# In Homespun

E. Nesbit

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THESE tales are written in an English dialect—none the less a dialect for that it lacks uniformity in the misplacement of aspirates, and lacks, too, strange words misunderstanded of the reader.

In South Kent villages with names ending in 'den,' and out away on the Sussex downs where villages end in 'hurst,' live the plain people who talk this plain speech—a speech that should be sweeter in English ears than the implacable consonants of a northern kail−yard, or the soft one−vowelled talk of western hillsides.

All through the summer nights the market carts creak along the London road; to London go the wild young man and the steady young man who 'betters' himself. To London goes the girl seeking a 'place.' The 'beano' comes very near to this land—so near that across its marches you may hear the sackbut and shawm from the breaks. Once a year come the hoppers. And so the cup of the hills holds no untroubled pool of pastoral speech. This book therefore is of no value to a Middle English scholar, and needs no glossary.

E. NESBIT.

KENT, _March_ 1896.

# THE BRISTOL BOWL

MY cousin Sarah and me had only one aunt between us, and that was my Aunt Maria, who lived in the little cottage up by the church.

Now my aunt had a tidy little bit of money laid by, which she couldn't in reason expect to carry with her when her time came to go, wherever it was she might go to, and a houseful of furniture, old−fashioned, but strong and good still. So of course Sarah and I were not behindhand in going up to see the old lady, and taking her a pot or so of jam in fruiting season, or a turnover, maybe, on a baking−day, if the oven had been steady and the baking turned out well. And you couldn't have told from aunt's manner which of us she liked best; and there were some folks who thought she might leave half to me and half to Sarah, for she hadn't chick nor child of her own.

But aunt was of a having nature, and what she had once got together she couldn't bear to see scattered. Even if it was only what she had got in her rag−bag, she would give it to one person to make a big quilt of, rather than give it to two persons to make two little quilts.

So Sarah and me, we knew that the money might come to either or neither of us, but go to both it wouldn't.

Now, some people don't believe in special mercies, but I have always thought there must have been something out of the common way for things to happen as they did the day Aunt Maria sprained her ankle. She sent over to the farm where we were living with my mother (who was a sensible woman, and carried on the farm much better than most men would have done, though that's neither here nor there) to ask if Sarah or me could be spared to go and look after her a bit, for the doctor said she couldn't put her foot to the ground for a week or more.

Now, the minister I sit under always warns us against superstition, which, I take it, means believing more than you have any occasion to. And I'm not more given to it than most folks, but still I always have said, and I always shall say, that there's a special Providence above us, and it wasn't for nothing that Sarah was laid up with a quinsy that very morning. So I put a few things together—in Sarah's hat−tin, I remember, which was handier to carry than my own—and I went up to the cottage.

Aunt was in bed, and whether it was the sprained ankle or the hot weather I don't know, but the old lady was cantankerous past all believing.

'Good−morning, aunt,' I said, when I went in, 'and however did this happen?'

'Oh, you've come, have you?' she said, without answering my question, 'and brought enough luggage to last you a year, I'll be bound. When I was young, a girl could go to spend a week without nonsense of boxes or the like. A clean shift and a change of stockings done up in a cotton handkerchief—that was good enough for us. But now, you girls must all be young ladies. I've no patience with you.'

I didn't answer back, for answering back is a poor sort of business when the other person is able to make you pay for every idle word. Of course, it's different if you haven't anything to lose by it. So I just said—

'Never mind, aunt dear. I really haven't brought much; and what would you like me to do first?'

'I should think you'd see for yourself,' says she, thumping her pillows, 'that there's not a stick in the house been dusted yet—no, nor a stair swep'.'

So I set to to clean the house, which was cleaner than most people's already, and I got a nice bit of dinner and took it up on a tray. But no, that wasn't right, for I'd put the best instead of the second−best cloth on the tray.

'The workhouse is where you'll end,' says aunt.

But she ate up all the dinner, and after that she seemed to get a little easier in her temper, and by−and−by fell off to sleep.

I finished the stairs and tidied up the kitchen, and then I went to dust the parlour.

Now, my aunt's parlour was a perfect moral. I have never seen its like before or since. The mantelpiece and the corner cupboard, and the shelves behind the door, and the top of the chest of drawers and the bureau were all covered up with a perfect litter and lurry of old china. Not sets of anything, but different basins and jugs and cups and plates and china spoons and the bust of John Wesley and Elijah feeding the ravens in a red gown and standing on a green crockery grass plot.

There was every kind of china uselessness that you could think of; and Sarah and I used to think it hard that a girl had no chance of getting on in life without she dusted all this rubbish once a week at the least.

'Well, the sooner begun the sooner ended,' says I to myself So I took the silk handkerchief that aunt kep' a purpose—an old one it was that had belonged to uncle, and hemmed with aunt's own hair and marked with his name in the corner. (Folks must have had a deal of time in those days, I often think.) And I began to dust the things, beginning with the big bowl on the chest of drawers, for aunt always would have everything done just one way and no other.

You think, perhaps, that I might as well have sat down in the arm−chair and had a quiet nap and told aunt afterwards that I had dusted everything; but you must know she was quite equivalent to asking any of the neighbours who might drop in whether that dratted china of hers was dusted properly.

It was a hot afternoon, and I was tired and a bit cross.

'Aunts, and uncles, and grandmothers,' thinks I to myself. 'O what a stupid old lot they must have been to have set such store by all this gimcrackery! Oh, if only a bull or something could get in here for five minutes and smash every precious—oh, my cats alive!'

I don't know how I did it, but just as I was saying that about the bull, the big bowl slipped from my hands and broke in three pieces on the floor at my feet, and at the same moment I heard aunt thump, thump, thumping with the heel of her boot on the floor for me to go up and tell her what I had broken. I tell you I wished from my heart at that moment that it was me that had had the quinsy instead of Sarah.

I was so knocked all of a heap that I couldn't move, and the boot went on thump, thump, thumping overhead. I had to go, but I was flustered to that degree that as I went up the stairs I couldn't for the life of me think what I should say.

Aunt was sitting up in bed, and she shook her fist at me when I went in.

'Out with it!' she said. 'Speak the truth. Which of them is it? The yallar china dish, or the big teapot, or the Wedgwood tobaccojar that belonged to your grandfather?'

And then all in a minute I knew what to say. The words seemed to be put into my mouth, like they were into the prophets of old.

'Lord, aunt!' I said, 'you give me quite a turn, battering on the floor that way. What do you want? What is it?'

'What have you broken, you wicked, heartless girl? Out with it, quick!'

'Broken?' I says. 'Well, I hope you won't mind much, aunt, but I have had a misfortune with the little cracked pie−dish that the potatopie was baked in; but I can easy get you another down at Wilkins.'

Aunt fell back on her pillows with a sort of groan.

'Thank them as be!' she said, and then she sat up again, bolt upright all in a minute.

'You fetch me the pieces,' she says, short and sharp.

I hope it isn't boastful to say that I don't think many girls would have had the sense to bring up that dish in their apron and to break it on their knee as they came up the stairs, and take it in and show it to her.

'Don't say another word about it,' says my aunt, as kind and hearty as you please.

Things not being as bad as she expected, it made her quite willing to put up with things being a bit worse than they had been five minutes before. I've often noticed it is this way with people.

'You're a good girl, Jane,' she says, 'a very good girl, and I shan't forget it, my dear. Go on down, now, and make haste with your washing up, and get to work dusting the china.'

And it was such a weight off my mind to feel that she didn't know, that I felt as if everything was all right until I got downstairs and see those three pieces of that red and yellow and green and blue basin lying on the carpet as I had left them. My heart beat fit to knock me down, but I kept my wits about me, and I stuck it together with white of egg, and put it back in its place on the wool mat with the little teapot on top of it so that no one could have noticed that there was anything wrong with it unless they took the thing up in their hands.

The next three days I waited on aunt hand and foot, and did everything she asked, and she was as pleased as pleased, till I felt that Sarah hadn't a chance.

On the third day I told aunt that mother would want me, it being Saturday, and she was quite willing for the Widow Gladish to come in and do for her while I was away. I chose a Saturday because that and Sunday were the only days the china wasn't dusted.

I went home as quick as I could, and I told mother all about it.

'And don't you, for any sake, tell Sarah a word about it, or quinsy or no quinsy, she'll be up at aunt's before we know where we are, to let the cat out of the bag.'

I took all the money out of my money−box that I had saved up for starting housekeeping with in case aunt should leave her money to

Sarah, and I put it in my pocket, and I took the first train to London.

I asked the porter at the station to tell me the way to the best china−shop in London; and he told me there was one in Queen Victoria Street. So I went there.

It was a beautiful place, with velvet sofas for people to sit down on while they looked at the china and glass and chose which pattern they would have; and there were thousands of basins far more beautiful than aunt's, but not one like hers, and when I had looked over some fifty of them, the gentleman who was showing them to me said—

'Perhaps you could give me some idea of what it is you do want?'

Now, I had brought one of the pieces of the bowl up with me, the piece at the back where it didn't show, and I pulled it out and showed it to him.

'I want one like this,' I said.

'Oh!' said he, 'why didn't you say so at first? We don't keep that sort of thing here, and it's a chance if you get it at all. You might in Wardour Street, or at Mr. Aked's in Green Street, Leicester Square.'

Well, time was getting on and I did a thing I had never done before, though I had often read of it in the novelettes. I waved my umbrella and I got into a hansom cab.

'Young man,' I said, 'will you please drive to Mr. Aked's in Green Street, Leicester Square? and drive careful, young man, for I have a piece of china in my hands that's worth a fortune to me.'

So he grinned and I got in and the cab started. A hansom cab is better than any carriage you ever rode in, with soft cushions to lean against and little looking−glasses to look at yourself in, and, somehow, you don't hear the wheels. I leaned back and looked at myself and felt like a duchess, for I had my new hat and mantle on, and I knew I looked nice by the way the young men on the tops of the omnibuses looked at me and smiled. It was a lovely drive. When we got to Mr. Aked's, which looked to me more like a rag−and−bone shop than anything else, and very poor after the beautiful place in Queen Victoria Street, I got out and went in.

An old gentleman came towards me and asked what he could do for me, and he looked surprised, as though he wasn't used to see such smart girls in his pokey old shop.

'Please, sir,' I said, 'I want a bowl like this, if you have got such a thing among your old odds and ends.'

He took the piece of china and looked at it through his glasses for a minute. Then he gave it back to me very carefully.

'There's not a piece of this ware in the market. The few specimens extant are in private collections.'

'Oh dear,' I said; 'and can't I get another like it?'

'Not if you were to offer me a hundred pounds down,' said the old man.

I couldn't help it. I sat down on the nearest chair and began to cry, for it seemed as if all my hopes of Aunt Maria's money were fading away like the 'roseate hues of early dawn' in the hymn.

'Come, come,' said he, 'what's the matter? Cheer up. I suppose you're in service and you've broken this bowl. Isn't that it? But never mind—your mistress can't do anything to you. Servants can't be made to replace valuable bowls like this.'

That dried my eyes pretty quick, I can tell you.

'Me in service!' I said. 'And my grandfather farming his own land before you were picked out of the gutter, I'll be bound'—God forgive me that I should say such a thing to an old man—'and my own aunt with a better lot of fal−lals and trumpery in her parlour than you've got in all your shop.'

With that he laughed, and I flounced out of the shop, my cheeks flaming and my heart going like an eight−day clock. I was so flustered I didn't notice that some one came out of the shop after me, and I had walked a dozen yards down the street before I saw that some one was alongside of me and saying something to me.

It was another old gentleman—at least, not so old as Mr. Aked,—and I remembered now having seen him at the back of the shop. He was taking off his hat, as polite as you please.

'You're quite overcome,' he said, 'and no wonder. Come and have a little dinner with me quietly somewhere, and tell me all about it.'

'I don't want any dinner,' I said; 'I want to go and drown myself, for it's all over, and I've nothing more to look for. My brother Harry will have the farm, and I shan't get a penny of aunt's money. Why couldn't they have made plenty of the ugly old basins while they were about it?'

'Come and have some dinner,' the old gentleman said again, 'and perhaps I can help you. I have a basin just like that.'

So I did. We went to some place where there were a lot of little tables and waiters in black clothes; and we had a nice dinner, and I did feel better for it, and when we had come to the cheese, I told him exactly what had happened; and he leaned his head on his hands, and he thought, and thought, and presently he said—

'Do you think your aunt would sell any of her china?'

'That I'm downright sure she wouldn't,' I said; 'so it's no good your asking.'

'Well, you see, your aunt won't be down for three or four days yet. You give me your address, and I'll write and tell you if I think of anything.'

And with that he paid the bill and had a cab called, and put me in it and paid the driver, and I went along home.

I didn't sleep much that night, and next day I was thinking all sermon−time of whatever I could do, for it wasn't in nature that my aunt would not find me out before another two days was over my head; and she had never been so nice and kind, and had even gone so far as to say—

'Whoever my money's left to, Jane, will be bound not to part with my china, nor my old chairs and presses. Don't you forget, my child. It's all written in black and white, and if the person my money's left to sells these old things, my money goes along too.'

There was no letter on Monday morning, and I was up to my elbows in the suds, doing aunt's bit of washing for her, when I heard a step on the brick path, and there was that old gentleman coming round by the water−butt to the back−door.

'Well?' says he. 'Anything fresh happened?

'For any sake,' says I in a whisper, 'get out of this. She'll hear if I say more than two words to you. If you've thought of anything that's to be of any use, get along to the church porch, and I'll be with you as soon as I can get these things through the rinse−water and out on the line.'

'But,' he says in a whisper, 'just let me into the parlour for five minutes, to have a look round and see what the rest of the bowl is like.'

Then I thought of all the stories I had heard of pedlars' packs, and a married lady taken unexpectedly, and tricks like that to get into the house when no one was about. So I thought—

'Well, if you are to go in, I must go in with you,' and I squeezed my hands out of the suds, and rolled them into my apron and went in, and him after me.

You never see a man go on as he did. It's my belief he was hours in that room, going round and round like a squirrel in a cage, picking up first one bit of trumpery and then another, with two fingers and a thumb, as carefully as if it had been a _tulle_ bonnet just home from the draper's, and setting everything down on the very exact spot he took them up from.

More than once I thought that I had entertained a loony unawares, when I saw him turn up the cups and plates and look twice as long at the bottoms of them as he had at the pretty parts that were meant to show, and all the time he kept saying—'Unique, by Gad, perfectly unique!' or 'Bristol, as I'm a sinner,' and when he came to the large blue dish that stands at the back of the bureau, I thought he would have gone down on his knees to it and worshipped it.

'Square−marked Worcester!' he said to himself in a whisper, speaking very slowly, as if the words were pleasant in his mouth, 'Square−marked Worcester—an eighteen−inch dish!'

I had as much trouble getting him out of that parlour as you would have getting a cow out of a clover−patch, and every minute I was afraid aunt would hear him, or hear the china rattle or something; but he never rattled a bit, bless you, but was as quiet as a mouse, and as for carefulness he was like a woman with her first baby. I didn't dare ask him anything for fear he should answer too loud, and by−and−by he went up to the church porch and waited for me.

He had a brown−paper parcel with him, a big one, and I thought to myself, 'Suppose he's brought his bowl and is wishful to sell it.' I got those things through the blue−water pretty quick, I can tell you. I often wish I could get

a maid who would work as fast as I used to when I was a girl. Then I ran up and asked aunt if she could spare me to run down to the shop for some sago, and I put on my sunbonnet and ran up, just as I was, to the church porch. The old gentleman was skipping with impatience. I've heard of people skipping with impatience, but I never saw any one do it before.

'Now, look here,' he said, 'I want you—I must—oh, I don't know which way to begin, I have so many things to say. I want to see your aunt, and ask her to let me buy her china.'

'You may save your trouble,' I said, 'for she'll never do it. She's left her china to me in her will,' I said.

Not that I was quite sure of it, but still I was sure enough to say so. The old gentleman put down his brown−paper parcel on the porch seat as careful as if it had been a sick child, and said—

'But your aunt won't leave you anything if she knows you have broken the bowl, will she?'

'No,' I said, 'she won't, that's true, and you can tell her if you like.' For I knew very well he wouldn't.

'Well,' says he, speaking very slowly, 'if I lent you my bowl, you could pretend it's hers and she'll never know the difference, for they are as like as two peas. I can tell the difference, of course, but then I'm a collector. If I lend you the bowl, will you promise and vow in writing, and sign it with your name, to sell all that china to me directly it comes into your possession? Good gracious, girl, it will be hundreds of pounds in your pocket.'

That was a sad moment for me. I might have taken the bowl and promised and vowed, and then when the china came to me I might have told him I hadn't the power to sell it; but that wouldn't have looked well if any one had come to know of it. So I just said straight out—

'The only condition of my having my aunt's money is, that I never part with the china.'

He was silent a minute, looking out of the porch at the green trees waving about in the sunshine over the gravestones, and then he says—

'Look here, you seem an honourable girl. I am a collector. I buy china and keep it in cases and look at it, and it's more to me than meat, or drink, or wife, or child, or fire—do you understand? And I can no more bear to think of that china being lost to the world in a cottage instead of being in my collection than you can bear to think of your aunt's finding out about the bowl, and leaving the money to your cousin Sarah.'

Of course, I knew by that that he had been gossiping in the village.

'Well?' I said, for I saw that he had something more on his mind.

'I'm an old man,' he went on, 'but that need not stand in the way. Rather the contrary, for I shall be less trouble to you than a young husband. Will you marry me out of hand? And then when your aunt dies the china will be mine, and you will be well provided for.'

No one but a madman would have made such an offer, but that wasn't a reason for me to refuse it. I pretended to think a bit, but my mind was made up.

'And the bowl?' I said.

'Of course I'll lend you my bowl, and you shall give me the pieces of the old one. Lord Worsley's specimen has twenty−five rivets in it.'

'Well, sir,' I said, 'it seems to be a way out of it that might suit both of us. So, if you'll speak to mother, and if your circumstances is as you represent, I'll accept your offer, and I'll be your good lady.'

And then I went back to aunt and told her Wilkinses was out of sago, but they would have some in on Wednesday.

It was all right about the bowl. She never noticed the difference. I was married to the old gentleman, whose name was Fytche, the next week by special licence at St. Nicholas Cole Abbey, Queen Victoria Street, which is very near that beautiful glass and china shop where I had tried to match the bowl; and my aunt died three months later and left me everything. Sarah married in quite a poor way. That quinsy of hers cost her dear.

Mr. Fytche was very well off, and I should have liked living at his house well enough if it hadn't been for the china. The house was cram full of it, and he could think of nothing else. No more going out to dinner; no amusements; nothing as a girl like me had a right to look for. So one day I told him straight out I thought he had better give up collecting and sell aunt's things, and we would buy a nice little place in the country with the money.

'But, my dear,' he said, 'you can't sell your aunt's china. She left it stated expressly in her will.'

And he rubbed his hands and chuckled, for he thought he had got me there.

'No, but you can,' I said, 'the china is yours now. I know enough about law to know that; and you can sell it, and you shall.'

And so he did, whether it was law or not, for you can make a man do anything if you only give your mind to it and take your time and keep all on. It was called the great Fytche sale, and I made him pay the money he got for it into the bank; and when he died I bought a snug little farm with it, and married a young man that I had had in my eye long before I had heard of Mr. Fytche.

And we are very comfortably off, and not a bit of china in the house that's more than twenty years old, so that whatever's broke can be easy replaced.

As for his collection, which would have brought me in thousands of pounds, they say, I have to own he had the better of me there, for he left it by will to the South Kensington Museum.

# BARRING THE WAY

I DON'T know how she could have done it. I couldn't have done it myself. At least, I don't think so. But being lame and small, and not noticeable anyhow, I had never any temptation, so I can't judge those that have.

Ellen was tall and a slight figure, and as pretty as a picture in her Sunday clothes, and prettier than any picture on a working day, with her sleeves rolled up to her shoulder and the colour in her face like a rose, and her brown, hair all twisted up rough anyhow; and, of course, she was much sought after and flattered. But I couldn't have done it myself, I think, even if I had been sought after twice as much and twice as handsome. No, I couldn't, not after the doctor had said that father's heart was weak, and any sudden shock might bring an end to him.

