threw his handkerchief over his head; for what can the holiest man pronounce? And there was nothing that moved him more to shame, than even to be called a "holy man."

"The worst of it is," said Dr. Fox, with tears in his eyes, for he loved this man, although so unlike him in his ways of thought; "the worst of it is – or at least from a wretchedly selfish point of view, the worst – that all the neighbourhood has pitched upon the guilty person."

"Who is supposed to have done this horribly wicked thing? Not Gowler?"

"No sir; but somebody nearer home. Somebody well-known in the village."

"Tell me who it is, my dear fellow. I am sure there is no one here who would have done it."

"Everybody else is sure there is. And the name of the scoundrel is – James Fox."

"Fox, it is not a time for jokes. If you knew how I feel, you would not joke."

"I am not joking, sir," said Fox, and his trembling voice confirmed his words. "The universal conclusion is, that I am the villain that did it."

"My dear friend, my noble fellow!" The Parson sprang up on his feeble legs, and took both of Jemmy's strong thick hands in his quivering palms, and looked at him; "I am ashamed of my parish; and of myself, as a worthless labourer. And with this crushing lie upon you, you have been tending me, day and night, and shown not a sign of your bitter disdain!"

"I knew that you would acquit me, sir. And what did I care for the rest of them? Except one of course – well you know what I mean; and I must now give up all hope of that. Now take a little of this strengthening stuff, and rest for a couple of hours."

"I will take the stuff; but I will not rest, until you have told me, upon what grounds this foul accusation has been brought. That I should be in this helpless state, when I ought to go from house to house – truly the ways of Providence are beyond our poor understanding."

The young man told him in a few hot words, upon what a flimsy tale his foes had built this damning charge, and how lightly those who called themselves his friends had been ready to receive it. He had had a long interview with Crang, and had shaken the simple blacksmith's faith in his own eyes; and that was all. Owing to the sharp frost of the night, there was no possibility of following the track of the spring-cart up the road, though its course had first been eastward, and in the direction of the Old Barn. For the same reason, all attempts had failed in the immediate scene of the outrage; and the crisp white frost had settled on bruised herbage and heavy footmark.

"There is nothing more to be done in that way;" the Doctor finished with a bitter smile; "their luck was in the right scale, and mine in the wrong one, according to the usual rule. Now what do you advise me to do, dear sir?"

"I am never very quick, as some men are;" Mr. Penniloe replied, without even the reproof which he generally administered to those who spoke of "luck." "I am slow in perceiving the right course, when it is a question of human sagacity. But the Lord will guide this for our good. Allow me to think it over, and to make it a subject of earnest prayer."

Fox was well content with this, though his faith in prayer was limited. But he knew that the clergyman was not of those, who plead so well that the answer tallies with their inclinations. For such devoted labourers, when a nice preferment comes in view, lay it before the "Throne of Grace;" and the heavenly order always is – "Go thou into the fatter Vineyard." Mr. Penniloe had not found it thus, when a College living was offered to him as a former Fellow, at a time when he and his wife could scarce succeed in making both ends meet. The benefice being in a part of Wales where the native tongue alone prevailed, his Ministry could be blest to none but the occupants of the rectory. Therefore he did not pray for guidance, but for grace to himself and wife – especially the latter – to resist this temptation without a murmur. Therein he succeeded, to the huge delight of the gentleman next upon the roll, and equally ignorant of Welsh, whose only prayer upon the occasion was – "Thank the Lord, oh my soul!"

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