Stories by English Authors: England

Various

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THE BOX TUNNEL

BY CHARLES READE

The 10:15 train glided from Paddington May 7, 1847. In the left compartment of a certain first−class carriage were four passengers; of these two were worth description. The lady had a smooth, white, delicate brow, strongly marked eyebrows, long lashes, eyes that seemed to change colour, and a good−sized, delicious mouth, with teeth as white as milk. A man could not see her nose for her eyes and mouth; her own sex could, and would have told us some nonsense about it. She wore an unpretending grayish dress, buttoned to the throat with lozenge−shaped buttons, and a Scottish shawl that agreeably evaded colour. She was like a duck, so tight her plain feathers fitted her, and there she sat, smooth, snug, and delicious, with a book in her hand and a soupcon of her wrist just visible as she held it. Her opposite neighbour was what I call a good style of man, the more to his credit since he belonged to a corporation that frequently turns out the worst imaginable style of young men. He was a cavalry officer, aged twenty−five. He had a moustache, but not a very repulsive one—not one of those subnasal pigtails on which soup is suspended like dew on a shrub; it was short, thick, and black as a coal. His teeth had not yet been turned by tobacco smoke to the colour of juice; his clothes did not stick to nor hang to him; he had an engaging smile, and, what I liked the dog for, his vanity, which was inordinate, was in its proper place, his heart, not in his face, jostling mine and other people's who have none; in a word, he was what one oftener hears of than meets—a young gentleman. He was conversing in an animated whisper with a companion, a fellow−officer; they were talking about what it is far better not to—women. Our friend clearly did not wish to be overheard; for he cast ever and anon a furtive glance at his fair vis−a−vis and lowered his voice. She seemed completely absorbed in her book, and that reassured him. At last the two soldiers came down to a whisper (the truth must be told); the one who got down at Slough, and was lost to posterity, bet ten pounds to three that he who was going down with us to Bath and immortality would not kiss either of the ladies opposite upon the road. “Done, done!” Now I am sorry a man I have hitherto praised should have lent himself, even in a whisper, to such a speculation; “but nobody is wise at all hours,” not even when the clock is striking five and twenty, and you are to consider his profession, his good looks, and the temptation—ten to three.

After Slough the party was reduced to three. At Twylford one lady dropped her handkerchief; Captain Dolignan fell on it like a lamb; two or three words were interchanged on this occasion. At Reading the Marlborough of our tale made one of the safe investments of that day; he bought a “Times” and “Punch”—the latter full of steel−pen thrusts and woodcuts. Valour and beauty deigned to laugh at some inflamed humbug or other punctured by “Punch.” Now laughing together thaws our human ice; long before Swindon it was a talking−match; at Swindon who so devoted as Captain Dolignan? He handed them out, he souped them, he tough−chickened them, he brandied and cochinealed one, and he brandied and burnt−sugared the other; on their return to the carriage one lady passed into the inner compartment to inspect a certain gentleman's seat on that side of the line.

Reader, had it been you or I, the beauty would have been the deserter, the average one would have stayed with us till all was blue, ourselves included; not more surely does our slice of bread and butter, when it escapes from our hand, revolve it ever so often, alight face downward on the carpet. But this was a bit of a fop, Adonis, dragoon, —so Venus remained in tete−a−tete with him. You have seen a dog meet an unknown female of his species; how handsome, how *empresse*, how expressive he becomes: such was Dolignan after Swindon, and, to do the dog justice, he got handsome and handsomer. And you have seen a cat conscious of approaching cream: such was Miss Haythorn; she became demurer and demurer. Presently our captain looked out of the window and laughed; this elicited an inquiring look from Miss Haythorn.

“We are only a mile from the Box Tunnel.”

“Do you always laugh a mile from the Box Tunnel?” said the lady.

“Invariably.”

“What for?”

“Why, hem! it is a gentleman's joke.”