But, oh! poor dear, she was my sister—my own only sister—and it's not the time now to be hard on her, and she where she is.

She was walking regular with a steady young man, who worked through the week at Hastings, and come home here on a Sunday, and she would have married him and been as happy as a queen, I know; and all her looking in the glass, and dressing herself pretty, would have come to being proud of her babies and spending what bits she could get together in making them look smart; but it was not to be.

Young Barber, the grocer's son, who had a situation in London, he come down for his summer holiday, and then it was 'No, thank you kindly,' to poor Arthur Simmons, that had loved her faithful and true them two years, and she was all for walking with young Mr. Barber, besides running into the shop twenty times a day when no occasion was, just for a word across the counter.

And father wasn't the best pleased, but he was always a silent man, very pious, and not saying much as he sat at his bench, for he had been brought up to the shoemaking and was very respected among Pevensey folks. He would hum a hymn or two at his work sometimes, but he was never a man of words. When young Barber went back to London, Ellen, she began to lose her pretty looks. I had never thought much of young Barber. There was something common about him—not like the labouring men, but a kind of town commonness, which is twenty times worse to my thinking; and if I didn't like him before, you may guess I didn't waste much love on him when I see poor Ellen's looks.

Now, if I am to tell you this story at all, I must tell it very steady and quiet, and not run on about what I thought or what I felt, or I shan't never have the heart to go through it. The long and short of it was that a month hadn't passed over our heads after young Barber leaving, when one morning our Ellen wasn't there. And she left a note, nailed to father's bench, to say she had gone off with her true love, and father wasn't to mind, for she was going to be married.

Father, he didn't say a word, but he turned a dreadful white, and blue his lips were, and for one dreadful moment I thought that I had lost him too. But he come round presently. I ran across to the Three Swans to get a drop of brandy for him; and I looked at her letter again, and I looked at him, and we both see that neither of us believed that she was going to be married. There was something about the very way of the words as she had written them which showed they weren't true.

Father, he said nothing, only when next Sunday had come, and I had laid out his Sunday things and his hat, all brushed as usual, he says—

'Put 'em away, my girl. I don't believe in Sunday. How can I believe in all that, and my Ellen gone to shame?'

And, after that, Sundays was the same to him as weekdays, and the folks looked shy at us, and I think they thought that, what with Ellen's running away and father's working on Sundays, we was on the high−road to the pit of destruction.

And so the time went on, and it was Christmas. The bells was ringing for Christmas Eve, and I says to father: 'O father! come to church. Happen it's all true, and Ellen's an honest woman, after all.'

And he lifted his head and looked at me, and at that moment there come a soft little knock at the door. I knew who it was afore I had time to stir a foot to go across the kitchen and open the door to her. She blinked her eyes at the light as I opened the door to her. Oh, pale and thin her face was that used to be so rosy−red, and—

'May I come in?' she said, as if it wasn't her own home. And father, he looked at her like a man that sees nothing, and I was frightened what he might do, like the fool I was, that ought to have known better.

'I'm very tired,' says Ellen, leaning against the door−post; 'I have come from a very long way.'

And the next minute father makes two long steps to the door, and his arms is round her, and she a−hanging on his neck, and they two holding each other as if they would never let go. And so she come home, and I shut the door.

And in all that time father and me, we couldn't make too much of her, me being that thankful to the Lord that He had let our dear come back to us; and never a word did she say to me of him that had been her ruin. But one night when I asked her, silly−like, and hardly thinking what I was doing, some question about him, father down with his fist on the table, and says he—

'When you name that name, my girl, you light hell in me, and if ever I see his damned face again, God help him and me too.'

And so I held my stupid tongue, and sat sewing with Ellen long days, and it was a happy, sad time, if a time can be sad and happy both.

And it was about primrose−time that her time come, and we had kept it quiet, and nobody knew but us and Mrs. Jarvis, that lived in the cottage next to ours, and was Ellen's godmother, and loved her like her own daughter; and when the baby come, Ellen says, 'Is it a boy or a girl?' And we told her it was a boy.

Then, says she, 'Thank God for that! My baby won't live to know such shame as mine.'

And there wasn't one of us dared tell her that God meant no shame or pain or grief at all should come to her little baby, because it was dead. But by−and−by she would have it to lie by her, and we said No: it was asleep; and for all we said she guessed the truth somehow. And she began to cry, the tears running down her cheeks and wetting the linen about her, and she began to moan, 'I want my baby—oh, bring me my little baby that I have never seen yet. I want to say "good−bye" to it, for I shall never go where it is going.'

And father said, 'Bring her the child.'

I had dressed the poor little thing—a pretty boy, and would have been a fine man—in one of the gowns I had taken a pleasure in sewing for it to wear, and the little cap with the crimped border that had been Ellen's own when she was a baby and her mother's pride, and I brought it and put it in her arms, and it was clay−cold in my hands as I carried it. And she laid its head on her breast as well as she could for her weakness; and father, who was leaning over her, nigh mad with love and being so anxious about her, he says—

'Let Lucy take the poor little thing away, Ellen,' he says, 'for you must try to get well and strong for the sake of those that love you.'

Then she says, turning her eyes on him, shining like stars out of her pale face, and still holding her baby tight to her breast, 'I know what's the best thing I can do for them as love me, and I'm doing it fast. Kiss me, father, and kiss the baby too. Perhaps if I hold it tight we'll go out into the dark together, and God won't have the heart to part us.' And so she died.

And there was no one but me that touched her after she died, for all I am a cripple, and I laid her out, my pretty, with my own hands, and the baby in the hollow of her arm; and I put primroses all round them, and I took father to look at them when all was done, and we stood there, holding hands and looking at her lying there so sweet and peaceful, and looking so good too, whatever you may think, with all the trouble wiped off her face as if the Lord had washed it already in His heavenly light.

Now, Ellen was buried in the churchyard, and Parson, who was always a hard man, he would have her laid away to the north side, where no sun gets to for the trees and the church, and where few folks like to be buried. But father, he said, 'No; lay her beside her mother, in the bit of ground I bought twenty years ago, where I mean to lie myself, and Lucy too, when her time comes, so that if the talk of rising again is true we shall be all together at the last, as kinsfolk should.'

So they laid her there, and her name was cut under mother's on the headstone.

Father didn't grieve and take on as some men do, but he was quieter than he used to be, and didn't seem to have that heart in his work that he always had even after she had left us. It seemed as if the spring of him was broken, somehow. Not but what he was goodness itself to me then and always. But I wasn't his favourite child, nor could I have looked to be, me being what I am and she so sweet and pretty, and such a way with her.

And father went to church to the burying, but he wouldn't go to service. 'I think maybe there's a God, and if

there is, I have that in my heart that's quite enough keeping in my own poor house, without my daring to take it into His.'

And so I gave up going too. I wouldn't seem to be judging father, not though I might be judged myself by all the village. But when I heard the church−bells ringing, ringing, it was like as if some one that loved me was calling to me and me not answering; and sometimes when all the folk was in church, I used to hobble up on my crutches to the gate and stand there and sometimes hear a bit of the singing come through the open door.

It was the end of August that Mr. Barber at the shop fell off a ladder leading to his wareroom, and was killed on the spot; and Mrs. Jarvis, she says to me, 'If that young Barber comes home, as I suppose he will, to take what's his by right in the eyes of the law, he might as well go and put his head into an oven on a baking−day, and get his worst friend to shove his legs in after him and shut the door to.'

'He won't come back,' says I. 'How could he face it, when every one in the village knows it?'

For when Ellen died it could not be kept secret any longer, and a heap of folks that would have drawn their skirts aside rather than brush against her if she had been there alive and well, with her baby at her breast, had a tear and a kind word for her now that she was gone where no tears and no words could get at her for good or evil.

I see once a bit of poetry in a book, and it said when a woman had done what she had done, the only way to get forgiven is to die, and I believe that's true. But it isn't true of fathers and sisters.

It was Sunday morning, and father, he was working away at his bench—not that it ever seemed to make him any happier to work, only he was more miserable if he didn't,—and I had crept up to the churchyard to lean against the wall and listen to the psalms being sung inside, when, looking down the village street, I saw Barber's shop open, and out came young Barber himself. Oh, if God forgets any one in His mercy, it will be him and his like!

He come out all smart and neat in his new black, and he was whistling a hymn tune softly. Our house was betwixt Barber's shop and the church, not a stone's−throw off, anyway; and I prayed to God that Barber would turn the other way and not come by our house, where father he was sitting at his bench with the door open.

But he did turn, and come walking towards me; and I had laid my crutches on the ground, and I stooped to pick them up to go home—to stop words; for what were words, and she in her grave?—when I heard young Barber's voice, and I looked over the wall, and see he had stopped, in his madness and folly and the wickedness of his heart, right opposite the house he had brought shame to, and he was speaking to father through the door.

I couldn't hear what he said, but he seemed to expect an answer, and, when none came, he called out a little louder, 'Oh, well, you've no call to hold your head so high, anyhow!' And for the way he said it I could have killed him myself, but for having been brought up to know that two wrongs don't make a right, and 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord; I will repay.'

They was at prayers in the church, and there was no sound in the street but the cooing of the pigeons on the roofs, and young Barber, he stood there looking in at our door with that little sneering smile on his face, and the next minute he was running for his life for the church, where all the folks were, and father after him like a madman, with his long knife in his hand that he used to cut the leather with. It all happened in a flash.

Barber come running up the dusty road in his black, and passed me as I stood by the churchyard gate, and up towards the church; but sudden in the path he stopped short, his eyes seeming starting out of his head as he looked at Ellen's grave—not that he could see her name, the headstone being turned the other way,—and he put his hands before his eyes and stood still a−trembling, like a rabbit when the dogs are on it, and it can't find no way out. Then he cried out, 'No, no, cover her face, for God's sake!' and crouched down against the footstone, and father, coming swift behind him, passed me at the gate, and he ran his knife through Barber's back twice as he crouched, and they rolled on the path together.

Then all the folks in church that had heard the scream, they come out like ants when you walk through an ant−heap. Young Barber was holding on to the headstone, the blood running out through his new broadcloth, and death written on his face in big letters.

I ran to lift up father, who had fallen with his face on the grave, and as I stooped over him, young Barber he turned his head towards me, and he says in a voice I could hardly catch, such a whisper it was, 'Was there a child? I didn't know there was a child—a little child in her arm, and flowers all round.'

'Your child,' says I; 'and may God forgive you!'

And I knew that he had seen her as I see her when my hands had dressed her for her sleep through the long

night.

I never have believed in ghosts, but there is no knowing what the good Lord will allow.

So vengeance overtook him, and they carried him away to die with the blood dropping on the gravel; and he never spoke a word again.

And when they lifted father up with the red knife still fast in his hand, they found that he was dead, and his face was white and his lips were blue, like as I had seen them before. And they all said father must have been mad; and so he lies where he wished to lie, and there's a place there where I shall lie some day, where father lies, and mother, and my dear with her little baby in the hollow of her arm.

# GRANDSIRE TRIPLES

I WAS promised to William, in a manner of speaking, close upon seven year. What I mean to say is, when he was nigh upon fourteen, and was to go away to his uncle in Somerset to learn farming, he gave me a kiss and half of a broken sixpence, and said—

'Kate, I shall never think of any girl but you, and you must never think of any chap but me.'

And the Lord in His goodness knows that I never did.

Father and mother laughed a bit, and called it child's nonsense; but they was willing enough for all that, for William was a likely chap, and would be well−to−do when his good father died, which I am sure I never wished nor prayed for. All the trouble come from his going to Somerset to learn farming, for his uncle that was there was a Roman, and he taught William a good deal more than he set out to learn, so that presently nothing would do but William must turn Roman Catholic himself. I didn't mind, bless you. I never could see what there was to make such a fuss about betwixt the two lots of them. Lord love us! we're all Christians, I should hope. But father and mother was dreadful put out when the letter come saying William had been 'received' (like as if he was a parcel come by carrier). Father, he says—

'Well, Kate, least said soonest mended. But I had rather see you laid out on the best bed upstairs than I'd see you married to William, a son of the Scarlet Woman.'

In my silly innocence I couldn't think what he meant, for William's mother was a decent body, who wore a lilac print on week−days and a plain black gown on Sunday for all she was a well−to−do farmer's wife, and might have gone smart as a cock pheasant.

It was at tea−time, and I was a−crying on to my bread−and−butter, and mother sniffing a little for company behind the tea−tray, and father, he bangs down his fist in a way to make the cups rattle again, and he says—

'You've got to give him up, my girl. You write and tell him so, and I'll take the letter as I go down to the church to−night to practice. I've been a good father to you, and you must be a good girl to me; and if you was to marry him, him being what he is, I'd never speak to you again in this world or the next.'

'You wouldn't have any chance in the next, I'm afraid, James,' said my mother gently, 'for her poor soul, it couldn't hope to go to the blessed place after that.'

'I should hope not,' said my father, and with that he got up and went out, half his tea not drunk left in the mug.

Well, I wrote that letter, and I told William right enough that him and me could never be anything but friends, and that he must think of me as a sister, and that was what father told me to say. But I hope it wasn't very wrong of me to put in a little bit of my own, and this is what I said after I had told him about the friend and sister—

'But, dear William,' says I, 'I shall never love anybody but you, that you may rely, and I will live an old maid to the end of my days rather than take up with any other chap; and I should like to see you once, if convenient, before we part for ever, to tell you all this, and to say "Good−bye" and "God bless you." So you must find out a way to let me know quiet when you come home from learning the farming in Somerset.'

And may I be forgiven the deceitfulness, and what I may call the impudence of it! I really did give father that same letter to post, and him believing me to be a better girl than I was, to my shame, posted it, not doubting that I had only wrote what he told me.

That was the saddest summer ever I had. The roses was nothing to me, nor the lavender neither, that I had always been so fond of; and as for the raspberries, I don't believe I should have cared if there hadn't been one on the canes; and even the little chickens, I thought them a bother, and—it goes to my heart to say it—a whole sitting was eaten by the rats in consequence. Everything seemed to go wrong. The butter was twice as long a−coming as ever I knowed it, and the broad beans got black fly, and father lost half his hay with the weather. If it had been me that had done something unkind, father would have said it was a Providence on me. But, of course, I knew better than to speak up to my own father, with his hay lying rotting and smoking in the ten−acre, and telling him he was a−being judged.

Well, the harvest was got in. It was neither here nor there. I have seen better years and I have seen worse. And

October come. I was getting to bed one night; at least, I hadn't begun to undress, for I was sitting there with William's letters, as he had wrote me from time to time while he was in Somerset, and I was reading them over and thinking of William, silly fashion, as a young girl will, and wishing it had been me was a Roman Catholic and him a Protestant, because then I could have gone into a convent like the wicked people in father's story−books. I was in that state of silliness, you see, that I would have liked to do something for William, even if it was only going into a convent—to be bricked up alive, perhaps. And then I hears a scratch, scratch, scratching, and 'Drat the mice,' says I; but I didn't take any notice, and then there was a little tap, tapping, like a bird would make with its beak on the window−pane, and I went and opened it, thinking it was a bird that had lost its way and was coming foolish−like, as they will, to the light. So I drew the curtain and opened the window, and it was—William!

'Oh, go away, do,' says I; 'father will hear you.'

He had climbed up by the pear−tree that grew right and left up the wall, and—

'I ask your pardon,' says he, 'my pretty sweetheart, for making so free as to come to your window this time of night, but there didn't seem any other way.'

'Oh, go, dear William, do go,' says I. I expected every moment to see the door open and father put his head in.

'I'm not going,' said William, 'till you tell me where you'll meet me to say "Good−bye" and "God bless you," like you said in the letter.'

Though I knew the whole parish better than I know the palm of my hand, if you'll believe me, I couldn't for the life of me for the moment think of any place where I could meet William, and I stood like a fool, trembling. Oh, what a jump I gave when I heard a noise like a heavy foot in the garden outside!

'Oh! it's father got round. Oh! he'll kill you, William. Oh! whatever shall we do?'

'Nonsense!' said William, and he caught hold of my shoulder and gave me a gentle little shake. 'It was only one of these pears as I kicked off. They must be as hard as iron to fall like that.'

Then he gave me a kiss, and I said: 'Then I'll meet you by the Parson's Shave to−morrow at half−past five, and do go. My heart's a−beating so I can hardly hear myself speak.'

'Poor little bird!' says William. Then he kissed me again and off he went; and considering how quiet he came, so that even I couldn't hear him, you would not believe the noise he made getting down that pear−tree. I thought every minute some one would be coming in to see what was happening.

Well, the next day I went about my work as frightened as a rabbit, and my heart beating fit to choke me, trying not to think of what I had promised to do. At tea−time father says, looking straight before him—

'William Birt has come home, Kate. You remember I've got your promise not to pass no words with him, him being where he is, without the fold, among the dogs and things.'

And I didn't answer back, though I knew well enough it wasn't honest; but he hadn't got my word. Father had brought me up careful and kind, and I knew my duty to my parents, and I meant to do it, too. But I couldn't help thinking I owed a little bit of a duty to William, and I meant doing that, so far as keeping my promise to meet him that afternoon went. So after tea I says, and I do think it is almost the only lie I ever told—

'Mother,' I says, 'I've got the jumping toothache, and it's that bad I can hardly see to thread my needle.'

Then she says, as I knew she would, her being as kind an old soul as ever trod: 'Go and lie down a bit and put the old sheepskin coat over your head, and I'll get on with the darning.'

So I went upstairs trembling all over. I took the bolster and pillow and put them under the covers, to look as like me as I could, and I put the old sheepskin coat at the top of all; and as you come into the room any one would have thought it was me lying there with the toothache. Then I took my hat and shawl and I went out, quiet as a mouse, through the dairy. When I got to the Parson's Shave there was William, and I was so glad to see him, I didn't think of nothing else for full half a minute. Then William said—

'It's only one field to the church. Why not go up there and sit in the porch? See, it's coming on to rain.'

So he took my arm, and we started across the field, where all the days of the year but one you would not meet a soul. We went up through the churchyard. It was 'most dark, but I wasn't a bit afraid with William's arm round me. But when we got to the porch and had sat down, I was sorry I'd come, for I heard feet on the road below, and they stopped outside the lychgate.

'Come, quick,' says I, 'or we're caught like rats in a trap. If I am going to give you up to please father, I may as well please him all round. There's no reason why he should know I've seen you.'

'So we stole on our tiptoes round to the little door that is hardly ever fastened, and so through to the tower. Father being one of the bellringers, I knew every step. There's a stone seat cut out of the wall in the bellringers' loft, and there we sat down again, and I was just going to tell him again what I had said in the letter about being his sister and a friend, which seemed to comfort me somehow, though William has told me since it never would have him, when William, he gripped my hand like iron, and "S−sh!' says he, 'listen.' And I listened, and oh! what I felt when I heard footsteps coming up the tower. I didn't dare speak a word to him, and only kept tight hold of his hand, and pulled him along till we got to the tower steps, and went on up. But I says to myself, 'Oh, what's my head made of, to forget that it's practising night? and Him the church was built for only knows how long they won't be here practising!' We went on up the twisted cobwebby stairs, with bits of broken birds' nests that crackled under our feet that loud I thought for sure the folks below must hear us; and we got into the belfry, and there William was for staying, but I whispered to him—

'If you hear them bells when they're all a−going, you won't never hear much else. We must get on up out of it unless we want to be deaf the rest of our lives.'

And it was pitch dark in the belfry, except for the little grey slits where the shuttered windows are. The owls and starlings were frightened, I suppose, at hearing us, though why they should have been, I don't know, being used to the bells; and they flew about round us liker ghosts than anything feathered, and one great owl flopped out right into my face, till I nearly screamed again. It was all very, very dusty, and not being able to see, and being afraid to strike a light, we had to feel along the big beams for our way between the bells, I going first, because I knew the way, and reaching back a hand every now and then to see that William was coming after me safe and sound. On hands and knees we had to go for safety, and all the while I was dreading they would start the bells a−going and, maybe, shake William, who wasn't as used to it as I was, off the beams, and him perhaps be smashed to pieces by the bells as they swung.

I don't know how long it took us to get across the belfry to the corner where the ladder is that leads up to the tower−top. William says it must have been about a couple of minutes, but I think it was much more like half an hour. I thought we should never get there, and oh! what it was to me when I came to the end of the last beam, and got my foot down on the firm floor again, and the ladder in my hand, and William behind me! So up we went, me first again, because I knew the way and the fastenings of the door. And that part of it wasn't so bad, for I will say, if you've got to go up a long ladder, it's better to go up in the dark, when you can't see what's below you if you happen to slip; and I got up and opened the door, and it was light out of doors and fresh with the rain—though that had stopped now.

Then William would take his coat off, and put it round me, for all I begged him not, and presently the tower began to shake and the bells began, and directly they began I knew what they was up to.

'O William,' I says, 'it's Grandsire Triples, and there's five thousand and fifty changes to 'em, and it's a matter of three hours!'

But he couldn't hear a word I said for the bells. So then I took his coat and my shawl, and we wrapped them round both our heads to shut the bells out, and then we could hear each other speak inside.

I'm not going to write down all I said nor all he said, which was only foolishness—and besides, it come to nothing after all. But somehow the time wasn't long; and it's a funny thing, but unhappy and happy you can be at the same time when you are with one you love and are going to leave. William, he begged and prayed of me not to give him up. But I said I knew my duty, and he said he hoped I would think better of it, and I said, 'No, never,' and then we kissed each other again, and the bells went on, and on, and on, clingle, clangle, clingle, chim, chime, chim, chime, till I was 'most dazed, and felt as if I had lived up there all my life, and was going to live up there twenty lives longer.

'I'll wait for you all my life long,' says William. 'Not that I wish the old man any harm, but it's not in the nature of things your father can live for ever, and then—'

'It ain't no use thinking of that, William,' said I. 'Father is sure to make me promise never to have you—when he's dying, and I can't refuse him anything. It's just the kind of thing he'd think of.'

Perhaps you will think William ought to have made more stand, for everybody likes a masterful man; but what stand can you make when you are up in a belfry with the bells shouting and yelling at you, and when the girl you are with won't listen to reason? And you have no idea what them bells were. Often and often since then I have started up in the bed thinking I heard them again. It was enough to drive one distracted.

'Well,' says William, 'you'll give me up, but I'll never give you up; and you mark my words, you and me will be man and wife some day.'

And as he said it, the bells stopped sudden in the middle of a change. The rain had come on again. It was very chill up there. My teeth was chattering, and so was William's, though he pretended he did it for the joke.

'Let's get inside again,' says he. 'Perhaps they are going home, and if they are not, we can stay there till they begin it again.'

So we opened the door and crept down the ladder. There was light now coming up from the bellringers' loft through the holes in the floor, and we got down to the belfry easy, and as we got to the bottom of the ladder I heard my father's voice in the loft below—

'I don't believe it,' he was shouting. 'It can't be true. She's a God−fearing girl.'

And then I heard my mother. 'Come home, James,' she said, 'come home—it's true. I told you you was too hard on them. Young folks will be young folks, and now, perhaps, our little girl has come to shame instead of being married decent, as she might have been, though Roman.'

Then there was silence for a bit, and then my father says, speaking softer, 'Tell me again. I can't think but what I'm dreaming.'

Then mother says—'Don't I tell you she said she'd got the toothache, and she was going to lie down a bit, and I went to take her up some camomiles I'd been hotting, and she wasn't there, and her bolsters and pillows, poor lamb, made up to pretend she was, and Johnson's Ben, he see her along of William Birt by the Parson's Shave with his arm round her—God forgive them both!'

Then says my father, 'Here's an end on't. She's no daughter o' mine. If she was to come back to me, I'd turn her out of doors. Don't let any one name her name to me never no more. I hain't got no daughter,' he said, 'and may the Lord—'

I think my mother put her hands afore his mouth, for he stopped short, and mother, she said—

'Don't curse them, James. You'll be sorry for it, and they'll have trouble enough without that.'

And with that father and mother must have gone away, and the other ringers stood talking a bit.

'She'd best not come back,' said the leader, John Evans. 'Out a−gallivanting with a young chap from five to eight as I understand! What's the good of coming back? She's lost her character, and a gal without a character, she's like—like—'

'Like a public−house without a licence,' said the second ringer.

'Or a cart without a horse,' said the treble.

There was only one man spoke up for me—that was Jim Piper at the general shop. 'I don't believe no harm of that gal,' says he, 'no more nor I would of my own missus, nor yet of him.'

'Well, let's hope for the best,' said the others. But I had a sort of feeling they was hoping for the worst, because when things goes wrong, it's always more amusing for the lookers−on than when everything goes right. Presently they went clattering down the steps, and all was dark, and there was me and William among the cobwebs and the owls, holding each other's hands, and as cold as stone, both of us.

'Well?' says William, when everything was quiet again.

'Well!' says I. 'Good−bye, William. He won't be as hard as his word, and if I couldn't give you all my life to be a good wife to you, I have given you my character, it seems; not willing, it's true; but there's nothing I should grudge you, William, and I don't regret it, and good−bye.'

But he held my hands tight.

'Good−bye, William,' I says again. 'I'm going. I'm going home.'

'Yes, my girl,' says he, 'you are going home; you're going home with me to my mother.' And he was masterful enough then, I can tell you. 'If your father would throw you off without knowing the rights or wrongs of the story, it's not for him you should be giving up your happiness and mine, my girl. Come home to my mother, and let me see the man who dares to say anything against my wife.'

And whether it was father's being so hard and saying what he did about me before all those men, or whether it was me knowing that mother had stood up for us secret all the time, or whether it was because I loved William so much, or because he loved me so much, I don't know. But I didn't say another word, only began to cry, and we got downstairs and straight home to William's mother, and we told her all about it; and we was cried in church next Sunday, and I stayed with the old lady until we was married, and many a year after; and a good mother she was to

me, though only in law, and a good granny to our children when they come. And I wasn't so unhappy as you may think, because mother come to see me directly, and she was at our wedding; and father, he didn't say anything to prevent her going.

When I was churched after my first, and the boy was christened—in our own church, for I had made William promise it should be so if ever we had any—mother was there, and she said to me: 'Take the child,' she said, 'and go to your father at home; and when he sees the child, he'll come round, I'll lay a crown; for his bark,' she says, 'was allus worse than his bite.'

And I did so, and the pears was hard and red on the wall as they was the night William climbed up to my window, and I went into the kitchen, and there was father sitting in his big chair, and the Bible on the table in front of him, with his spectacles; but he wasn't reading, and if it had been any one else but father, I should have said he had been crying. And so I went in, and I showed him the baby, and I said—

'Look, father, here's our little baby; and he's named James, for you, father, and christened in church the same as I was. And now I have got a child of my own,' says I, for he didn't speak, 'dear father, I know what it is to have a child of your own go against your wishes, and please God mine never will—or against yours either. But I couldn't help it, and O father, do forgive me!'

And he didn't say anything, but he kissed the boy, and he kissed him again. And presently he says—

'It's 'most time your mother was home from church. Won't you be setting the tea, Kate?'

So I give him the baby to hold, for I knew everything was all right betwixt us.

And all the children have been christened in the church. But I think when father is taken from us—which in the nature of things he must be, though long may it be first!—I think I shall be a Roman Catholic too; for it doesn't seem to me to matter much one way or the other, and it would please William very much, and I am sure it wouldn't hurt me. And what's the good of being married to the best man in the world if you can't do a little thing like that to please him?

# A DEATH−BED CONFESSION

AND so you think I shall go to heaven when I die, sir! And why? Because I have spent my time and what bits of money I've had in looking after the poor in this parish! And I would do it again if I had my time to come over again; but it will take more than that to wipe out my sins, and God forgive me if I can't always believe that even His mercy will be equal to it. You're a clergyman, and you ought to know. I think sometimes the black heart in me, that started me on that deed, must have come from the devil, and that I am his child after all, and shall go back to him at the last. Don't look so shocked, sir. That's not what I really believe; it's only what I sometimes fear I ought to believe, when I wake up in the chill night and think things over, lying here alone.

To see me old and prim, with my cap and little checked shawl, you'd never think that I was once one of the two prettiest girls on all the South Downs. But I was, and my cousin Lilian was the other. We lived at Whitecroft together at our uncle's. He was a well−to−do farmer, as well−to−do as a farmer could be in such times as those, and on such land as that.

Whenever I hear people say 'home,' it's Whitecroft I think of, with its narrow windows and thatch roof and the farm−buildings about it, and the bits of trees all bent one way with the wind from the sea.

Whitecroft stands on a shoulder of the Downs, and on a clear day you can see right out to sea and over the hollow where Felscombe lies cuddled down close and warm, with its elms and its church, and its bright bits of gardens. They are sheltered from the sea wind down there, but there's nothing to break the wing of it as it rolls across the Downs on to Whitecroft; and of a night Lilian and I used to lie and listen to the wind banging the windows, and know that the chimneys were rocking over our heads, and feel the house move to and fro with the strength of the wind like as if it was the swing of a cradle.

Lilian and I had come there, little things, and uncle had brought us up together, and we loved each other like sisters until that happened, and this is the first time I have told a human soul about it; and if being sorry can pay for things—well, but I'm afraid there are some things nothing can pay for.

It was one wild windy night, when, if you should open the door an inch, everything in the house jarred and rattled. We were sitting round the fire, uncle and Lilian and me, us with our knitting and him asleep in his newspaper, and nobody could have gone to sleep with a wind like that but a man who has been bred and born at sea, or on the South Downs.

Lilian and I were talking over our new winter dresses, when there come a knock at the side door, not nigh so loud as some of the noises the wind made, but not being used to it, uncle sat up, wide awake, and said, 'Hark!' In a minute it come again, and then I went to the door and opened it a bit. There was some one outside who began to speak as soon as he saw the light, but I could not hear what he said for the roaring of the wind, and the cracking of the trees outside.

'Shut that door!' uncle shouted from the parlour. 'Let the dog in, whatever he is, and let him tell his tale this side the oak.'

So I let him in and shut the door after him, and I had better have shut to the lid of my own coffin after me.

Him that I let in was dripping wet, and all spent with fighting the wind on these Downs, where it is like a lion roaring for its prey, and will go nigh to kill you, if you fight it long enough. He leaned against the wall and said—

'I have lost my way, and I have had a nasty fall. I think there is something wrong with my arm—hollow—slip—light—hospitality beg your pardon, I'm sure,' and with that he fainted dead off on the cocoanut matting at my feet.

Uncle came out when I screamed, and we got the stranger in and put him on the big couch by the fire. Uncle was nursing up with one of his bad attacks of bronchitis, the same thing that carried him off in the end, and the first thing he said when he'd felt the poor chap's arm down was—

'This is a bad break. Which of you girls will go and wake one of the waggoners to fetch Doctor from Felscombe?'

'I will,' I said.

But before I went I got out the port wine and the brandy, and bade Lilian rub his hands a bit, and be sure she didn't let him see her looking frightened when he come to.

Why did I do that? Because the Lord made me to be a fool—giving him her pretty face to be the first thing he looked at when he come to after that long, dreary spell on the Downs, and that black journey into the strange place where people go to when they faint.

But everything that there was of me ached to be of some use to him. So I went, and once outside the door it seemed easier to take Brown Bess and go myself to Felscombe than to rouse the waggoners, who were but sleepy and slow−headed at the best of times. So I saddled Brown Bess myself and started.

It was but a small way across the Downs that I had to lead her, it being almost as much as both of us could do to keep our feet in the fury of the wind. Then you go down the steep hill into the village, and as soon as we had passed the brow, it was easy and I mounted. I was down there in less time than it would have taken to rouse one of those heavy−headed carters; and Doctor, he come back with me, walking beside Brown Bess with his hand on her bridle, he not being by any means loth to come out such a night, because, forsooth, it was me that fetched him. Oh yes! I might have married him if I had wanted to, and more than one better man than him; but that's neither here nor there.

When we got in, we found Lilian kneeling by the sofa rubbing the young man's hands as I had told her to, and his eyes were open, and there was a bit of colour in his cheek, and he was looking at her like as any one but a fool might have known he would look; and the Doctor, he saw it too, and looked at me and grinned; and if I had been God, that grin should have been his last. No, I don't mean to be irreverent, but it's true, all the same.

Well, the arm was set, and when he was a bit easier we settled round the fire, and he told us that his name was Edgar Linley, and he was an artist, and had been painting the angry sunset that had come before that night's storm, and got caught in the dusk and so lost his way, as many do on our Downs at home, some not so lucky as him to see a light and get to it.

This Mr. Linley had a way with him like no other man I ever see; not only a way to please women with, but men too. I never saw my uncle so taken up with anybody; and the long and the short of it was that he stayed there a month, and we nursed him; and at the end of the month I knew no more than I had known that evening when I had seen him looking at Lilian; but he and Lilian, they had learned a deal in that time.

And one evening I was at my bedroom window, and I see them coming up the path in the red light of the evening, walking very close together, and I went down very quick to the parlour, where uncle was just come in to his tea and taking his big boots off, and I sat down there, for I wanted to hear how they'd say it, though I knew well enough what they had got to say. And they came in and he says, very frank and cheery—

'Mr. Verinder,' he says, 'Lilian and I have made up our minds to take each other, with your consent, for better, for worse.'

And uncle was as pleased as Punch; and as for me, I didn't believe in God then, or I should have prayed Him to strike them both down dead as they stood.

Why did I hate them so? And you call yourself a man and a parson, and one that knows the heart of man! Why did I hate them? Because I loved him as no woman will ever love you, sir, if you'll pardon me being so bold, if you live to be a thousand.

He would have understood all about everything with half what I have been telling you. As it is, I sometimes think that he understood, for he was very gentle with me and kind, not making too much of Lilian when I was by, yet never with a look or a word that wasn't the look and the word of her good, true lover; and she was very happy, for she loved him as much as that blue−and−white teacup kind of woman can love; and that's more than I thought for at the time.

He was an orphan, and well off, and there was nothing to wait for, so the wedding was fixed for early in the new year; and I sewed at her new clothes with a marrow of lead in every bone of my fingers.

A truly understanding person might get some meaning out of my words when I say that I loved her in my heart all the time that I was hating her; and the devil himself must have sent out my soul and made use of the rest of me on that night I shall tell you about presently.

It was in the sharp, short, frosty days that brought in Christmas that uncle came home one day from Lewes, looking thunder black, with an eye like fire and a mouth like stone. And he walked straight into the kitchen where we three were making toast for tea, for Edgar was one of us by this time, and lent a hand at all such little things as

young folks can be merry over together. And uncle says—

'Leave my house, young man; it's an honest house and a clean, and no fit place for a sinful swine. Get out,' he says, '"For without are dogs—"'

With that he went on with a long text of Revelation that I won't repeat to you, sir, for I know your ears are nice, and it's out of one of the plainest−spoken parts of the Bible. Edgar turned as white as a sheet.

'I swear to God,' he said, 'I wasn't to blame. I know what you have heard, but if I can't whiten myself without blacking a woman

I'll live and die as black as hell,' he says. 'But I don't need whitening with those that love me,' he says, looking at Lilian and then at me—oh! yes, he looked at me then.

I said, 'No, indeed,' and so did Lilian; but she began to cry, and before we had time to think what it was all about, he had taken his hat and kissed Lilian and was gone. But he turned back at the door again.

'I'll write to you,' he says to Lilian, 'but I don't cross this door again till those words are unsaid,' and so he was gone.

Him being gone, uncle told us what he had heard in Lewes, and what all folks there believed to be the truth; how young Edgar had carried on, as men may not, with a young married woman, the grocer's wife where he lodged, the end of it being that she drowned herself in a pond near by, leaving as her last word that he was the cause of it; and so he may have been, but not the way my uncle and the folk at Lewes thought, I'll stake my soul. God makes His troubles in dozens; He don't make a new patterned one for every back. I wasn't the only woman who ever loved Edgar Linley without encouragement and without hope, and risked her soul because she was mad with loving him.

But when uncle had told us all this with a black look on his face I never had seen before, he said—

'Girls, I have always been a clean liver, and I have brought you up in the fear of the Lord. I don't want to judge any man, and Lilian is of age and her own mistress. It's not for me to say what she shall or shan't do, but if she marries that scoundrel, she has my curse here and hereafter, and not one penny of my money, if it was to save her from the workhouse.'

After that we were sad enough at Whitecroft. But in two days come a letter from Edgar to Lilian; and when she had read it, she looked at me and said, 'O Isabel, whatever shall I do? I never can marry without dear uncle's consent,' and I turned and went from her without a word, because I couldn't bear to see her arguing and considering what to do, when the best thing in the world was to her hand for the taking.

All the next week she cried all day and most of the night. Then uncle went to London, my belief being it was to alter his will, so that if Lilian married Edgar, she should feel it in her pocket, anyhow, and he was to stay all night, and the farm servants slept out of the house, and we were without a maid at the time. So Lilian and me were left alone at Whitecroft.

Lilian and I didn't sleep in one room now. I had made some excuse to sleep on the other side of the house, because I couldn't bear to wake up of mornings and see her lying there so pretty, looking like a lily in her white nightgown and her fair hair all tumbled about her face. It was more than any woman could have borne to see her lying there, and think that early in the new year it was him that would see her lying like that of a morning.

And that night the place seemed very quiet and empty, as if there was more room in it for being unhappy in. When Lilian had taken her candle and gone up to bed, I walked through all the rooms below, as uncle's habit was, to see that all was fast for the night. It was as I set the bolt on the door of the little lean−to shed, where the faggots were kept, that the devil entered into me all in a breath; and I thought of Lilian upstairs in her white bed, and of how the day must come, when he would see how pretty she looked and white, and I said to myself, 'No, it never shall, not if I burn for it too.'

I hope you are understanding me. I sometimes think there is something done to folks when they are learning to be parsons as takes out of them a part of a natural person's understandingness; and I would rather have told the doctor, but then he couldn't have told me whether these are the kind of things Christ died to make His Father forgive, and I suppose you can.

What I did was this. I clean forgot all about uncle and how fond I was of Whitecroft, and how much I had always loved Lilian (and I loved her then, though I know you can't understand me when I say so), and I took all them faggots, dragging them across the sanded floor of the kitchen, and I put them in the parlour in the little wing to the left, and just under Lilian's bedroom, and I laid them under the wooden corner cupboard where the best

china is, and then I poured oil and brandy all over, and set it alight.

Then I put on my hat and jacket, buttoning it all the way down, as quiet as if I was going down to the village for a pound of candles. And I made sure all was burning free, and out of the front door I went and up on to the Downs, and there I set me down under the wall where I could see Whitecroft.

And I watched to see the old place burn down; and at first there was no light to be seen.

But presently I see the parlour windows get redder and redder, and soon I knew the curtains had caught, and then there was a light in Lilian's bedroom. I see the bars of the window as you do in the ruined mill when the sun is setting behind it; and the light got more and more, till I see the stone above the front door that tells how it was builded by one of our name this long time since; and at that, as sudden as he had come, the devil left me, and I knew all in a minute that I was crouched against a wall, very cold, and my hands hooked into my hair over my ears, and my knees drawn up under my chin; and there was the old house on fire, the dear old house, with Lilian inside it in her little white bed, being burnt to death, and me her murderer! And with that I got up, and I remember I was stiff, as if I had been screwing myself all close together to keep from knowing what it was I had been a−doing. I ran down the meadow to our house faster than I ever ran in my life, in at the door, and up the stairs, all blue and black, and hidden up with coppery−coloured smoke.