Captain Dolignan then recounted to Miss Haythorn the following:

“A lady and her husband sat together going through the Box Tunnel; there was one gentleman opposite; it was pitch−dark. After the tunnel the lady said, 'George, how absurd of you to salute me going through the tunnel!' 'I did no such thing.' 'You didn't?' 'No; why?' 'Because somehow I thought you did!'”

Here Captain Dolignan laughed and endeavoured to lead his companion to laugh, but it was not to be done. The train entered the tunnel.

Miss Haythorn. Ah!

Dolignan. What is the matter?

Miss Haythorn. I am frightened.

Dolignan (moving to her side). Pray do not be alarmed; I am near you.

Miss Haythorn. You are near me—very near me indeed, Captain Dolignan.

Dolignan. You know my name?

Miss Haythorn. I heard you mention it. I wish we were out of this dark place.

Dolignan. I could be content to spend hours here reassuring you, my dear lady.

Miss Haythorn. Nonsense!

Dolignan. Pweep! (Grave reader, do not put our lips to the next pretty creature you meet, or will understand what this means.)

Miss Haythorn. Ee! Ee!

Friend. What is the matter?

Miss Haythorn. Open the door! Open the door!

There was a sound of hurried whispers; the door was shut and the blind pulled down with hostile sharpness.

If any critic falls on me for putting inarticulate sounds in a dialogue as above, I answer, with all the insolence I can command at present, “Hit boys as big as yourself”—bigger, perhaps, such as Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes; they began it, and I learned it of them sore against my will.

Miss Haythorn's scream lost most of its effect because the engine whistled forty thousand murders at the same moment, and fictitious grief makes itself heard when real cannot.

Between the tunnel and Bath our young friend had time to ask himself whether his conduct had been marked by that delicate reserve which is supposed to distinguish the perfect gentleman.

With a long face, real or feigned, he held open the door; his late friends attempted to escape on the other side; impossible! they must pass him. She whom he had insulted (Latin for kissed) deposited somewhere at his feet a look of gentle, blushing reproach; the other, whom he had not insulted, darted red−hot daggers at him from her eyes; and so they parted.

It was perhaps fortunate for Dolignan that he had the grace to be a friend to Major Hoskyns of his regiment, a veteran laughed at by the youngsters, for the major was too apt to look coldly upon billiard−balls and cigars; he had seen cannon−balls and linstocks. He had also, to tell the truth, swallowed a good bit of the mess−room poker, which made it as impossible for Major Hoskyns to descend to an ungentlemanlike word or action as to brush his own trousers below the knee.

Captain Dolignan told this gentleman his story in gleeful accents; but Major Hoskyns heard him coldly, and as coldly answered that he had known a man to lose his life for the same thing.

“That is nothing,” continued the major, “but unfortunately he deserved to lose it.”

At this blood mounted to the younger man's temples, and his senior added, “I mean to say he was thirty−five; you, I presume, are twenty−one!”

“Twenty−five.”

“That is much the same thing; will you be advised by me?”

“If you will advise me.”

“Speak to no one of this, and send White the three pounds, that he may think you have lost the bet.”

“That is hard, when I won it.”

“Do it, for all that, sir.”

Let the disbelievers in human perfectibility know that this dragoon, capable of a blush, did this virtuous action, albeit with violent reluctance; and this was his first damper. A week after these events he was at a ball. He

was in that state of factitious discontent which belongs to us amiable English. He was looking in vain for a lady equal in personal attraction to the idea he had formed of George Dolignan as a man, when suddenly there glided past him a most delightful vision—a lady whose beauty and symmetry took him by the eyes; another look: “It can't be! Yes, it is!” Miss Haythorn! (not that he knew her name), but what an apotheosis!