I don't know how I got up them stairs, for they were beginning to burn too. I opened her door—all red and glowing it was inside! like an oven when you open it to rake out the ashes on a baking−day. And I tried to get in, because all I wanted then was to save her—to get her out safe and sound, if I had to roast myself for it, because we had been brought up together from little things, and I loved her like a sister. And while I was trying to get my jacket off and round my head, something gave way right under my feet, and I seemed to fall straight into hell!

I was badly burnt, and what handsomeness there was about my face was pretty well scorched out of it by that night's work; and I didn't know anything for a bit.

When I come to myself, they had got me into bed bound up with cotton−wool and oil and things. And the first thing I did was to sit up and try to tear them off.

'You'll kill yourself,' says the nurse.

'Thank you,' says I, 'that's the best thing I can do, now Lilian is dead.'

And with that the nurse gives a laugh. 'Oh, that's what's on your mind, is it?' says she. 'Doctor said there was something. Miss Lilian had run away that night to her young man. Lucky for her! She's luckier than you, poor thing! And they're married and living in lodgings at Brighton, and she's been over to see you every day.'

That day she came again. I lay still and let her thank me for having tried to save her; for the farm men had seen the fire, and had come up in time to see me go up the staircase to her room, and they had pulled me out. She believes to this day the fire was an accident, and that I would have sacrificed my life for her. And so I would; she's right there.

I wasn't going to make her unhappy by telling her the real truth, because she was as fond of me as I was of her; and she has been as happy as the day is long, all her life long, and so she deserves.

And as for me, I stayed on with uncle at the farm until he died of that bronchitis I told you of, and the little wing was built up again, and the lichen has grown on it, so that now you could hardly tell it is only forty years old; and he left me all his money, and when he died, and Whitecroft went to a distant relation, I came here to do what bits of good I could.

And I have never told the truth about this to any one but you. I couldn't have told it to any one as cared, but I know you don't. So that makes it easy.

# HER MARRIAGE LINES

## I

I HAD never been out to service before, and I thought it a grand thing when I got a place at Charleston Farm. Old Mr. Alderton was close−fisted enough, and while he had the management of the farm it was a place no girl need have wished to come to; but now Mr. Alderton had given up farming this year or two, and young Master Harry, he had the management of everything. Mr. Alderton, he stuck in one room with his books, which he was always fond of above a bit, and must needs be waited on hand and foot, only driving over to Lewes every now and then.

Six pounds a year I was to have, and a little something extra at Christmas, according as I behaved myself. It was Master Harry who engaged me. He rode up to our cottage one fine May morning, looking as grand on his big grey horse, and says he, through the stamping clatter of his horse's hoofs on the paved causeway—

'Are you Deresby's Poll?' says he.

And I says, 'Yes; what might you be wanting?'

'We want a good maid up at the farm,' says he, patting his horse's neck—'Steady, old boy—and they tell me you're a good girl that wants a good place, and ours is a good place that wants a good girl. So if our wages suit you, when can you come?'

And I said, 'Tuesday, if that would be convenient.'

And he took off his hat to me as if I was a queen, though I was floury up to the elbows, being baking−day, and rode off down the lane between the green trees, and no king could have looked handsomer.

Charleston is a lonesome kind of house. It's bare and white, with the farm buildings all round it, except on one side where the big pond is; and lying as it does, in the cup of the hill, it seems to shut loneliness in and good company out.

I was to be under Mrs. Blake, who had been housekeeper there since the old mistress died. No one knew where she came from, or what had become of Mr. Blake, if ever there had been one. For my part I never thought she was a widow, and always expected some day to see Mr. Blake walk in and ask for his wife. But as a widow she came, and as a widow she passed.

She had just that kind of handsome, black, scowling looks that always seem to need a lot of black jet and crape to set them off—the kind of complexion that seems to be playing up for the widow's weeds from the very cradle. I have heard it said she was handsome, and so she may have been; and she took a deal of care of her face, always wearing a veil when there was a wind, and her hands to have gloves, if you please, for every bit of dirty work.

But she was a capable woman, and she soon put me in the way of my work; and me and Betty, who was a little girl of fourteen from Alfreston, had most of the housework to do, for Mrs. Blake would let none of us do a hand's−turn for the old master. It was she must do everything, and as he got more and more took up with his books there come to be more and more waiting on him in his own room; and after a bit Mrs. Blake used even to sit and write for him by the hour together.

I have heard tell old Mr. Alderton wasn't brought up to be a farmer, but was a scholar when he was young, and had to go into farming when he married Hakes's daughter as brought the farm with her; and now he had gone back to his books he was more than ever took up with the idea of finding something out—making something new that no one had ever made before—his invention, he called it, but I never understood what it was all about—and indeed Mrs. Blake took very good care I shouldn't.

She wanted no one to know anything about the master except herself—at least that was my opinion—and if that was her wish she certainly got it.

It was hard work, but I'm not one to grudge a hand's−turn here or a hand's−turn there, and I was happy enough; and when the men came in for their meals I always had everything smoking hot, and just as I should wish to sit down to it myself: And when the men come in, Master Harry always come in with them, and he'd say,

'Bacon and greens again, Polly, and done to a turn, I'll wager. You're the girl for my money!' and sit down laughing to a smoking plateful.

And so I was quite happy, and with my first six months' money I got father a new pipe and a comforter agin the winter, and as pretty a shepherd's plaid shawl as ever you see for mother, and a knitted waistcoat for my brother Jim, as had wanted one this two year, and had enough left to buy myself a bonnet and gown that I didn't feel ashamed to sit in church in under Master Harry's own blue eye. Mrs. Blake looked very sour when she saw my new things.

'You think to catch a young man with those,' says she. 'You gells is all alike. But it isn't fine feathers as catches a husband, as they say. Don't you believe it.'

And I said, 'No; a husband as was caught so easy might be as easy got rid of, which was convenient sometimes.'

And we come nigh to having words about it.

That was the day before old master went off to London unexpected. When Mrs. Blake heard he was going, she said she would take the opportunity of his being away to make so bold as to ask him for a day's holiday to go and visit her friends in Ashford. So she and master went in the trap to the station together, and off by the same train; and curious enough, it was by the same train in the evening they come back, and I thought to myself, 'That's like your artfulness, Mrs. Blake, getting a lift both ways.'

And I wondered to myself whether her friends in Ashford, supposing she had any, was as glad to see her as we was glad to get rid of her.

That's a day I shall always remember, for other things than her and master going away.

That was the day Betty and I got done early, and she wanted to run home to her mother to see about her clean changes for Sunday, which hadn't come according to expectations.

So I said, 'Off you go, child, and mind you're back by tea,' and I sat down in the clean kitchen to do up my old Sunday bonnet and make it fit for everyday.

And as I was sitting there, with the bits of ribbons and things in my lap, unpicking the lining of the bonnet, I heard the back door open, and thinking it was one of the men bringing in wood, maybe, I didn't turn my head, and next minute there was Master Harry had got his hand under my chin and holding my head back, and was kissing me as if he never meant to stop.

'Lor bless you, Master Harry,' says I, as soon as I could push him away, dropping all the ribbons and scissors and things in my flurry, 'how could you fashion to behave so? And me alone in the house! I thought you had better sense.'

'Don't be cross, Polly,' says he, smiling at me till I could have forgiven him much more than that, and going down on his knees to pick up my bits of rubbish. 'You know well enough who my choice is. I haven't lived in the house with you six months without finding out there's only one girl as I should like to keep my house to the end of the chapter.'

He had that took me by surprise that I give you my word that for a minute or two I couldn't say anything, but sat looking like a fool and taking the ribbons and things from his hands as he picked them up.

When I come to my senses I said, 'I don't know what maggot has bit you, sir, to think of such nonsense. What would the master say, and Mrs. Blake and all?'

Well, he got up off his knees and walked up and down the kitchen twice in a pretty fume, and he said a bad word about what Mrs. Blake might say that I'm not going to write down here.

'And as for my father,' says he, 'I know he's ideas above what's fitting for farmer folk, but I know best what's the right choice for me, and if you won't mind me not telling him, and will wait for me patient, and will give me a kind word and a kiss on a Sunday, so to say, you and me will be happy together, and you shall be mistress of the farm when the poor old dad's time comes to go. Not that I wish his time nearer by an hour, for all I love you so dear, Polly.'

And I hope I did what was right, though it was with a sore heart, for I said—

'I couldn't stay on in your folks' house to have secret understandings with you, Master Harry. That ain't to be thought of. But I do say this—'tain't likely that I shall marry any other chap; and if, when you come to be master of Charleston, you are in the same mind, why you can speak your mind to me again, and I'll listen to you then with a freer heart, maybe, than I can to−day.'

And with that I bundled all my odds and ends into the dresser drawer, and took the kettle off, which was a−boiling over.

'And now,' I says, 'no more of this talk, if you and me is to keep friends.'

'Shake hands on it,' says he; 'you're a good girl, Polly, and I see more than ever what a lucky man I shall be the day I go to church with you; and I'll not say another word till I can say it afore all the world, with you to answer "Yes" for all the world to hear.'

So that was settled, and, of course, from that time I kept myself more than ever to myself, not even passing the time of day with a young man if I could help it, because I wanted to keep all my thoughts and all my words for Master Harry, if he should ever want me again.

II

Well, as I said, old Master and Mrs. Blake come back together from the station, and from that day forward Mrs. Blake was unbearabler than ever. And one day when Mr. Sigglesfield, the lawyer from Lewes, was in the parlour, she a−talking to him after he'd been up to see master (about his will, no doubt), she opened the parlour door sharp and sudden just as I was bringing the tea for her to have it with him like a lady—she opened the door sudden, as I say, and boxed my ears as I stood, and I should have dropped the tea−tray but for me being brought up a careful girl, and taught always to hold on to the tea−tray with all my fingers.

I'm proud to say I didn't say a word, but I put down that tea−tray and walked into the kitchen with my ear as hot as fire and my temper to match, which was no wonder and no disgrace. Then she come into the kitchen.

'You go this day month, Miss,' she says, 'a−listening at doors when your betters is a−talking. I'll teach you!' says she, and back she goes into the parlour.

But I took no notice of what she said, for Master Harry, he hired me, and I would take no notice from any one but him.

Mr. Sigglesfield was a−coming pretty often just then, and Harry he come to me one day, and he says—

'It's all right, Polly, and I must tell you because you're the same as myself, though I don't like to talk as if we was waiting for dead men's shoes. Long may he wear them! But father's told me he has left everything to me, right and safe, though I am the second son. My brother John never did get on with father, but when all's mine, we'll see that John don't starve.'

And that day week old master was a corpse.

He was found dead in his bed, and the doctor said it was old age and a sudden breaking up.

Mrs. Blake she cried and took on fearful, more than was right or natural, and when the will was to be read in the parlour after the funeral she come into the kitchen where I was sitting crying too—not that I was fond of old master, but the kind of crying there is at funerals is catching, I think, and besides, I was sorry for Master Harry, who was a good son, and quite broken down.

'You can come and hear the will read,' she says, 'for all your impudence, you hussy!'

And I don't know why I went in after her impudence, but I did. Mr. Sigglesfield was there, and some of the relations, who had come a long way to hear if they was to pull anything out of the fire; and Master Harry was there, looking very pale through all his sun−brownness. And says he, 'I suppose the will's got to be read, but my father, he told me what I was to expect. It's all to me, and one hundred to Mrs. Blake, and five pounds apiece to the servants.'

And Mr. Sigglesfield looks at him out of his ferret eyes, and says very quietly, 'I think the will had better be read, Mr. Alderton.'

'So I think,' says Mrs. Blake, tossing her head and rubbing her red eyes with her handkerchief at the same minute almost.

And read it was, and all us people sat still as mice, listening to the wonderful tale of it. For wonderful it was, though folded up very curious and careful in a pack of lawyer's talk. And when it was finished, Master Harry stood up on his feet, and he said—

'I don't understand your cursed lawyer's lingo. Does this mean that my father has left me fifty pounds, and has left the rest, stock, lock and barrel, to his wife Martha. Who in hell,' he says, 'is his wife Martha?'

And at that Mrs. Blake stood up and fetched a curtsy to the company.

'That's me,' she said, 'by your leave; married two months come Tuesday, and here's my lines.'

And there they were. There was no getting over them. Married at St. Mary Woolnoth, in London, by special

licence.

'O you wicked old Jezebel!' says Master Harry, shaking his fist at her; 'here's a fine end for a young man's hopes! Is it true?' says he, turning to the lawyer. And Mr. Sigglesfield shakes his head and says—

'I am afraid so, my poor fellow.'

'Jezebel, indeed!' cries Mrs. Blake. 'Out of my house, my young gamecock! Get out and crow on your own dunghill, if you can find one.'

And Harry turned and went without a word. Then I slipped out too, and I snatched my old bonnet and shawl off their peg in the kitchen, and I ran down the lane after him.

'Harry,' says I, and he turned and looked at me like something that's hunted looks when it gets in a corner and turns on you. Then I got up with him and caught hold of his arm with both my hands. 'Never mind the dirty money,' says I. 'What's a bit of money,' I says—'what is it, my dear, compared with true love? I'll work my fingers to the bone for you,' says I, 'and we're better off than her when all's said and done.'

'So we are, my girl,' says he; and the savage look went out of his face, and he kissed me for the second time.

Then we went home, arm−under−arm, to my mother's, and we told father and mother all about it; and mother made Harry up a bit of a bed on the settle, and he stayed with us till he could pull himself together and see what was best to be done.

III

Of course, our first thought was, 'Was she really married?' And it was settled betwixt us that Harry should go up to London to the church named in her marriage lines and see if it was a real marriage or a make−up, like what you read of in the weekly papers. And Harry went up, I settling to go the same day to fetch my clothes from Charleston.

So as soon as I had seen him off by the train, I walked up to Charleston, and father with me, to fetch my things.

Mrs. Blake—for Mrs. Alderton I can't and won't call her—was out, and I was able to get my bits of things together comfortable without her fussing and interfering. But there was a pair of scissors of mine I couldn't find, and I looked for them high and low till I remembered that I had lent them to Mrs. Blake the week before. So I went to her room to look for them, thinking no harm; and there, looking in her corner cupboard for my scissors, as I had a right to do, I found something else that I hadn't been looking for; and, right or wrong, I put that in my pocket and said nothing to father, and so we went home and sat down to wait for Harry.

He came in by the last train, looking tired and gloomy.

'They were married right enough,' he said. 'I've seen the register, and I've seen the clerk, and he remembers them being married.'

'Then you'd better have a bit of supper, my boy,' says mother, and takes it smoking hot out of the oven.

The next day when I had cleared away breakfast, I stood looking into the street. It was a cold day, and a day when nobody would be out of doors that could anyways be in. I shouldn't have had my nose out of the door myself, except that I wanted to turn my back on other folks now, and think of what I had found at Charleston, for I hadn't even told Harry of it yet.

And as I sat there, who should come along but the postman, as is my second cousin by the mother's side, and, 'Well, Polly,' says he, 'times do change. They tell me young Alderton is biding with your folks now.'

'They tell you true for once,' says I.

'Then 'tain't worth my while to be trapesing that mile and a quarter to leave a letter at the farm, I take it, especially as it's a registered letter, and him not there to sign for it.'

So I calls Harry out, who was smoking a pipe in the chimney−corner, as humped and gloomy as a fowl on a wet day, and he was as surprised as me at getting a letter with a London postmark, and registered too; and he was that surprised that he kept turning it over and over, and wondering who it could have come from, till we thought it would be the best way to open and see, and we did.

'Well, I'm blowed!' says Harry; and then he read it out to me. It was—

'MY DEAR BROTHER,—I have seen in the papers the melancholy account of our poor father's decease, and the disastrous circumstances of his second marriage; and the more I have thought of it, the more it seems to me that there was a screw loose somewhere. I had the misfortune, as you know, to offend him by my choice of a profession; but you will be glad to hear that I have risen from P.C. to detective−sergeant, and am doing well.

'I have made a few inquiries about the movements of our lamented father and Mrs. Blake on the day when they were united, and if the same will be agreeable to you, I will come down Sunday morning and talk matters over with you.—I remain, my dear brother, your affectionate brother,

JOHN. '_P.S._ I shall register the letter to make sure. Telegraph if you would like me to come.'

Well, we telegraphed, though mother doesn't hold with such things, looking on it as flying in the face of Providence and what's natural. But we got it all in, with the address, for sixpence, and Harry was as pleased as Punch to think of seeing his brother again. But mother said she doubted if it would bring a blessing. And on the Sunday morning John came.

He was a very agreeable, gentlemanly man, with such manners as you don't see in Littlington—no, nor in Polegate neither,—and very changed from the boy with the red cheeks as used to come past our house on his way to school when he was very little.

Harry met him at the station and brought him home, and when he come in he kissed me like a brother, and mother too, and he said—

'The best good of trouble, ma'am, is to show you who your friends really are.'

'Ah,' says mother, 'I doubt if all the detectives in London, asking your pardon, Master John, can set Master Harry up in his own again. But he's got a pair of hands, and so has my Polly, and he might have chosen worse, though I says it.'

Now, after dinner, when I'd cleared away, nothing would serve but I must go out with the two of them. So we went out, and walked up on to the Downs for quietness' sake, and it was a warm day and soft, though November, and we leaned against a grey gate and talked it all over.

Then says Master John, 'Look here, Polly, we aren't to have any secrets from you. There's no doubt they were married, but doesn't it seem to you rather strange that my poor old father should have been taken off so suddenly after the wedding?'

'Yes,' I said, 'but the doctors seemed to understand all about it.'

Then he said something about the doctors that it was just as well they weren't there to hear, and he went on—

'Of course I thought at first they weren't married, so I set about finding out what they did when they came to London; and I haven't found out what my father did, but I did pounce on a bit of news, and that's that she wasn't with him the whole day. They came to Charing Cross by the same train, but he wasn't with her when she went to get that arsenic from the chemist's.'

'What!' says I, 'arsenic?'

'Yes,' says John, 'don't you get excited, my dear. I found that out by a piece of luck once as doesn't come to a man every day of the week. A woman answering to her description went into a chemist's shop, and the assistant gave the arsenic, a shilling's−worth it was, to kill rats with.'

'And God above only knows why they put such bits of fools into a shop to sell sixpenny−worths of death over the counter,' says Harry.

'Now the question is: Was this woman answering to her description really Mrs. Blake or not?'

'It was Mrs. Blake,' says I, very short and sharp.

'How do you know?' says John, shorter and sharper.

Then I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out what I had found in Mrs. Blake's corner cupboard, and John took it in his hand and looked at it, and whistled long and low. It was a little white packet, and had been opened and the label torn across, but you could read what was on it plain enough—'Arsenic—Poison,' and the name of the chemist in London.

John's face was red as fire, like some men's is when they're going in fighting, and my Harry's as white as milk, as some other men's is at such times. But as for me, I fell a−crying to think that any woman could be so wicked, and him such a good master and so kind to her, and she having the sole care of him, helpless in her hands as the new−born babe.

And Harry, he patted me on the back, and told me to cheer up and not to cry, and to be a good girl; and presently, my handkerchief being wet through, I stopped, and then John, he said—

'We'll bring it home to her yet, Harry, my boy. I'll get an order to have poor old father exhumed, and the doctors shall tell us how much of the arsenic that cursed old hag gave him.'

IV I don't know what you have to do to get an order to open up a grave and look at the poor dead person after

it is once put away, but, whatever it was, John knew and did it.

We didn't tell any one except our dear old parson who buried the old man; and he listened to all we had to say, and shook his head and said, 'I think you are wrong—I think you are wrong,' but that was only natural, him not liking to see his good work disturbed. But he said he would be there.

Now, no one was told of it, and yet it seemed as if every one for miles round knew more than we did about it.

Afore the day come, old Mrs. Jezebel up at the farm, she met me one day, and she says, 'You're a pretty puss, aren't you, howking up my poor dear deceased husband's remains before they're hardly cold? Much good you'll do yourself. You'll end in the workhouse, my fine miss, and I shall come to see you as a lady visitor when you're dying.'

I tried to get past her, but she wouldn't let me. 'I wish you joy o' that Harry, cursed young brute!' says she. 'It serves him right, it does, to marry a girl out of the gutter!'

And with that—I couldn't help it—I fetched her a smack on the side of the face with the flat of my hand as hard as I could, and bolted off, her after me, and me being young and she stout she couldn't keep up with me. Gutter, indeed! and my father a respectable labourer, and known far and wide.

There were several strangers come the day the coffin was got up. It was a dreadful thing to me to see them digging, not to make a grave to be filled up, but to empty one. And there were a lot of people there I didn't know; and the parson, and another parson, seemingly a friend of his, and every one as could get near looking on.

They got the coffin up, and they took it to the room at the Star, at Alfreston, where inquests are held, and the doctors were there, and we were all shut out. And Harry and John and I stood on the stairs. But parson, being a friend of the doctor's, he was let in, him and his friend. And we heard voices and the squeak of the screws as they was drawn out; and we heard the coffin lid being laid down, and then there was a hush, and some one spoke up very sharp inside, and we couldn't hear what he said for the noise and confusion that came from every one speaking at once, and nineteen to the dozen it seemed.

'What is it?' says Harry, trembling like a leaf: 'O my God! what is it? If they don't open the door afore long, by God, I shall burst it open! He was murdered, he was! And if they wait much longer, that woman will have time to get away.'

As he spoke, the door opened and parson came out, and his friend with him.

'These are the young men,' says our parson.

'Well, then,' says parson number two, 'it's a good thing I heard of this, and came down—out of mere curiosity, I am ashamed to say—for the man who is buried there is not the man whom I united in holy matrimony to Martha Blake two months ago last Tuesday.'

We didn't understand.

'But the poison?' says Harry.

'She may have poisoned him,' said our parson, 'though I don't think it. But from what my friend here, the rector of St Mary Woolnoth, tells me, it is quite certain she never married him.'

'Then she's no right to anything?' said Harry.

'But what about the will?' says I. But no one harkened to me.

And then Harry says, 'If she poisoned him she will be off by now. Parson, will you come with me to keep my hands from violence, and my tongue from evil−speaking and slandering? for I must go home and see if that woman is there yet.'

And parson said he would; and it ended in us, all five of us, going up together, the new parson walking by me and talking to me like somebody out of the Bible, as it might be one of the disciples.

I got to know him well afterwards, and he was the best man that ever trod shoe−leather.

We all went up together to Charleston Farm, and in through the back, without knocking, and so to the parlour door. We knew she was sitting in the parlour, because the red firelight fell out through the window, and made a bright patch that we see before we see the house itself properly; and we went, as I say, quietly in through the back; and in the kitchen I said, 'Oh, let me tell her, for what she said to me.'

And I was sorry the minute I'd said it, when I see the way that clergyman from London looked at me; and we all went up to the parlour door, and Harry opened it as was his right.

There was Mrs. Blake sitting in front of the fire. She had got on her widow's mourning, very smart and complete, with black crape, and her white cap; and she'd got the front of her dress folded back very neat on her

lap, and was toasting her legs, in her black−and−red checked petticoat, and her feet in cashmere house−boots, very warm and cosy, on the brass fender; and she had got port wine and sherry wine in the two decanters that was never out of the glass−fronted chiffonier when master was alive; and there was something else in a black bottle; and opposite her, in the best arm−chair that old master had sat in to the last, was that lawyer, Sigglesfield from Lewes. And when we all came in, one after another, rather slow, and bringing the cold air with us, they sat in their chairs as if they had been struck, and looked at us.

Harry and John was in front, as was right; and in the dusk they could hardly see who was behind.

'And what do you want, young men?' says Mrs. Blake, standing up in her crape, and her white cap, and looking very handsome, Harry said afterwards, though, for my part, I never could see it; and, as she stood up, she caught sight of the clergyman from London, and she shrank back into her chair and covered her face with her hands; and the clergyman stepped into the room, none of us having the least idea of what he was going to say, and said he—

'That's the woman that I married on the 7th; and that's the man I married her to!' said he, pointing to Sigglesfield, who seemed to turn twice as small, and his ferret eyes no better than button−hole slits.

'That!' said our parson; 'why, that's Mr. Sigglesfield, the solicitor from Lewes.'

'Then the lady opposite is Mrs. Sigglesfield, that's all,' said the parson from London.

'What I want to know,' says Harry, 'is—is this my house or hers? It's plain she wasn't my father's wife. But yet he left it to her in the will.'

'Slowly, old boy!' said John; 'gently does it. How could he have left anything in a will to his wife when he hadn't got any wife? Why, that fellow there—−'

But here Mrs. Blake got on her feet, and I must say for the woman, if she hadn't got anything else she had got pluck.

'The game's up!' she says. 'It was well played, too, though I says it. And you, you old fool!' she says to the parson, 'you have often drunk tea with me, and gone away thinking how well−mannered I was, and what a nice woman Mrs. Blake was, and how well she knew her place, after you had chatted over half your parish with me. I know you are the curiousest man in it, and as you and me is old friends, I don't mind owning up just to please you. It'll save a lot of time and a lot of money.'

'It's my duty to warn you,' said John, 'that anything you say may be used against you.'

'Used against a fiddlestick end!' said Mrs. Blake. 'I married Robert Sigglesfield in the name of William Alderton, and he sitting trembling there, like a shrimp half boiled! He got ready the kind of will we wanted instead of the one the old man meant, and gave it to the old man to sign, and he signed it right enough.'

'And what about that arsenic,' says I,—'that arsenic I found in your corner cupboard?'

'Oh, it was you took it, was it? You little silly, my neck's too handsome for me to do anything to put a rope round it. Do you suppose I've kept my complexion to my age with nothing but cold water, you little cat?'

'And the other will,' says Harry, 'that my father meant to sign?'

'I'll get you that,' says Mrs. Blake. 'It's no use bearing malice now all's said and done.'

And she goes upstairs to get it, and, if you'll believe me, we were fools enough to let her go; and we waited like lambs for her to come back, which being a woman with her wits about her, and no fool, she naturally never did; and by the time we had woke up to our seven senses, she was far enough away, and we never saw her again. We didn't try too much. But we had the law of that Sigglesfield, and it was fourteen years' penal.

And the will was never found—I expect Mrs. Blake had burnt it,—so the farm came to John, and what else there was to Harry, according to the terms of the will the old man had made when his wife was alive, afore John had joined the force. And Harry and John was that pleased to be together again that they couldn't make up their minds to part; so they farm the place together to this day.

And if Harry has prospered, and John too, it's no more than they deserve, and a blessing on brotherly love, as mother says. And if my dear children are the finest anywhere on the South Downs, that's by the blessing of God too, I suppose, and it doesn't become me to say so.

# ACTING FOR THE BEST

I HAVE no patience with people who talk that kind of nonsense about marrying for love and the like. For my part I don't know what they mean, and I don't believe they know it themselves. It's only a sort of fashion of talking. I never could see what there was to like in one young man more than another, only, of course, you might favour some more than others if they was better to do.

My cousin Mattie was different. She must set up to be in love, and walk home from church with Jack Halibut Sunday after Sunday, the long way round, if you please, through the meadows; and he used to buy her scent and ribbons at the fair, and send her a big valentine of lacepaper, and satin ribbons and things, though Lord knows where he got the money from—honest, I hope—for he hadn't a penny to bless himself with.

When my uncle found out all this nonsense, being a man of proper spirit, he put his foot down, and says he—

'Mattie, my girl, I would be the last to say anything against any young man you fancied, especially a decent chap like young Halibut, if his prospects was anything like as good as could be expected, but you can't pretend poor Jack's are, him being but a blacksmith's man, and not in regular work even. Now, let's have no waterworks,' he went on, for Mattie had got the corner of her apron up and her mouth screwed down at the corners. 'I've known what poverty is, my girl, and you shan't never have a taste of it with my consent.'

'I don't care how poor I be, father,' said Mattie, 'it's Jack I care about.'

'There's a girl all over,' says uncle, for he was a sensible man in those days. 'The bit I've put by for you, lass, it's enough for one, but it's not enough for two. And when young Halibut can show as much, you shall be cried in church the very next Sunday. But, meantime, there must be no kisses, no more letters, and no more walking home from churches. Now, you give me your word—and keep it I know you will—like an honest girl.'

So Mattie she gave him her word, though much against her will; and as for Jack, I suppose, man−like, he didn't care much about staying in the village after there was a stop put to his philandering and kissing and scent and so on. So what does he do, but he ups and offs to America (assisted emigration) 'to make his fortune,' says he.

And never word nor sign did we hear of him for three blessed years. Mattie was getting quite an old maid, nigh on two−and−twenty, and I was past nineteen, when one morning there come a letter from Jack.

My father and mother were dead this long time, so I lived with uncle and Mattie at the farm. What offers I had had is neither here nor there. At any rate, whatever they were, they weren't good enough.

But Mattie might have been married twice over if she had liked, and to folks that would have been quite a catch to a girl like her getting on in years. She might have had young Bath for one, the strawberry grower; and what if he did drink a bit of a Saturday? He was taking his hundreds of pounds to the Bank every week in canvas bags, as all the world knew.

But no, she must needs hanker after Jack, and that's why I say it's such nonsense.

Well, when the letter come, I was up to my elbows in the jam−making—raspberry and currant it was,—and Mattie, she was down in the garden getting the last berries off the canes. My hands were stained up above the wrist with the currant juice, so I took the letter up by the corner of my apron and I went down the garden with it.

'Mattie,' I calls out, 'here's a letter from that good−for−nothing fellow of yours.'

She couldn't see me, and she thought I was chaffing her about him, which I often did, to keep things pleasant.

'Don't tease me, Jane,' she says, 'for I do feel this morning as if I could hardly bear myself as it is.'

And as she said it I came out through the canes close to her with the letter in my hand. But when she see the letter she dropped the basket with the raspberries in it (they rolled all about on the ground right under the peony bush, for that was a silly, old−fashioned garden, with the flowers and fruit about it anyhow), and I had a nice business picking them up, and she threw her arms round my neck and kissed me, and cried like the silly little thing she was, and thanked me for bringing the letter, just as if I had anything to do with it, or any wish or will one way or another; and then she opened the letter, and seemed to forget all about me while she read it.

I remember the sun was so bright on the white paper that I could scarce see to read it over her shoulder, she not noticing me, nor anything else, any more. It was like this—

'DEAR MATTIE,—This comes hoping to find you well, as it leaves me at present.

'I don't bear no malice over what your father said and done, but I'm not coming to his house.

'Now Mattie, if you have forgot me, or think more of some other chap, don't let anything stand in the way of your letting me know it straight and plain. But if you do remember how we used to walk from church, and the valentine, and the piece of poetry about Cupid's dart that I copied for you out of the poetry−book, you will come and meet me in the little ash copse, you know where. I may be prevented coming, for I've a lot of things to see to, and I am going to Liverpool on Thursday, and if we are to be married you will have to come to me there, for my business won't bear being left, and I must get back to it. But if so I will put a note in your prayer−book in the church. So you had best look in there on your way up on Wednesday evening.

'I am taking this way of seeing you because I don't want there to be any unpleasantness for you if you are tired of me or like some other chap better.

'I mean to take a wife back with me, Mattie, for I have done well, and can afford to keep one in better style than ever your father kept his. Will you be her, dear? So no more at present from your affectionate friend and lover,

JACK HALIBUT.'

I am quicker at reading writing than Mattie, and I had finished the letter and was picking up the raspberries before she come to the end, where his name was signed with all the little crosses round it.

'Well?' says I, as she folded it up and unbuttoned two buttons of her dress to push it inside. 'Well,' says I, 'what's the best news?'

'He's come home again,' she says. And I give you my word she did look like a rose as she said it. 'He's come home again, Jane, and it's all right, and he likes me just as much as ever he did, God bless him.'

Not a word, you see, about his having made his fortune, which I might never have known if I hadn't read the letter which I did, acting for the best. Not that I think it was deceitfulness in the girl, but a sort of fondness that always kept her from noticing really important things.

'And does he ask you to have him?' says I.

'Of course he does,' she says; 'I never thought any different. I never thought but what he would come back for me, just as he said he would—just as he has.'

By that I knew well enough that she had often had her doubts.

'Oh, well!' says I, 'all's well that ends well.

I hope he's made enough to satisfy uncle—that's all.'

'Oh yes, I think so,' says Mattie, hardly understanding what I was saying. 'I didn't notice particular. But I suppose that's all right.'

She didn't notice particular! Now, I put it to you, Was that the sort of girl to be the wife of a man who had got on like Jack had? I for one didn't think so. If she didn't care for money why should she have it, when there was plenty that did? And if love in a cottage was what she wanted, and kisses and foolishness out of poetry−books, I suppose one man's pretty much as good as another for that sort of thing.

So I said, 'Come along in, dear, and we will get along with the jam−making, and talk it all over nicely. I'm so glad he's come back. I always say he would, if you remember.'

Not that I ever had, but she didn't seem to know any different, anyhow.

The next few days Mattie was like a different girl. I will say for her that she always did her fair share of the work, but she did it with a face as long as a fiddle. Only now her face was all round and dimply, and like a child's that has got a prize at school.

On Wednesday afternoon she said to me, 'I'm going to meet Jack, and don't you say a word to the others about it, Jane. I'll tell father myself when I come back, if you'll get the tea like a good girl, and just tell them I've gone up to the village.'

'I don't tell lies as a rule, especially for other people,' I says; 'but I don't mind doing it for you this once.'

And she kissed me (she had got mighty fond of kissing these last few days), and ran upstairs to get ready. When she come down, if you'll believe me, she wasn't in her best dress as any other girl would have been, but she had gone and put on a dowdy old green and white delaine that had been her Sunday dress, trimmed with green satin piping, three years before, and the old hat she had with all the flowers faded and the ribbons crumpled up, that was three year old too, and the very one she used to walk home from church with him on Sundays in. And her

with a really good blue poplin laid by and a new bonnet with red roses in it, only come home the week before from Maidstone.

She come through the kitchen where I was setting the tea, and she took the key of the church off the nail in the wall. Our farm was full a mile from the village, and half way between it and the church. So we kept one key, and Jack's uncle, who was the sexton, he had the other.

'What time was you to meet Jack?' I says.

'He didn't say,' said she; 'but it used to be half−past six.'

'You're full early,' says I.

'Yes,' she says, 'but I've got to take the butter down to Weller's, and to call in for something first.'

And, of course, I knew that she meant that she had to call in for that note at the church.

Minute she was out of the way, I runs into the kitchen, and says to our maid—

'Poor Mrs. Tibson's not so well, Polly. I'm going over to see her. Give the men their tea, will you? there's a good girl.'

And she said she would. And in ten minutes I was dressed, and nicely dressed too, for I had on my white frock and the things I had had at a girl's wedding the summer before, and a pair of new gloves I had got out of my butter−money.

Then I went off up the hill to the church after Mattie, even then not making up my mind what I was going to do, but with an idea that all things somehow might work together for good to me if I only had the sense to see how, and turn things that way.

As I come up to the church I was just in time to see her old green gown going in at the porch, and when I come up the key was in the door, and she hadn't come out. Quick as thought, the idea come to me to have a joke with her and lock her in, so she shouldn't meet him, and next minute I had turned the key in the lock softly, and stole off through the church porch, and up to the ash copse, which I couldn't make a mistake about, for there's only one within a mile of the church.

Jack was there, though it was before the time. I could see his blue tie and white shirt−front shining through the trees.

When I locked her in I only meant to have a sort of joke—at least, I think so,—but when I come close up to him and saw how well off he looked, and the diamond ring on his fingers, and his pin and his gold chain, I thought to myself—

'Well, you go to Liverpool to−morrow, young man! And she ain't got your address, and, likely as not, if you go away vexed with her, you won't leave it with your aunt, and one wife is as good as another, if not better, and as for her caring for you, that's all affectation and silliness—so here goes.'

He stepped forward, with his hands held out to me, but when he saw it was me he stopped short.

'Why, Miss Jane,' he said, 'I beg your pardon. I was expecting quite a different person.'

'Yes, I know,' I says, 'you was expecting my cousin Mattie.'

'And isn't she coming?' he asks very quick, looking at me full, with his blue eyes.

'I hope you won't take it hard, Mr. Halibut,' says I, 'but she said she'd rather not come.'

'Confound it!' says he.

'You see,' I went on, 'it's a long time since you was at home, and you not writing or anything, and some girls are very flighty and changeable; and she told me to tell you she was sorry if you were mistaken in her feelings about you, and she's had time to think things over since three years ago; and now you're so well off, she says she's sure you'll find no difficulty in getting a girl suited to your mind.'

'Did she say that?' he said, looking at me very straight. 'It's not like her.'

'I don't mean she said so in those words, or that she told me to tell you so; but that's what I made out to be her mind from what she said between us two like.'

'But what message did she send to me? For I suppose she sent you to meet me to−day.'

Then I saw that I should have to be very careful. So to get a little time I says, 'I don't quite like to tell you, Mr. Halibut, what she said.'

'Out with it,' says he. 'Don't be a fool, girl!'

'Well, then,' I says, 'if it must be so, her words were these: "Tell Jack," she says, "that I shall ever wish him well for the sake of what's past, but all's over betwixt him and me, and—"'

'And what,' says he.

'There wasn't much besides,' says I.

'Good God, don't be such an idiot!' and he looked as if he could have shaken me.

'Well, then, if you must have it,' says I, 'she says, "'Tell Jack there's at least one girl I know of as would make him a better wife than I should, and has been thinking of him steady and faithful these three years, while I've been giving my mind to far other things.'"

'Confound her!' says he, 'little witch. And who is this other girl that she's so gracious to hand me over to?'

'I don't want to say no more,' says I. 'I'm going now, Mr. Halibut. Good−bye.'

For well I knew he wouldn't let me go at that.

'Tell me who it is,' says he. 'What! she's not content with giving me the mitten herself, but she must insult me and this poor girl too, who's got more sense than she has. Good Heavens, it would serve her right if I took her at her word, and took the other girl back with me.'

He was walking up and down with his hands in his pockets, frowning like a July thunderstorm.

'Wicked, heartless little—but there, thank God! all women aren't like her. Who's this girl that she's tried to set me against?'

'I can't tell you,' says I.

'Oh! can't you, my girl? But you shall.'

And he catches hold of both my wrists in his hands.

'Leave me go!' I cried, 'you're hurting me.'

'Who is it?'

I was looking down my nose very straight, but when he said that, I just lifted my eyes up and looked at him, and dropped them.

I've always practised looking like what I meant, or what I wanted people to think I meant—sort of matching your looks and words, like you match ribbon and a bit of stuff.

'So you're the girl, are you?' he cries. 'And she thought to put you to shame before me with her messages? Look here, I'm well off. I'm going to Liverpool to−night, and back to America next week. I want to take a wife with me, and she says you have thought of me while I've been away. Will you marry me, Jane?'

I just looked at him again, and he put his arm round me and gave me a good kiss. I had to put up with it, though I never could see any sense in that sort of stuff. Then we walked home together, very slow, his arm round me.

I daresay some people will think I oughtn't to have acted so, taking away another girl's fellow. But I was quite sure she would get plenty that would play love in a cottage with her, and she did not seem to appreciate her blessings in getting a man that was well off, and I didn't see how it could be found out, as he was going away next day.

Now, it would all have gone as well as well if I had had the sense to offer to see him off at the station, and I ought to have had the sense to see him well out of the place. But we all make mistakes sometimes. Mine was in saying 'Good−bye' to him at the corner of the four−acre and going home by myself, leaving him with three−quarters of an hour for 'Satan to find some mischief still for idle hands to do' in.

I said 'Good−bye' to him, and he kissed me, and gave me the address where to write, and told me what to do.

'For I shan't have no truck with your uncle,' says he. 'I marries my wife, and I takes her right away.'

It wasn't till I was going up the stairs, untying my bonnet−strings as I went, and smoothing out the ribbons with my finger and thumb, for it was my best, that it come to me all in a minute that I had left Mattie locked up in that church. It was very tiresome, and how to get her out I didn't know. But I thought maybe she would be trying some of the other doors, and I might turn the key gently and away again before she could find out it was unlocked.