The duck had become a peahen—radiant, dazzling; she looked twice as beautiful and almost twice as large as before. He lost sight of her; he found her again. She was so lovely she made him ill, and he alone must not dance with her, speak to her. If he had been content to begin her acquaintance the usual way it might have ended in kissing; it must end in nothing. As she danced sparks of beauty fell from her on all around but him; she did not see him; it was clear she never would see him. One gentleman was particularly assiduous; she smiled on his assiduity; he was ugly, but she smiled on him. Dolignan was surprised at his success, his ill taste, his ugliness, his impertinence. Dolignan at last found himself injured; who was this man? and what right had he to go on so? “He never kissed her, I suppose,” said Dolle. Dolignan could not prove it, but he felt that somehow the rights of property were invaded. He went home and dreamed of Miss Haythorn, and hated all the ugly successful. He spent a fortnight trying to find out who his beauty was; he never could encounter her again. At last he heard of her in this way: a lawyer's clerk paid him a little visit and commenced a little action against him in the name of Miss Haythorn for insulting her in a railway−train.

The young gentleman was shocked, endeavoured to soften the lawyer's clerk; that machine did not thoroughly comprehend the meaning of the term. The lady's name, however, was at last revealed by this untoward incident; from her name to her address was but a short step, and the same day our crestfallen hero lay in wait at her door, and many a succeeding day, without effect. But one fine afternoon she issued forth quite naturally, as if she did it every day, and walked briskly on the parade. Dolignan did the same, met and passed her many times on the parade, and searched for pity in her eyes, but found neither look nor recognition nor any other sentiment; for all this she walked and walked till all the other promenaders were tired and gone; then her culprit summoned resolution, and, taking off his hat, with a voice for the first time tremulous, besought permission to address her. She stopped, blushed, and neither acknowledged nor disowned his acquaintance. He blushed, stammered out how ashamed he was, how he deserved to be be punished, how he was punished, how little she knew how unhappy he was, and concluded by begging her not to let all the world know the disgrace of a man who was already mortified enough by the loss of her acquaintance. She asked an explanation; he told her of the action that had been commenced in her name; she gently shrugged her shoulders, and said, “How stupid they are!” Emboldened by this, he begged to know whether or not a life of distant unpretending devotion would, after a lapse of years, erase the memory of his madness—his crime!

She did not know!

She must now bid him adieu, as she had some preparations to make for a ball in the Crescent, where everybody was to be. They parted, and Dolignan determined to be at the ball where everybody was to be. He was there, and after some time he obtained an introduction to Miss Haythorn and he danced with her. Her manner was gracious. With the wonderful tact of her sex, she seemed to have commenced the acquaintance that evening. That night for the first time Dolignan was in love. I will spare the reader all a lover's arts by which he succeeded in dining where she dined, in dancing where she danced, in overtaking her by accident when she rode. His devotion followed her to church, where the dragoon was rewarded by learning there is a world where they neither polk nor smoke, the two capital abominations of this one.

He made an acquaintance with her uncle, who liked him, and he saw at last with joy that her eye loved to dwell upon him when she thought he did not observe her. It was three months after the Box Tunnel that Captain Dolignan called one day upon Captain Haythorn, R.N., whom he had met twice in his life, and slightly propitiated by violently listening to a cutting−out expedition; he called, and in the usual way asked permission to pay his addresses to his daughter. The worthy captain straightway began doing quarter−deck, when suddenly he was summoned from the apartment by a mysterious message. On his return he announced, with a total change of voice, that it was all right, and his visitor might run alongside as soon as he chose. My reader has divined the truth; this nautical commander, terrible to the foe, was in complete and happy subjugation to his daughter, our heroine.

As he was taking leave, Dolignan saw his divinity glide into the drawing−room. He followed her, observed a sweet consciousness deepen into confusion; she tried to laugh, and cried instead, and then she smiled again; when

he kissed her hand at the door it was “George” and “Marian” instead of “Captain” this and “Miss” the other.

A reasonable time after this (for my tale is merciful and skips formalities and torturing delays) these two were very happy; they were once more upon the railroad, going to enjoy their honeymoon all by themselves. Marian Dolignan was dressed just as before—duck−like and delicious, all bright except her clothes; but George sat beside her this time instead of opposite, and she drank him in gently from her long eyelashes.

“Marian,” said George, “married people should tell each other all. Will you ever forgive me if I own to you; no—”

“Yes, yes!”