So up to the church I went, very hot, and a setting sun, and having had no tea or anything, and as I began to climb the hill my heart stood still in my veins, for I heard a sound from the church as I never expected to hear at that time of the day and week.

'O Lord!' I thought, 'she's tried every other way, and now she's ringing the bell, and she'll fetch up the whole village, and what will become of me?'

I made the best haste I could, but I could see more than one black dot moving up the hill before me that

showed me folks on their way home had heard the bell and was going to see what it meant. And when I got up there they were trying the big door of the church, not knowing it was the little side one where the key was, and Jack, he come up almost the same moment I did, and I knew well enough he had come to get that note out of her prayer−book for fear some one else should see it.

'Here, I've got the key in my pocket,' says he, and with that he opened the door, the bell clang, clang, clanging from the tower all the time like as if the bellringer was drunk and had got a wager on to get more beats out of the bell in half an hour than the next man.

Whoever it was that was ringing the bell—and I could give a pretty good guess who it was—didn't seem to hear us coming, and they went up the aisle and pulled back the red baize curtain that hides the bottom of the tower where the ringers stand on Sundays, and there was Mattie with her old green gown on, and her hair all loose and down her back with the hard work of bellringing, I suppose, and her face as white as the bald−faced stag as is painted on the sign down at the inn in the village. And directly she saw Jack, I knew it was all over, for she let go the rope and it swung up like a live thing over our heads, and she made two steps to Jack and had him round the neck before them all.

'O Jack!' she cried, 'don't look like that.

I came to fetch your letter, and somebody locked me in.'

Jack, he turned to me, and his face was so that I should have been afraid to have been along of him in a lonely place.

'This is your doings,' says he, 'and all that pack of lies you told me was out of your own wicked head.'

He had got his arm round her, and was holding on as if she was something worth having, instead of a silly girl in a frock three year old.

'I don't know what you mean, I'm sure,' I said; 'it was only a joke.'

'A joke!' says he. 'Lies, I call it, and I know they're lies by the very touch of her in my arm here.'

'Oh, well!' I said, 'if you can't take joking better than this, it's the last time I'll ever try joking with you.'

And I walked out of the church, and the other folks who had run up to see what was the matter come out with me. And they two was left alone.

I suppose it was only human nature that, as I come round the church, I should get on the top of a tombstone and look in to see what they was doing. It was the little window where a pane was broken by a stone last summer, and so I heard what they was saying. He was trying to tell her what I had told him—quite as much for her own good as for mine, as you have seen; but she didn't seem to want to listen.

'Oh, never mind all that now, Jack,' she says, with arms round his neck. 'What does it matter about a silly joke now that I have got you, and it's all right betwixt us?'

I thought it my duty to go straight home and tell uncle she was up in the church, kissing and cuddling with Jack Halibut; and he took his stick and started off after her.

But he met them at the garden gate, and Jack, he came forward, and he says—

'Mr. Kenworthy, I have had hard thoughts of you this three year, but I see you was right, for if I had never gone away, I should never have been able to keep my little girl as she should be kept, and as I can now, thanks be! and I should never have known how dear she has loved me this three year.'

And uncle, like the soft−hearted old thing he is, he holds out his hands, and he says, 'God bless you, my boy, it was for your own good and hers.'

And they went in to supper.

As for me, I went to bed. I had had all the supper I wanted. And uncle has never been the same to me since, though I'm sure I tried to act for the best.

# GUILTY

IT was my first place and my last, and I don't think we should have got on in business as we have if it hadn't been for me being for six or seven years with one of the first families in the county. Though only a housemaid, you can't help learning something of their ways. At any rate, you learn what gentlefolks like, and what they can't abide. But the worst of being housemaid where there's a lot of servants kept is, that one or other or all of the men−servants is sure to be wanting to keep company with you. They have nothing else to do in their spare time, and I suppose it's handy having your sweetheart living in the house. It doesn't give you so much trouble with going out in the evening, if not fine.

The coachman was promised to the cook, which, I believe, often takes place. Tim, the head groom, was a very nice, genteel fellow, and I daresay I might have taken up with him, if I hadn't met with my James, though never with John, who was the plague of my life. To begin with, he had a black whisker, that I couldn't bear to look at, let alone putting one's face against it, as I should have had to have done when married, no doubt. And he had a roving black eye, very yellowy in the white of it, and hair that looked all black and bear's−greasy, though he always said he never put anything on it except a little bay rum in moderation.

They tell me I was a pretty girl enough in those days, though looks is less important than you might think to a housemaid, if only she dresses neat and has a small waist. And I suppose I must think that John really did love me in his scowling, black whiskery way. He was a good footman, I will say that, and had been with the master three years, and the best of characters; but whatever he might have thought, I never would have had anything to do with him, even if James and me had had seas between us broad a−rolling for ever and ever Amen. He asked me once and he asked me twice, and it was 'no' and 'no' again. And I had even gone so far as to think that perhaps I should have to give up a good place to get out of his way, when master's uncle, old Mr. Oliver, and his good lady, came to stay at the Court, and with them came James, who was own man to Mr. Oliver.

Mr. Oliver was the funniest−looking old gent I ever see, if I may say so respectfully. He was as bald as an egg, with a sort of frill of brown hair going from ear to ear behind; and as if that wasn't enough, he was shaved as clean as a whistle, as though he had made up his mind that people shouldn't say that it had all gone to beard and whiskers, anyway. He wrote books, a great many of them, and you may often see his name in the papers, and he was for ever poking about into what didn't concern him, and my Lady, she said to me when she found me a little put out at him asking about how things went on in the servants' hall, she said to me—

'You mustn't mind him, Mary,' she said; 'you know he likes to find out all that he can about everything, so as to put it in his books.'

And he certainly talked to every one he came across—even the stable−boys—in a way that you could hardly think becoming from a gentleman to servants, if he wasn't an author, and so to have allowances made for him, poor man! He talked to the housemaids, and he talked to the groom, and he talked to the footman that waited on him at lunch when he had it late, as he did sometimes, owing to him having been kept past the proper time by his story−writing, for he wrote a good part of the day most days, and often went up to London while he was staying with us—to sell his goods, I suppose. He wore curious clothes, not like most gentlemen, but all wool things, even to his collars and his boots, which were soft and soppy like felt; and he took snuff to that degree I wouldn't have believed any human nose could have borne it, and he must have been a great trial to Mrs. Oliver until she got used to him and his pottering about all over the house in his soft−soled shoes; and the mess he made of his pocket−handkerchieves and his linen!

Mrs. Oliver was a round little fat bunch of a woman, if I may say so in speaking of master's own aunt by marriage, and him a baronet. She had the most lovely jewellery, and was very fond of wearing it of an evening, more than most people do when they are staying with relations and there's no company. She never spoke much except to say, 'Yes, Dick dear,' and 'No, Dick dear,' when they spoke to each other; but they were as fond of each other as pigeons on a roof, and always very pleasant−spoken and nice to wait on.

As for James, he was the jolliest man I ever met, and cook said the same. He was like Sam Weller in the book,

or would have been if he had lived in those far−off times; but footmen are more genteel now than they were then.

Anyway, he hadn't been at the Court twenty−four hours before he was first favourite with every one, and cook made him a Welsh rabbit with her own hands, 'cause he hadn't been able to get his dinner comfortable with the rest of us—a thing she wouldn't have done for Sir William himself at that time of night. As for me, the first time he looked at me with his jolly blue eyes—it was when he met me carrying a tray the first morning after he came—my heart gave a jump inside my print gown, and I said to it as I went downstairs— 'You've met your master, I'm thinking'; and if I did go to church with him the very first Sunday, which was more than ever I had done with any of the others, it was after he had asked me plain and straight to go to church with him some day for good and all.

Now, the next morning, quite early, I was dusting the library, when John come in with his black face like a thundercloud.

'Look here, Mary,' he says; 'what do you mean by going to church with that stuck−up London trumpery?'

'Mind your own business,' says I, sharp as you please.

'I am,' he says. 'You are my business—the only business I care a damn about, or am ever likely to. You don't know how I love you, Mary,' he says. And I was sorry for him as he spoke. 'I would lie down in the dirt for you to walk on if it would do you any good, so long as you didn't walk over me to get to some other chap.'

'I am very sorry for you, John,' says I, 'but I've told you, not once or twice, but fifty times, that it can never be. And there are plenty of other girls that would be only too glad to walk out with a young man like you without your troubling yourself about me.'

He was walking up and down the room like a cat in a cage. Presently he began to laugh in a nasty, sly, disagreeable way.

'Oh! you think he'll marry you, do you?' says he. 'But he's just amusing himself with you till he gets back to London to his own girl. You let him see you was only amusing yourself with him, and you come out with me when you get your evening.'

And he took the dusting−brush out of my hand, and caught hold of my wrists.

'It's all a lie!' I cried; 'and I wonder you can look me in the face and tell it. Him and me are going to be married as soon as he has saved enough for a little public, and I never want to speak to you again; and if you don't let go of my hands, I'll scream till I fetch the house down, master and all, and then where will you be?'

He scowled at that, but he let my hands go directly.

'Have it your own way,' he said. 'But I tell you, you won't marry him, and you'll find he won't want to marry you, and you'll marry me, my girl. And when you have married me, you shall cry your eyes out for every word you have said now.'

'Oh, shall I, Mr. Liar?' says I, for my blood was up; 'before that happens, you'll have to change him into a liar and me into a fool and yourself into an honest man, and you'll find that the hardest of all.' And with that I threw the dusting−brush at him—which was a piece of wicked temper I oughtn't to have given way to—and ran out of the door, and I heard him cursing to himself something fearful as I went down the passage.

'Good thing the gentlefolks are abed still,' I said to myself; and I didn't tell a soul about it, even cook, the truth being I was ashamed to.

Well, everything went on pretty much the same as usual for two or three weeks, and I thought John was getting the better of his silliness, because he made a show of being friendly to James and was respectful to me, even when we was alone. Then came that dreadful day that I shall never forget if I live to be a hundred years old. Dinner was half an hour later than usual on account of Mr. Oliver having gone up to town on his business; but he didn't get home when expected, and they sat down without him after all. I was about my work, turning down beds and so forth, and I had done Mrs. Oliver's about ten minutes, and was in my lady's room, when Mrs. Oliver's own maid came running in with a face like paper.

'Oh, what ever shall I do?' she cried, wringing her hands, as they say in books, and I always thought it nonsense, but she certainly did, though I never saw any one do it before or since.

'What is it?' I asked her.

'It's my mistress's diamond necklace,' she said. 'She was going to wear it to−night. And then she said, No, she wouldn't; she'd have the emeralds, and I left it on the dressing−table instead of locking it up, and now it's gone!'

I went into Mrs. Oliver's room with her, and there was the jewel−box with the pretty shining things turned out

on the dressing−table, for Mrs. Oliver had a heap of jewellery that had come to her from her own people, and she as fond of wearing it as if she was slim and twenty, instead of being fifty, and as round as an orange. We looked on the dressing−table and we looked on the floor, and we looked in the curtains to see if it had got in any of them. But look high, look low, no diamond necklace could we find. So at last Scott—that was Mrs. Oliver's maid—said there was nothing for it but to go and tell her mistress. The ladies were in the drawing−room by this time. So she went down all of a tremble, and in the hall there was Mrs. Oliver looking anxious out of the front door, which was open, it being summer and the house standing in its own park.

'Mr. Oliver is very late, Scott,' she says. 'I am getting anxious about him.'

And as she spoke, and before Scott could answer, there was his step on the gravel, and he came in at the front door with his little black bag in his hand that I suppose he carried his stories in to see if people would like to buy them.

'Hullo! Scott,' he says, 'have you seen a ghost?' And, indeed, she looked more dead than alive. She gulped in her throat, but she could not speak.

'Here, young woman,' says Mr. Oliver to me, 'you haven't lost your head altogether. What's it all about?'

So I told him as well as I could, and by this time master had come out and my Lady, and you never saw any one so upset as they were. All the house was turned out of window, hunting for the necklace; though, of course, not having legs, it couldn't have walked by itself out of Mrs. Oliver's room. All the servants was called up, even to the kitchen−maid; and those who were not angry, were frightened, and, what with fright and anger, there wasn't one of us, I do believe, as didn't look as they had got the necklace on under their clothes that very minute. John was very angry indeed. 'Do they think we'd take their dirty necklace?' he said, as we were going up. 'It's enough to ruin all of us, this kind of thing happening, and leaving the doors open so that any one could get in and walk clear off with it without a stain on their character, and us left with none to speak of'

So when master had asked us all a lot of questions, and we were told we could go, John stepped out and said—

'I am sure I am only expressing the feelings of my fellow−servants when I say that we should wish our boxes searched and our rooms, so that there shall be no chance for any one to say afterwards that it lays at any of our doors.'

And Mrs. Oliver began to cry, and she said 'No, no, she wouldn't put that insult on any one.' But Mr. Oliver, who hadn't been saying much, though so talkative generally, but kept taking snuff at a rate that was dreadful to see, he said—

'The young man is quite right, my dear; and if you don't mind,' he says to master, 'I think it had better be done.'

And so it was done, and I don't know how to write about it now, though it was never true. They came to my room and they looked into all my drawers and boxes except my little hat−tin, and when they wanted the key of that, I said, silly−like, not having any idea that they could think that I could do such a thing, 'I'd rather you didn't look into that. It's only some things I don't want any one to see.'

And the reason was that I'd got some bits of things in it that I'd got the week before in the town towards getting my things for the wedding ready, and I felt somehow I didn't want any one to see them till James did. And they all looked very queer at me when I said that, and my Lady said—

'Mary, give me the key at once.'

So I did, and oh! I shall never forget it. They took out the flannel, and the longcloth and things, and the roll of embroidery that I was going to trim them with, and rolled inside that, if you'll believe me, there was the necklace like a shining snake coiled up. I never said a word, being struck silly. I didn't cry or even say anything as people do in books when these things happen to them; but Mrs. Oliver burst out crying, God bless her for it! and my Lady said, 'O Mary, I'd never have believed it of you any more than I would of myself!'

And Mr. Oliver he said to master, 'Have all the servants into the library, William. Perhaps some one else is in it too.'

But nobody said a word to say that it wasn't me, and indeed how could they?

I should think it's like being had up for murder, standing there in the library with all the servants holding off from me as if I had got something catching, and master and my Lady and Mr. and Mrs. Oliver in leather armchairs, all of a row, looking like a bench of magistrates. I could not think, though I tried hard—I could only feel as if I was drowning and fighting for breath.

'Now, Mary,' says Master, 'what have you got to say?'

'I never touched it, sir,' I said; 'I never put it there; I don't know who did; and may God forgive them, for I never could.'

Then my Lady said, 'Mary, I can hardly believe it of you even now, but why wouldn't you let us have the key of your box?'

Then I turned hot and cold all of a minute, and I looked round, and there wasn't a face that looked kind at me except Mr. Oliver's, and he nodded at me, taking snuff all over his fat white waistcoat.

'Speak up, girl,' he said, 'speak up.'

So then I said, 'I'm a−going to be married, my Lady, and it was bits of things I'd got towards my wedding clothes.'

I looked at James to see if he believed it, and his face was like lead, and his eyes wild that used to be so jolly, and to see him look like that made my heart stand still, and I cried out—

'O my God, strike me down dead, for live I can't after this!'

And at that, James spoke up, and he said, speaking very quick and steady, 'I wish to confess that I took it, and I put it in her box, thinking to take it away again after. We were to have been married, and I wanted the money to start in a little pub.'

And everybody stood still, and you could have heard a pin drop, and Mr. Oliver went on nodding his head and taking snuff till I could have killed him for it; and I looked at James, and I could have fallen at his feet and worshipped him, for I saw in a minute why he said it. He believed it was me, and he wanted to save me. So then I said to master—

'The thing was found in my box, sir, and I'll take the consequences if I have to be hanged for it. But don't you believe a word James says. He never touched it. It wasn't him.'

'How do you know it wasn't him,' says master very sharp. 'If you didn't take it, how do you know who did?'

'How do I know?' I cried, forgetting for a moment who I was speaking to. 'Why, if you'd half a grain of sense among the lot of you, you'd know why I know it's not him. If you felt to a young man like I feel to James, you'd know in your heart that he could not have done such a thing, not if there was fifty diamond necklaces found in fifty pockets on him at the same time.'

They said nothing, but Mr. Oliver chuckled in his collar till I'd have liked to strangle him with my two hands round his fat throat. And I went on—

'I'm as sure he didn't do it as I am that I didn't do it myself, and as he would have been that I didn't if he had really loved me, as he said, instead of believing that I could do such a thing, and trying to save me with a black lie—God bless him for it.'

And James he never looked at me, but he said again, 'Don't mind her—she's off her head with fright about me. You send me off to prison as soon as you like, sir.'

And still none of the others spoke, but Mr. Oliver leaned back in his chair, and he clapped his hands softly as though he was at a play. 'Bravo!' he says, 'bravo!'

And the others looked at him as if they thought he had gone out of his mind.

'It's a very pretty drama, very nicely played, but now it's time to put an end to it. Do you want to see the villain?' he says to master, and master never answering him, only staring, he turned quite sharp and sudden and pointed to John as he stood near the door with his black eyes burning like coals. 'You took it,' said Mr. Oliver, 'and you put it in Mary's box. Oh! you needn't start. I know it's true without that.'

John had started, but he pulled himself together in a minute. The man had pluck, I will say that. He spoke quite firm and respectful. 'And why should I have done that, sir, if you please, when all the house knows that I have been courting Mary fair and honest this two year?'

Mr. Oliver tapped his snuff−box and grinned all over his big smooth face. 'When you do your courting fair and honest, young man, you should be careful not to do it in the library with the window open. I was in the verandah, and I heard you threaten that she should never marry James, and that she should marry you; and that you would be revenged on her for her bad taste in preferring him to you.'

John drew a deep breath. 'That's nothing, sir, is it?' he says to master. 'Every one in the house knows I have been sorry for a hasty word, and have been the best friends with both of them for these three weeks.'

Mr. Oliver got up and put his snuff−box on the table, and his hands in his trouser pockets. 'You can send for

the police, William,' he said to master, 'because as a matter of fact, I saw the black−whiskered gentleman with the necklace in his hand. I did get home late to−night, but not so late as you thought, and I came in through the open door and was up in my dressing−room when that scoundrel sneaked into my wife's room and took the necklace to ruin an innocent girl with. What a thorough scoundrel you are, though, aren't you?' he said to John.

Then John, he shrugged his shoulders as much as to say, 'It's all up now,' and he said to Mr. Oliver very politely, 'You are always fond of poking your nose into other people's business, sir, and I daresay you'd like to know why I did it. Oh yes. You know everything, you do,' says John, growing very white, and speaking angry and quick, 'with your writing, and your snuff, and your gossiping with the servants, which no gentleman would do, and your nasty, sneaking, Jaeger−felt boots, and your silly old tub of a wife. I knew that smooth−spoken man of yours would believe anything against her, and I knew he would never marry her after a set−out like this, and I knew I should get her when she found I stuck to her through it all, as I should have done, and as I would have done too, if she had taken fifty diamond necklaces.'

'Send for the police,' said master, but nobody moved. For Mrs. Oliver, who had been crying like a waterworks ever since we came down into the library, said quite sudden, 'O Dick dear! let him go. Don't prosecute him. See, he's lost everything, and he's lost her, and he must have been mad with love for her or he wouldn't have done such a thing.'

Now, wasn't that a true lady to speak up like that for him after what he'd said of her? Mr. Oliver looked surprised at her speaking up like that, her that hardly ever said a word except 'Yes, Dick dear,' and 'No, Dick dear,' and then he shrugs his shoulders and he says, 'You are right, my dear, he's punished enough.'

And John turned to go like a dog that has been whipped; but at the door he faced round, and he said to Mrs. Oliver, 'You're a good woman, and I'm sorry I said what I did about you. But for the other I'm not sorry, not if it was my last word.'