“Well then, you remember the Box Tunnel?” (This was the first allusion he had ventured to it.) “I am ashamed to say I had three pounds to ten pounds with White I would kiss one of you two ladies,” and George, pathetic externally, chuckled within.

“I know that, George; I overheard you,” was the demure reply.

“Oh! you overheard me! Impossible.”

“And did you not hear me whisper to my companion? I made a bet with her.”

“You made a bet? how singular! What was it?”

“Only a pair of gloves, George.”

“Yes, I know; but what about it?”

“That if you did you should be my husband, dearest.”

“Oh! but stay; then you could not have been so very angry with me, love. Why, dearest, then you brought that action against me”

Mrs. Dolignan looked down.

“I was afraid you were forgetting me! George, you will never forgive me?”

“Sweet angel! why, here is the Box Tunnel!”

Now, reader—fie! no! no such thing! you can't expect to be indulged in this way every time we come to a dark place. Besides, it is not the thing. Consider—two sensible married people. No such phenomenon, I assure you, took place. No scream in hopeless rivalry of the engine—this time!

MINIONS OF THE MOON

BY F. W. ROBINSON

Our story is of the time when George III was king, and our scene of action lies only at an old farm−house six miles or so from Finchley —a quaint, ramshackle, commodious, old−fashioned, thatched farm−house that we see only in pictures now, and which has long since been improved off the face of the earth.

It was a farm estate that was flourishing bravely in those dear disreputable days when the people paid fivepence a pound for bread, and only dared curse Protection in their hearts; when few throve and many starved, and younger sons of gentry, without interest at court or Parliament, either cut the country which served them so badly, or took to business on the king's highway and served the country badly in return.

The Maythorpe Farm belonged to the Pemberthys, and had descended from father to son from days lying too far back to reckon up just now; and a rare, exclusive, conservative, bad−tempered, long−headed race the Pemberthys had always borne the reputation of being, feathering their own nests well, and dying in them fat and prosperous.

There were a good many Pembcrthys scattered about the home and midland counties, but it was generally understood in the family that the head of the clan, as it were, lived at Maythorpe Farm, near Finchley, and here the Pemberthys would forgather on any great occasion, such as a marriage, a funeral, or a christening, the funeral taking precedence for numbers. There had been a grand funeral at Maythorpe Farm only a few days before our story opens, for Reuben Pemberthy had been consigned to his fathers at the early age of forty−nine. Reuben Pemberthy had left one son behind him, also named Reuben, a stalwart, heavy−browed, good−looking young fellow, who, at two and twenty, was quite as well able to manage the farm and everybody on it as his father had been before him. He had got rid of all his relatives save two six days after his father's funeral; and those two were stopping by general consent, because it was signed, sealed, and delivered by those whom it most concerned, that the younger woman, his cousin, pretty Sophie Tarne, was to be married before the year was out to the present Reuben Pemberthy, who had wooed her and won her consent when he went down to her mother's house at King's Norton for a few days' trip last summer. Being a steady, handsome fellow, who made love in downright earnest, he impressed Sophie's eighteen years, and was somewhat timidly but graciously accepted as an affianced suitor. It was thought at King's Norton that Mrs. Tarne had done a better stroke of business in the first year of her widowhood than her late husband had done—always an unlucky wretch, Timothy—in the whole course of his life. And now Sophie Tarne and her mother were staying for a few days longer at Maythorpe Farm after the funeral.

Mrs. Tarne, having been a real Pemberthy before her unfortunate marriage with the improvident draper of King's Norton, was quite one of the family, and seemed more at home at Finchley than was the new widow, Mrs. Pemberthy, a poor, unlucky lady, a victim to a chronic state of twittering and jingling and twitching, but one who, despite her shivers, had made the late Reuben a good wife, and was a fair housekeeper even now, although superintending housekeeping in jumps, like a a palsy−stricken kangaroo.

So Sophie and her bustling mother were of material assistance to Mrs. Pemberthy; and the presence of Sophie in that house of mourning—where the mourning had been speedily got over and business had begun again with commendable celerity—was a considerable source of comfort to young Reuben, when he had leisure after business hours which was not always the case, to resume those tender relations which had borne to him last autumn such happy fruit of promise.

Though there was not much work to do at the farm in the winter−time, when the nights were long and the days short, yet Reuben Pemberthy was generally busy in one way or another; and on the particular day on which our story opens Reuben was away at High Barnet.

It had been a dull, dark day, followed by a dull, dark night. The farm servants had gone to their homes, save the few that were attached to the premises, such as scullery−maids and dairymaids; and Mrs. Pemberthy, Mrs. Tarne, and her daughter Sophie were waiting early supper for Reuben, and wondering what kept him so long from

his home and his sweetheart.

Mrs. Tarne, accustomed, mayhap, to the roar and bustle of King's Norton, found the farm at Finchley a trifle dull and lonely,—not that in a few days after a funeral she could expect any excessive display of life or frivolity,—and, oppressed a bit that evening, was a trifle nervous as to the whereabouts of her future son−in−law, who had faithfully promised to be home a clear hour and a half before the present time, and whose word might be always taken to be as good as his bond. Mrs. Tarne was the most restless of the three women. Good Mrs. Pemberthy, though physically shaken, was not likely to be nervous concerning her son, and, indeed, was at any time only fidgety over her own special complaints—a remarkable trait of character deserving of passing comment here.

Sophie was not of a nervous temperament; indeed, for her eighteen years, was apparently a little too cool and methodical; and she was not flurried that evening over the delay in the arrival home of Reuben Pemberthy. She was not imaginative like her mother, and did not associate delay with the dangers of a dark night, though the nights *were* full of danger in the good old times of the third George. She went to the door to look out, after her mother had tripped there for the seventh or eighth time, not for appearances' sake, for she was above that, but to keep her mother company, and to suggest that these frequent excursions to the front door would end in a bad cold.

“I can't help fearing that something has happened to Reu,” said the mother; “he is always so true to time.”

“There are so many things to keep a man late, mother.”

“Not to keep Reuben. If he said what hour he'd be back—he 's like his father, my poor brother—he'd do it to the minute, even if there weren't any reason for his hurry.”

“Which there is,” said Sophie, archly.

“Which there is, Sophie. And why you are so quiet over this I don't know. I am sure when poor Mr. Tarne was out late—and he was often very, very late, and the Lord knows where he'd been, either!—I couldn't keep a limb of me still till he came home again. I was as bad as your aunt indoors there till I was sure he was safe and sound.”

“But he always came home safe and sound, mother.”

“Nearly always. I mind the time once, though—bless us and save us, what a gust!” she cried, as the wind came swooping down the hill at them, swirling past them into the dark passage and puffing the lights out in the big pantry beyond, where the maids began to scream. “I hope he hasn't been blown off his horse.”

“Not very likely that,” said Sophie, “and Reuben the best horseman in the county. But come in out of the gale, mother; the sleet cuts like a knife too, and he will not come home any the sooner for your letting the wind into the house. And—why, here he comes after all. Hark!”

There was a rattling of horses' hoofs on the frost−bound road; it was a long way in the distance, but it was the unmistakable signal of a well−mounted traveller approaching—of more than one well−mounted traveller, it became quickly apparent, the clattering was so loud and incessant and manifold.

“Soldiers!” said Sophie. “What can bring them this way?”

“It's the farmers coming the same way as Reuben for protection's sake these winter nights, child.”

“Protection?”

“Haven't you heard of the highwaymen about, and how a single traveller is never safe in these parts? Or a double one either—or—”

“Perhaps these are highwaymen.”

“Oh, good gracious! Let us get indoors and bar up,” cried Mrs. Tarne, wholly forgetful of Reuben Pemberthy's safety after this suggestion. “Yes, it's as likely to be highwaymen as soldiers.”