And with that he went out of the room, and out of the house through the front door. He had no relations and he had no friends, and I suppose he had nowhere to go with his character gone, and so it happened that was truly his last word as far as any one knows. For he was found next morning on the level−crossing after the down express had passed.

You never saw such a fuss as every one made of me and James afterwards. I might have been a queen and him a king. But when it was all over it stuck in my mind that he oughtn't to have doubted me, and so I wouldn't name the day for over a year, though Mrs. Oliver had bought him a nice little hotel and given it to him herself; but when the year was up, Mr. and Mrs. Oliver came down to stay again, and seeing them brought it all back, and his having tried to save me as he had seemed more than his having doubted me. And so I married him, and I don't think any one ever made a better match. James says he made a better match, and if I don't agree with him, it's only right and proper that he should think so, and I thank God that he does every hour of my life.

# SON AND HEIR

SIR JASPER was always the best of masters to me and to all of us; and he had that kind of way with him, masterful and gentle at the same time, like as if he was kind to you for his own pleasure, and ordering you about for your own good, that I believe any of us would have cut our hand off at the wrist if he had told us to.

Lady Breynton had been dead this many a year. She hadn't come to her husband with her hands empty. They say that Sir Jasper had been very wild in his youth, and that my Lady's money had come in very handy to pull the old place together again. She worshipped the ground Sir Jasper walked on, as most women did that he ever said a kind word to. But it never seemed to me that he took to her as much as you might have expected a warm−hearted gentleman like him to do. But he took to her baby wonderful. I was nurse to that baby from the first, and a fine handsome little chap he was, and when my Lady died he was wholly given over to my care. And I loved the child; indeed, I did love him, and should have loved him to the end but for one thing, and that comes in its own place in my story. But even those who loved young Jasper best couldn't help seeing he hadn't his father's winning ways. And when he grew up to man's estate, he was as wild as his father had been before him. But his wild ways were the ways that make young men enemies, not friends, and out of all that came to the house, for the hunting, or the shooting, or what not, I used to think there wasn't one would have held out a hand to my young master if he had been in want of it. And yet I loved him because I had brought him up, and I never had a child of my own. I never wished to be married, but I used to wish that little Jasper had been my own child. I could have had an authority over him then that I hadn't as his nurse, and perhaps it might have all turned out differently.

There were many tales about Sir Jasper, but I didn't think it was my place to listen to them.

Only, when it's your own eyes, it's different, and I couldn't help seeing how like young Robert, the under−gamekeeper, was to the Family. He had their black, curly hair, and merry Irish eyes, and he, if you please, had just Sir Jasper's winning ways.

Why he was taken on as gamekeeper no one could make out, for when he first came up to the Hall to ask the master for a job, they tell me he knew no more of gamekeeping than I do of Latin. Young Robert was a steady chap, and used to read and write of an evening instead of spending a jolly hour or two at the Dove and Branch, as most young fellows do, and as, indeed, my young master did too often. And Sir Jasper, he gave him books without end and good advice, and would have him so often about him he set everybody's tongue wagging to a tune more merry than wise. And young Robert loved the master, of course. Who didn't?

Well, there came a day when the Lord above saw fit to put out the sunshine like as if it had been a bedroom candle; for Sir Jasper, he was brought back from the hunting−field with his back broke.

I always take a pleasure in remembering that I was with him to the last, and did everything that could be done for him with my own hands. He lingered two days, and then he died.

It was the hour before the dawn, when there is always a wind, no matter how still the night, a chilly wind that seems to find out the marrow of your bones, and if you are nursing sick folk, you bank up the fire high and watch them extra careful till the sun gets up.

Sir Jasper opened his eyes and looked at me—oh! so kindly. It brings tears into my eyes when I think of it. 'Nelly,' he says, 'I know I can trust you.'

And I said, 'Yes, sir.' And so he could, whatever it might have been. What happened afterwards wasn't my fault, and couldn't have been guarded against.

'Then go,' he said, 'to my old secretaire and open it.'

And I did. There was rows of pigeon−holes inside, and little drawers with brass knobs.

'You take hold of the third knob from the right, Nelly,' said he. 'Don't pull it; give it a twist round.' I did, and lo and behold! a little drawer jumped out at me from quite another part of the secretaire.

'You see what's in it, Nelly?' says he.

It was a green leather case tied round with a bit of faded ribbon.

'Now, what I want you to do,' he says, 'is to lay that beside me when it's all over. I have always had my doubts

about the dead sleeping so quiet as some folks say. But I think I shall sleep if you lay that beside me, for I am very tired, Nelly,' he said, 'very tired.'

Then I went back to his bed, where he lay looking quite calm and comfortable.

'The end has come very suddenly,' says he; 'but it is best this way.'

Then we was both quiet a bit.

'I may be wrong,' he went on presently, his face quite straight, but a laugh in his blue eye. 'I may be wrong, Nelly, but I think you would like to kiss me before I die—I know well enough you'll do it after.'

And when he said that, I was glad I had never kissed another man. And soon after that, it being the coldest hour of all the night, he moved his head on his pillow and said—

'I'm off now, Nelly, but you needn't wake the doctors. It's very dark outside. Hand me out, my girl, hand me out.' So I gave him my hand, and he died holding it. Whether I grieved much or little over my old master is no one's business but my own. I went about the house, and I did my duty—ever since Master Jasper had been grown up I had been housekeeper. I did my duty, I say, and before the coffin lid was screwed down I laid that green leather case under the shroud by my master's side; and just as I had done it I turned round feeling that some one was in the room, and there stood young Master Jasper at the door looking at me.

'All's ready now,' I said to the undertaker's men, and called them in, and young Master Jasper, he followed me along the passage. 'What were you doing?'

'I was putting something in the master's coffin he told me to put there.'

'What was it?' he asked, very sharp and sudden.

'How should I know?' says I. 'It's in a case. It may be some old letter or a lock of hair as belonged to your mother.'

'Come into my room,' he said, and I followed him in. He looked very pale and anxious, and when he'd shut the door he spoke—

'Look here, Nelly, I'm going to trust you. My father was very angry with me about some little follies of mine, and he told me the other night he had left a good slice of the estate away from me. Do you think that packet you put in the coffin had anything to do with it?'

'Good Lord, bless your soul, sir, no,' I said. 'That was no will or lawyer's letters, it was but some little token of remembrance he set store by.'

'Thanks, Nelly, that was all I wanted to know.'

No one ever knows who tells these things, but it had leaked out somehow that that slice of the estate was to belong to young Robert the gamekeeper, and you may be sure the tongues went wagging above a bit. But it seemed to me, if it was so, my master was right to make a proper provision for Robert as well as for Jasper. However, nobody could be sure of anything until after the funeral.

The doctor was staying in the house, and master's younger brother, besides the lawyer and young Master Jasper; so I had many things to see to, and ought to have been tired enough to get to sleep easy the night before he was buried. But somehow I couldn't sleep. I couldn't help thinking of my master as I had known him all these years. Him being always so gentle and so kind, and so light−hearted, it didn't seem likely he could have had young Robert on his conscience all the time; and yet what was I to think? And then my poor Jasper—I say 'poor,' but I never loved and pitied him less than I did that night. He had lost such a father, and he could go troubling about whether he had got the whole estate or not. So I lay awake, and I thought of the coffin lying between its burning tapers in the great bedroom, and I wished they had not screwed him down, for then I could have gone, late as it was, and had another look at my master's face. And as I lay it seemed to me that I heard a door opened, and then a step, and then a key turned. Now, the master never locked his door, so the key of that room turned rusty in the lock, and before I had time to think more than that I was out of bed and in my dressing−gown, creeping along the passage. Sure enough, my master's door was open, as I saw by the streak of light across the corridor. I walked softly on my bare feet, and no one could have heard me go along the thick carpet. When I got to the door, I saw that what I had been trying not to think of was really true. Master Jasper was there taking the screws out of his father's coffin to see what was in that green leather case.

I stood there and looked. I could not have moved, not for the Queen's crown, if it had been offered me then and there. One after another he took the screws out and laid them on the little bedside table, where the master used to keep his pistols of a night. When all the screws was out he lifted the lid in both his arms and set it on the bed,

where it lay looking like another coffin. Then he began to search for what I had put in beside his father.

Now, I may be a heartless woman, and I suppose I am, or how account for it? But when I saw my young master go to his father's coffin like that, and begin to serve his own interest and his own curiosity, every spark of love I had ever had for the boy died out, and I cared no more for him than if he had been the first comer.

If he had kissed his father, or so much as looked kindly at the dead face in the coffin, it would have been different. But he hadn't a look or a thought to spare for him as gave him life, and had humoured and spoiled and petted and made much of him all his twenty years. Not a thought for his father; all his thoughts was to find out what his father hadn't wished him to know.

Now I was feeling set that Master Jasper should never know what was in that green leather case, and I cared no more for what he thought or what he felt than I should have done if he had been a common thief as, God forgive me, he was in my eyes at that hour. So I crept behind him softly, softly, an inch at a time, till I got to where I could see the coffin; and if you'll believe a foolish old woman, I kept looking at that dead face till I nigh forgot what I was there for. And while I was standing mazed like and stupid, young Master Jasper had got out the green case, and was turning over what was in it in his hands.

I got him by the two elbows behind, and he started like a horse that has never felt even the whip will do at the spur's touch. Almost at the same time my heart came leaping into my mouth, and if ever a woman nearly died of fright, I was that woman, for some one behind me put a hand on my shoulder and said, 'What's all this?'

Young Sir Jasper and I both turned sharp. It was the doctor. His ears were as quick as mine, and he had heard the key too, I suppose. Anyhow, there he was, and he picked up the papers young Sir Jasper had let fall, and says he, 'I will deal with these, young gentleman. Go you to your room.' And Sir Jasper, like a kicked hound, went. Then I began to tell my share in that night's work. But the doctor stopped me, for he had seen me and watched me all along. Then he stood by the coffin, and went through what was in the little leather case.

'I must keep these now,' he said, 'but you shall keep your promise and put them beside him before he is buried.'

And the next day, before the funeral, I went alone and saw my master again, and gave him his little case back, and I thought I should have liked him to know that I had done my best for him, but he could not have known that without knowing of what young Sir Jasper had done, and that would have broken his heart; so when all's said and done, perhaps it's as well the dead know nothing.

And after the funeral we was all in the library to hear the will read, and the lawyer he read out that the personal property went to Robert the gamekeeper, and the entailed property would of course be young Sir Jasper's.

And young Sir Jasper, oh that ever I should have called him my boy!—he rose up in his place and said that his father was a doting old fool and out of his mind, and he would have the law of them, anyhow, and my late dear master not yet turned of fifty! And then the doctor got up and he said—

'Stop a bit, young man; I have a word or two to say here.'

And he up and told before all the folks there straight out what had passed last night, and how young Sir Jasper had willed to rob his father's coffin.

'Now, you'll want to know what was in the little green leather case,' he says at the end. 'And it was this,—a lock of hair and a wedding ring, and a marriage certificate, and a baptism certificate; and you, Jasper, are but the son by a second marriage; and Sir Robert, I congratulate you, for you are come to your own.'

'Do I get nothing, then?' shrieked young Sir Jasper, trembling like a woman, and with the devil looking out of his eyes.

'Your father intended you to have the entailed estates, right or wrong; that was his choice. But you chose to know what he wished to hide from you, and now you know that the entailed estates belong to your brother.'

'But the personalty?'

'You forget,' said the doctor, rubbing his hands, with a sour smile, 'that your father provided for that in the will to which you so much objected.'

'Then, curse his memory and curse you,' cried Jasper, and flung out of the house; nor have I ever seen him again, though he did set lawyer folk to work in London to drive Sir Robert out of his own place. But to no purpose.

And Sir Robert, he lives in the old house, and is loved as his father was before him by all he says a kind word

to, and his kind words are many.

And to me he is all that I used to wish the boy Jasper might be, and he has a reason for loving me which Jasper never had.

For he said to me when he first spoke to me after his father's funeral—

'My mother was a farmer's girl,' he said, 'and your father was a farmer, so I feel we come, as it were, of one blood; and besides that, I know who my father's friends were. I never forget those things.'

I still live on as a housekeeper at the Hall. My master left me no money, but he bade his heir keep me on in my old place. I am glad to think that he did not choose to leave me money, but instead the great picture of himself that hung in the Hall. It hangs in my room now, and looks down on me as I write.

# ONE WAY OF LOVE

YOU don't believe in coincidences, which is only another way of saying that all things work together for good to them that love God—or them that don't, for that matter, if they are honestly trying to do what they think right. Now I do.

I had as good a time as most young fellows when I was young. My father farmed a bit of land down Malling way, and I walked out with the prettiest girl in our parts. Jenny was her name, Jenny Teesdale; her people come from the North. Pretty as a pink Jenny was, and neat in her ways, and would make me a good wife, every one said, even my own mother; and when a man's mother owns that about a girl he may know he's got hold of a treasure. Now Jenny—her name was Jane, but we called her Jenny for short—she had a cousin Amelia, who was apprenticed to the millinery and dress−making in Maidstone; the two had been brought up together from little things, and they was that fond of each other it was a pleasure to see them together. I was fond of Amelia, too, like as a brother might be; and when Jenny and me walked out of a Sunday, as often as not Amelia would come with us, and all went on happy enough for a while. Then I began to notice Jenny didn't seem to care so much about walking out, and one Sunday afternoon she said she had a headache and would rather stay at home by the fire; for it was early spring, and the days chilly. Amelia and me took a turn by ourselves, and when we got back to Teesdale's farm, there was Jenny, wonderfully brisked up, talking and laughing away with young Wheeler, whose father keeps the post−office. I was not best pleased, I can tell you, but I kept a still tongue in my head; only, as time went on, I couldn't help seeing Jenny didn't seem to be at all the same to me, and Amelia seemed sad, too.

I was in the hairdressing then, and serving my time, so it was only on Sundays or an evening that I could get out. But at last I said to myself, 'This can't go on; us three that used to be so jolly, we're as flat as half a pint of four ale; and I'll know the reason why,' says I, 'before I'm twenty−four hours older.' So I went to Teesdale's with that clear fixed in my head.

Jenny was not in the house, but Amelia was. The old folks had gone to a Magic Lantern in the schoolroom, and Amelia was alone in the house.

'I'll have it out with her,' thinks I; so as soon as we had passed the time of day and asked after each other's relations, I says, 'Look here, Amelia, what is it that's making mischief between you and me and Jenny, as used to be so jolly along of each other?'

She went red, and she went white and red again.

'Don't 'e ask me, Tom—don't 'e now, there's a good fellow.'

And, of course, I asked her all the more.

Then says she, 'Jenny'll never forgive me if I tell you.'

'Jenny shan't never know,' says I; and I swore it, too.

Then says Amelia, 'I can't abear to tell you, Tom, for I know it will break your 'eart. But

Jenny, she don't care for you no more; it's Joe Wheeler as she fancies now, and she's out with him this very minute, as here we stand.

'I'll wring her neck for her,' says I. Then when I had taken time to think a bit, 'I can't believe this, Amelia,' says I, 'not even from you. I must ask Jenny.'

'But that's just what you've swore not to do,' says she. 'She'll never forgive me if you do, Tom; and what need of asking when for the trouble of walking the length of the road you can see them together? But if I tell you where to find them, you swear you won't speak or make a fuss, because she'd know I'd told you?'

'I swear I won't,' says I.

'Well, then,' says Amelia, 'I don't seem to be acting fair to her; but, take it the other way, I can't abear to stand by and see you deceived, Tom. If you go by the churchyard an hour from now, you'll see them in the porch; but don't you say a word to them, and never say I told you. Now, be off, Tom,' says she.

It was early summer by this time, and the evenings long. I don't think any man need envy me what I felt as I walked about the lanes waiting till it was time to walk up to the church and find out for certain that I'd been made

a fool of.

It was dusk when I opened the churchyard gate and walked up the path.

There she was, sure enough, in her Sunday muslin with the violet sprig, and her black silk jacket with the bugles, and her arm was round Joe Wheeler's neck—confound him!—and his arms were round her waist, both of them. They didn't see me, and I stood for a minute and looked at them, and but for what I'd swore to Amelia I believe I should have taken Wheeler by the throat and shaken the life out of him then and there. But I had swore, and I turned sharp and walked away, and I never went up to Teesdale's nor to my father's farm, but I went straight back to Pound's, the man I was bound to, and I wrote a letter to Jenny and one to Amelia, and in Amelia's I only said—

'DEAR AMELIA,—Thank you very much; you were quite right.

TOM.'

And in the other I said—

Jenny, I've had pretty well enough of you; you can go to the devil your own way. So no more at present from your sincere well−wisher TOM.

'P.S.—I'm going for a soldier.'

And I left everything: my master that I was bound to, and my trade and my father. And I went straight off to London. And I should have been a soldier right enough but that I fell in with a fireman, and he persuaded me to go in for that business, which is just as exciting as a soldier's, and a great deal more dangerous, most times. And a fireman I was for six or eight years, but I never cared to walk out with another girl when I thought of Jenny. I didn't tell my folks where I'd gone, and for years I heard nothing from them.

And one night there was a fire in a street off the Borough—a high house it was,—and I went up the ladder to a window where there was a woman screaming, and directly I see her face I see it was Jenny.

I fetched her down the ladder right enough, and she clung round my neck (she didn't know me from Adam), and said: 'Oh, go back and fetch my husband.' And I knew it was Wheeler I'd got to go and find.

Then I went back and I looked for Wheeler.

There he was, lying on the bed, drunk.

Then the devil says to me, 'What call have you to go and find him, the drunken swine? Leave him be, and you can marry Jenny, and let bygones be bygones'; and I stood there half a minute, quite still, with the smoke getting thick round me. Then, the next thing I knew, there was a cracking under my feet and the boards giving way, and I sprang across to Wheeler all in a minute, as anxious to save him as if he'd been my own twin brother. There was no waking him, it was lift him or leave him, and somehow or other I got him out; but that minute I'd given to listening to Satan had very nearly chucked us both to our death, and we only just come off by the skin of our teeth. The crowd cheered like mad when I dragged him out.

I was burned awfully bad, and such good looks as I'd had burnt off me, and I didn't know nothing plainly for many a long day.

And when I come to myself I was in a hospital, and there was a sweet−faced charity sister sitting looking at me, and, by the Lord, if it wasn't Amelia! And she fell on her knees beside me, and she says, 'Tom, I must tell you.

Ever since I found religion I've known what a wicked girl I was. O Tom, to see you lying there, so ill! O Tom, forgive me, or I shall go mad, I know I shall!'

And, with that, she told me straight out, holding nothing back, that what she'd said to me that night eight years ago was a lie, no better; and that who I'd seen in the church porch with young Wheeler was not Jenny at all, but Amelia herself, dressed in Jenny's things.

'Oh, forgive me, Tom!' says Amelia, the tears runnin' over her nun's dress. 'Forgive me, Tom, for I can never forgive myself! I knew Jenny didn't rightly care about you, Tom, and I loved you so dear. And Wheeler wanted Jenny, and so I was tempted to play off that trick on you; I thought you would come round to me after.'

I was weak still with my illness, but I put my hand on hers, and I says, 'I do forgive you, Amelia, for, after all, you done it for love of me. And are you a nun, my dear?' says I.

'No,' says she, 'I'm only on liking as it were; if I don't like them or they don't like me, I can leave any minute.'

'Then leave, for God's sake,' says I, 'if you've got a bit of love for me left. Let bygones be bygones, and marry me as soon as I come out of this, for it's worth something to be loved as you've loved me, Amelia, and I was

always fond of you.'

'What?' says she. 'Me marry you, and be happy after all the harm I've done? You run away from your articles and turned fireman, and Jenny married to a drunken brute—no, Tom, no! I don't deserve to be happy; but, if you forgive me, I shan't be as miserable as I was.'

'Well,' says I, 'if ever you think better of it let me know.'

And the curious thing is that, within two years, she did think better of it—for why? That fire had sobered Wheeler more than twenty thousand temperance tracts, and all the Sons of the Phoenix and Bands of Hope rolled into one. He never touched a drop of drink since that day, and Jenny's as happy as her kind ever is. I hear she didn't fret over me more than a month, though perhaps that's only what I deserved, writing to her as I did. And then Amelia she said—'No such harm done then after all.' So she married me.

Now, you see, if I'd listened to Satan and hadn't pulled Wheeler out, I shouldn't have got burned, and I shouldn't have got into the hospital, and I shouldn't have found Amelia again, and then where should I have been? Whereas now, we're farming the same bit of land that my father farmed before us. And if this was a made−up story, Amelia would have had to drowned herself or something, and I should have gone a−weeping and a−wailing for Jenny all my born days; but as it's true and really happened, Amelia and me have been punished enough, I think; for eight years of unhappiness is only a few words of print in a story−book, but when you've got to live them, every day of them, eight years is eight years, as Amelia and I shall remember till our dying day; and eight years unhappiness is enough punishment for most of the wrong things a man can do, or a woman either for that matter.

## COALS OF FIRE

ALL my life I've lived on a barge. My father, he worked a barge from London to Tonbridge, and 'twas on a barge I first see the light when my mother's time come. I used to wish sometimes as I could 'ave lived in a cottage with a few bits of flowers in the front, but I think if I'd been put to it I should have chose the barge rather than the finest cottage ever I see. When I come to be grown up and took a husband of my own it was a bargeman I took, of course. He was a good sort always, was my Tom, though not particular about Sundays and churchgoings and such like, as my father always was. It used to be a sorrow to me in my young married days to think as Tom was so far from the Lord, and I used to pray that 'is eyes might be opened and that 'e might be led to know the truth like me, which was vanity on my part, for I've come to see since that like as not 'e was nearer the Lord nor ever I was.

We worked the William and Mary, did Tom and me, and I used to think no one could be 'appier than we was them first two years. Tom was as kind as kind, and never said a hard word to me except when he was in liquor; and as to liftin' his 'and to me, no, never in his life. But after two years we got a little baby of our own, and then I knew as I hadn't known what 'appiness was before. She was such a pretty little thing, with yellow hair, soft and fluffy all over her head, the colour of a new−hatched duck, and blue eyes and dear little hands that I used to kiss a thousand times a day.

My mother had married beneath her, they said, for she'd been to school and been in service in a good family, and she taught me to read and write and cipher in the old days, when I was a little kid along of 'er in the barge. So we named our little kid Mary to be like our boat, and as soon as she was big enough, I taught 'er all my mother had taught me, and when she was about eight year old my Tom's great−uncle James, who was a tinsmith by trade, left us a bit of money—over L 200 it were.

'Not a penny of it shall I spend,' says my Tom when he heard of it; 'we'll send our Mary to school with that, we will; and happen she'll be a lady's−maid and get on in the world.'

So we put her to boarding−school in Maidstone, and it was like tearing the heart out of my body. And she'd been away from us a fortnight, and the barge was like hell without her, Tom said, and I felt it too though I couldn't say it, being a Christian woman; and one night we'd got the barge fast till morning in Stoneham Lock, and we were a−settin' talking about her.

'Don't you fret, old woman,' says Tom, with the tears standin' in his eyes, 'she's better off where she is, and she'll thank us for it some day. She's 'appier where she is,' says 'e, 'nor she would be in this dirty old barge along of us.'

And just as he said it, I says, "Ark! what's that?' And we both listened, and if it wasn't that precious child standing on the bank callin' 'Daddy,' and she'd run all the way from Maidstone in 'er little nightgown, and a waterproof over it.

P'raps if we'd been sensible parents, we should 'ave smacked 'er and put 'er back next day; but as it was we hugged 'er, and we hugged each other till we was all out o' breath, and then she set up on 'er daddy's knee, and 'ad a bit o' cold pork and a glass of ale for 'er supper along of us, and there was no more talk of sendin' 'er back to school. But we put by the bit of money to set 'er up if she should marry or want to go into business some day.

And she lived with us on the barge, and though I ses it there wasn't a sweeter girl nor a better girl atwixt London and Tonbridge.

When she was risin' seventeen, I looked for the young men to be comin' after 'er; and come after 'er they did, and more than one and more than two, but there was only one as she ever give so much as a kind look to, and that was Bill Jarvis, the blacksmith's son at Farleigh. Whenever our barge was lyin' in the river of a Sunday, he would walk down in 'is best in the afternoon to pass the time of day with us, and presently it got to our Mary walking out with 'im regular.

'Blest if it ain't going to be "William and Mary" after all,' says my old man.

'He was pleased, I could see, for Bill Jarvis, he'd been put to his father's trade, and 'e might look to come into his father's business in good time, and barrin' a bit of poaching, which is neither here nor there, in my opinion there wasn't a word to be said against 'im.

And so things went along, and they was all jolly except me, but I had it tugging at my heart day and night, that the little gell as 'ad been my very own these seventeen years wouldn't be mine no longer soon, and, God forgive me, I hated Bill Jarvis, and I wouldn't 'ave been sorry if I'd 'eard as 'arm 'ad come to him.

The wedding was fixed for the Saturday; we was to 'ave a nice little spread at the Rose and Crown, and the young folks was to go 'ome and stay at old Jarvis's at Farleigh, and I was to lose my Pretty. And on the Friday night, my old man, 'e went up to the Rose and Crown to see about things and to get a drink along of 'is mates, and when 'e come back I looked to see 'im a little bit on maybe, as was only natural, the night before the weddin' and all. But 'e come back early, and 'e come back sober, but with a face as white as my apron.

'Bess,' says 'e to me, 'where's the girl?'

'She's in 'er bunk asleep,' says I, 'lookin' as pretty as a picture. She's been out with 'er sweet'eart,' says I. 'O Tom, this is the last night she'll lay in that little bunk as she's laid in every night of 'er life, except that wicked fortnight we sent 'er to school.'

'Look 'ere,' says 'e, speaking in a whisper, 'I've 'eard summat up at the Rose and Crown: Bank's broke, and all our money's gone. I see it in the paper, so it must be true.'

'You don't mean it, Tom,' says I; 'it can't be true.'

"Tis true, though, by God,' says 'e, "ere, don't take on so, old girl,' for I'd begun to cry. 'More's been lost on market−days, as they say: our little girl's well provided for, for old Jarvis, 'e's a warm man.'

'She won't 'ave a day's peace all 'er life,' says I, 'goin' empty−'anded into that 'ouse. I know old Mother Jarvis—a cat: we'd best tell the child, p'raps she won't marry 'im if she knows she's nothing to take to 'im,' and, God forgive me, my 'eart jumped up at the thought.

'No, best leave it be,' says my old man, 'they're fair sweet on each other.'

And so the next morning we all went up to the church, me cryin' all the way as if it was 'er buryin' we was a−goin' to and not 'er marryin'. The parson was at the church and a lot of folks as knew us, us 'avin' bin in those parts so long; but none of the bridegroom's people was there, nor yet the bridegroom.

And we waited and we waited, my Pretty as pale as a snowdrop in her white bonnet. And when it was a hour past the time, Tom, 'e ups and says out loud in the church, for all the parson and me said "Ush!' 'I'm goin' back 'ome,' says 'e; 'there won't be no weddin' to−day; 'e shan't 'ave 'er now,' says my old man, 'not if 'e comes to fetch 'er in a coach and six cram full of bank−notes,' says 'e.

And with that 'e catches 'old of Mary in one and and me in the other, and turns to go out of church, and at the door, who should we meet but old Mother Jarvis, 'er that I'd called a cat in my wicked spite only the day before. The tears was runnin' down her fat cheeks, and as soon as she saw my Pretty, she caught 'er in 'er arms and 'ugged 'er like as if she'd been 'er own. 'God forgive 'im,' says she, 'I never could, for all he's my own son. He's gone off for a soldier, and 'e left a letter sayin' you wasn't to think any more of 'im, for 'e wasn't a marryin' man.'

'It's that dam money,' says my goodman, forgettin' 'e was in church; 'that was all 'e wanted, but it ain't what he'll get,' says 'e. 'You keep 'im out of my way, for it 'ull be the worse for 'im if 'e comes within the reach of my fisties.'

And with that we went along 'ome, the three of us. And the sun kept a−shinin' just as if there was nothin' wrong, and the skylarks a−singin' up in the blue sky till I would a−liked to wring their necks for them.

And we 'ad to go on up and down the river as usual, for it was our livin', you see, and we couldn't get away from the place where everybody knew the slight that had been put upon my Pretty. You'd think p'raps that was as bad as might be, but it wasn't the worst.

We was beginnin' June then, and by the end of August I knew that what my Pretty 'ad gone through at the church was nothin' to what she'd got to go through. Her face got pale and thin, and she didn't fancy 'er food.

I suppose I ought to 'ave bin angry with her, for we'd always kept ourselves respectable; and I know if you spare the rod you spoil the child, and I felt I ought to tell her I didn't 'old with such wickedness; so one night when 'er father, 'e was up at the Rose and Crown, and she, a−settin' on the bank with 'er elbows on 'er knees and 'er chin in 'er 'ands, I says to 'er, 'You can't 'ide it no longer, my girl: I know all about it, you wicked, bad girl, you.'

And then she turned and looked at me like a dog does when you 'it it. 'O mother,' says she, 'O mother!' And with that I forgot everything about bein' angry with 'er, and I 'ad 'er in my arms in a minute, and we was 'oldin' each other as hard as hard.

'It was the night before the weddin',' says she, in a whisper. 'O mother, I didn't think there was any harm in it, and us so nearly man and wife.'

'My Pretty,' says I, for she was cryin' pitiful, 'don't 'e take on so, don't: there'll be the little baby by−and−by, and us 'ull love it as dear as if you'd been married in church twenty times over.'

'Ah, but father,' says she; 'he'll kill me when 'e knows.'

Well, I put 'er to bed and I made 'er a cup of strong tea, and I kissed 'er and covered 'er up with my heart like lead, and nobody as ain't a mother can know what a merry−go−round of misery I'd got in my head that night. And when my old man come 'ome I told 'im, and 'Don't be 'ard on the girl, for God's sake,' says I, 'for she's our own child and our only child, and it was the night before the weddin' as should 'ave bin.'

"Ard on 'er?' says 'e, and I'd never 'eard 'is voice so soft, not even when 'e was courtin' me, or when my Pretty was a little un, and 'e hushin' her to sleep. "Ard on 'er? 'Ard on my precious lamb? It ain't us men who is 'ard on them things, it's you wimmen−folk; the day before 'er weddin', too!'

Then 'e was quiet for a bit—then 'e takes 'is shoes off so as not to make a clatter on the steps near where she slept, and 'e comes out in a minute with my Bible in 'is 'and.

'Now,' says 'e, very quiet, 'you needn't be afraid of my bein' 'ard on 'er, but if ever I meet 'im, I'll 'ave 'is blood, if I swing for it, and I'm goin' to swear it on this 'ere Bible—so help me God!'

He looked like a mad thing; his eyes was a−shinin' like lanterns, and 'is face all pulled out of its proper shape; and 'e plumps down on 'is knees there, on the deck, with the Bible in 'is 'ands. And before I knew what I was doin', I'd caught the book out of 'is 'ands, and chucked it into the river, my own Bible, that my own mother had given me when I was a little kid, and I threw my arms round his neck, and held his head against my bosom, so that his mouth was shut, and 'e couldn't speak.

'No, no, no, Tom,' says I, 'you mustn't swear it, and you shan't. Think of the girl, think of your poor old woman, think of the poor little kid that's comin', what ud us all do without you? And you hanged for the sake of such trash as that! Why, 'e ain't worth it,' says I, tryin' to laugh.

Then 'e got 'is 'ead out of my arms and stood lookin' about 'im, like a man that's 'ad a bad dream and 'as just waked up. Then 'e smacks me on the back, 'All right, old woman,' says 'e, 'we won't swear nothin', but it'll be a bad day for him when 'e comes a−nigh the William and Mary.'

So no more was said. And we got through the winter somehow, and the baby was born, as fine a gell as ever you see; and what I said come true, for we couldn't none of us 'ave loved the baby more if its father and mother 'ad been married by an archbishop in Westminster Abbey. And the folks we knew along the banks would have been kind to my Pretty, but she wouldn't never show her face to any of them. 'I've got you, mother, and I've got father and the baby, and I don't want no one else,' says she.

My Tom, he wasn't never the same man after that night 'e 'd got out the Bible to swear. He give up the drink, but it didn't make 'im no cheerfuller, and 'e went to church now and then, a thing I'd never known 'im do since we was married. And time went on, and it was August again, with a big yellow moon in the sky.

My Pretty and the baby was in bed, and the old man and me, we was just a−turnin' in, when we 'eard some one a−runnin' along the tow−path. My old man puts 'is 'ead out to see who's there, and as 'e looked a man come

runnin' along close by where we was moored, and 'e jumped on to our barge, not stoppin' to look at the name, and, 'For God's sake, hide me!' says 'e, and it was a soldier in a red coat with a scared face, as I see by the light of the moon. And it was Bill Jarvis what 'ad brought our girl to shame and run away and left 'er on 'er weddin' morn; and I looked to see my old man take 'im by the shoulder and chuck 'im into the water. And Jarvis didn't see whose barge he'd come aboard of.

'I've got in a row,' says 'e; 'I knocked a man down and he's dead. Oh, for God's sake, hide me! I've run all the way from Chatham.'

Then my old man, he steps out on the deck, and Jarvis, 'e see who it was, and—'O my God!' says 'e, and 'e almost fell back in the water in 'is fright.

Then my old man, 'e took that soldier by the arm, and 'e open the door of the little cabin where my Pretty and 'er baby were. Then 'e slammed it to again. 'No, I can't,' says 'e, 'by God, I can't.' And before the soldier could speak, he'd dragged him down our cabin stairs, and shoved 'im into 'is own bunk and chucked the covers over 'im. Then 'e come up to where I was standin' in the moonlight.

'What ever you done that for?' says I. 'Why not 'a give 'im up to serve 'im out for what 'e done to our Pretty?'

He looked at me stupid−like. 'I don't know why,' says 'e, 'but I can't'; and we stood there in the quiet night, me a−holding on to 'is arm, for I was shivering, so I could hardly stand.

And presently half a dozen soldiers come by with a sergeant.

'Hullo!' cries the sergeant, 'see any redcoat go this way?'

'He's gone up over the bridge,' says Tom, not turnin' a 'air, 'im that I'd never 'eard tell a lie in his life before,—'You'll catch 'im if you look slippy; what's 'e done?'

'Only murder and desertion,' says the sergeant, as cheerful as you please.

'Oh, is that all?' says my old man; 'good−night to you.'

'Good−night,' says the sergeant, and off they went.

They didn't come back our way. We was a−goin' down stream, and we passed Chatham next mornin'.

Bill Jarvis, 'e lay close in the bunk, and my Pretty, she wouldn't come out of 'er cabin; and at Chatham, my old man, 'e says, 'I'm goin' ashore for a bit, old woman; you lay−to and wait for me.' And he went.

Then I went in to my Pretty and I told her all about it, for she knew nothin' but that Jarvis was aboard; and when I'd told 'er, she said, 'I couldn't 'a' done it, no, not for a kingdom.'

'No more couldn't I,' ses I. 'Father's a better chap nor you and me, my Pretty.'

Presently my old man come back from the town, and he goes down to the bunk where Bill Jarvis is lying, and 'e says, 'Look 'ere, Bill,' says 'e, 'you didn't kill your man last night, and after all, it was in a fair rough−and−tumble. The man's doing well. You take my tip and go back and give yourself up; they won't be 'ard on you.'

And Bill 'e looked at 'im all of a tremble. 'By God,' says 'e, 'you're a good man!'

'It's more than you are, then, you devil,' says Tom. 'Get along, out of my sight,' says 'e, 'before I think better of it.'

And that soldier was off that barge before you could say 'knife,' and we didn't see no more of 'im.

But we was up at Hamsted Lock the next summer. The baby was beginnin' to toddle about now; we'd called her Bessie for me. She and her mother was a−settin' in the meadow pickin' the daisies, when I see a soldier a−comin' along the meadow−path, and if it wasn't that Bill Jarvis again. He stopped short when he saw my Pretty.

'Well, Mary?' says 'e.

'Well, Bill?' says she.

'Is that my kid?' says 'e.

'Whose else's would it be?' says she, flashing up at him; 'ain't it enough to deceive a girl, and desert her, without throwing mud in her face on the top of it all? Whose else's should the child be but yours?'

'Go easy,' says Bill, 'I didn't mean that, my girl. Look 'ere, says 'e, 'I got out of that scrape, thanks to your father, and I want to let bygones be bygones, and I'll marry you to−morrow, if you like, and be a father to the kid.'

Then Mary, she stood up on her feet, with the little one in 'er arms.

'Marry you!' says she, 'I wouldn't marry you if you was the only man in the world. Me marry a man as could serve a girl as you served me? Not if it was to save me from hanging? Me give the kid a father like you? Thank God, the child's my own, and you can't touch it. I tell you,' says she, 'shame and all, I'd rather have things as they

are, than have married you in church and 'ave found out afterwards what a cowardly beast you are.'

And with that she walks past 'im, looking like a queen, and down into her cabin; and 'e was left a−standin' there sucking the end of his stick and looking like a fool.

'I think, perhaps,' says I afterwards, 'you ought to 'ave let 'im make an honest woman of you.'

'I'm as honest as I want to be,' says she, 'and the child is all my own now.' So no more was said.

And things went on the same old sleepy way, like they always do on the river, and we forgot the shame almost, in the pleasure of having the little thing about us. And so the time went on, till one day at Maidstone a Sister of Charity with one of those white caps and a big cross round her neck, come down to the water's side inquiring for Tom Allbutt.

'That's me,' says my old man.

'There's a young man ill in hospital,' says she. 'He's dying, I'm afraid, and he wants to see you before he goes. It's typhoid fever, but that's over now; he's dying of weakness, they say.'

And when we asked the young man's name, of course it was Bill Jarvis. So we left my Pretty in charge of the barge, and my old man and me, we went up to the hospital.

Bill was so changed you wouldn't 'ardly 'ave known 'im. From being a fleshy, red−cheeked young fellow, he'd come to be as thin as a skeleton, and 'is eyes seemed to fill half 'is face.

'I want to marry Mary,' says 'e. 'I'm dying, I can't do her and the kid no 'arm now, and I should die easier if she'd marry me here; the chaplain would do it—he said so.'

My old man didn't say nothin', but says I, 'I would dearly like her to be made an honest woman of.'

'It's me that wants to be made an honest man of,' says Bill. And with that my old man, he took his hand and shook it. Then says Bill with the tears runnin' down his cheeks,—partly from weakness, I suppose, for 'e wasn't the crying sort—'So help me God, I never knew what a beast I was till that day I come to you in your barge and you showed me what a man was, Tom Allbutt; you did, so, and I've been trying to be a man ever since, and I've given up the drink, and I've lived steady, and I've never so much as looked at another girl since that night. Oh, get her to be my wife,' says 'e, 'and let me die easy.'

And I went and fetched 'er, and she came along with me with the child in her arms; and the chaplain married them then and there. I don't know how it was the banns didn't have to be put up, but it was managed somehow.

'And you'll stay with me till I die,' says 'e, 'won't you, Mary, you and the kid?'

But he didn't die, he got better, and there isn't a couple happier than him and Mary, for all they've gone through.

And the doctor says it was Mary saved his life, for it was after he had had a little talk with her that he took a turn for the better.

'Mary,' says 'e, 'I've been a bad lot, and you was in the right when you called me a coward and a beast; but your father showed me what a man was, and I've tried to be a man. You was fond of me once, Mary; you'll love me a little when I'm gone, and don't let the kid think unkind of her daddy.'

'Love you when you're gone?' says she, cryin' all over 'er face, and kissin' 'im as if it was for a wager; 'you ain't a−goin' to die, you're goin' to live along of me and baby. Love you when you're gone?' says she, 'why, I've loved you all the time!' she says.