It was more likely. It was pretty conclusive that the odds were in favour of highwaymen when, five minutes afterward, eight mounted men rode up to the Maythorpe farm−house, dismounted with considerable noise and bustle, and commenced at the stout oaken door with the butt−ends of their riding−whips, hammering away incessantly and shouting out much strong language in their vehemence. This, being fortunately bawled forth all at once was incomprehensible to the dwellers within doors, now all scared together and no longer cool and self−possessed.

“Robbers!” said Mrs. Tarne.

“We've never been molested before, at least not for twenty years or more,” said Mrs. Pemberthy; “and then I mind—”

“Is it likely to be any of Reuben's friends?” asked Sophie, timidly.

“Oh no; Reuben has no bellowing crowd like that for friends. Ask who is there—somebody.”

But nobody would go to the door save Sophie Tarne herself. The maids were huddled in a heap together in a corner of the dairy, and refused to budge an inch, and Mrs. Tarne was shaking more than Mrs. Pemberthy.

Sophie, with the colour gone from her face, went boldly back to the door, where the hammering on the panels continued and would have split anything of a less tough fibre than the English oak of which they were constructed.

“Who is there? What do you want?” she gave out in a shrill falsetto; but no one heard her till the questions were repeated about an octave and a half higher.

“Hold hard, Stango; there's a woman calling to us. Stop your row, will you?”

A sudden cessation of the battering ensued, and some one was heard going rapidly backward over cobblestones amid the laughter of the rest, who had dismounted and were standing outside in the cold, with their hands upon their horses' bridles.

“Who is there?” asked Sophie Tarne again.

“Travellers in need of assistance, and who—“ began a polite and even musical voice, which was interrupted by a hoarse voice:

“Open in the king's name, will you?”

“Open in the fiend's name, won't you?” called out a third and hoarser voice; “or we'll fire through the windows and burn the place down.'

“What do you want?”

“Silence!” shouted the first one again; “let me explain, you dogs, before you bark again.”

There was a pause, and the polite gentleman began again in his mellifluous voice:

“We are travellers belated. We require corn for our horses, food for ourselves. There is no occasion for alarm; my friends are noisy, but harmless, I assure you, and the favour of admittance and entertainment here will be duly appreciated. To refuse your hospitality—the hospitality of a Pemberthy—is only to expose yourselves to considerable inconvenience, I fear.”

“Spoken like a book, Captain.”

“And, as we intend to come in at all risks,” added a deeper voice, “it will be better for you not to try and keep us out, d' ye hear? D' ye—Captain, if you shake me by the collar again I'll put a bullet through you. I—”

“Silence! Let the worthy folks inside consider the position for five minutes.”

Not a minute longer, if they don't want the place burned about their ears, mind you,” cried a voice that had not spoken yet.

“Who are you?” asked Sophie, still inclined to parley.

“Travellers, I have told you.”

“Thieves, cutthroats, and murderers—eight of us—knights of the road, gentlemen of the highway, and not to be trifled with when half starved and hard driven,” cried the hoarse man. “There, will that satisfy you, wench? Will you let us in or not? It's easy enough for us to smash in the windows and get in that way, isn't it?”

Yes, it was very easy.

“Wait five minutes, please,” said Sophie.

She went back to the parlour and to the two shivering women and the crowd of maids, who had crept from the dairy to the farm parlour, having greater faith in numbers now.

“They had better come in, aunt, especially as we are quite helpless to keep them out. I could fire that gun,” Sophie said, pointing to an unwieldy old blunderbuss slung by straps to the ceiling, “ and I know it's loaded. But I'm afraid it wouldn't be of much use.”

“It might make them angry,” said Mrs. Pemberthy.

“It would only kill one at the best,” remarked Mrs. Tarne, with a heavy sigh.

“And the rest of the men would kill us, the brutes,” said Mrs. Pemberthy. “Yes, they'd better come in.”

“Lord have mercy upon us,” said Mrs. Tarne.

“There's no help for it,” said Mrs. Pemberthy. “Even Reuben would not have dared to keep them out. I mind now their coming like this twenty years agone. It was—”

“I will see to them,” said Sophie, who had become in her young, brave strength quite the mistress of the ceremonies. “Leave the rest to me.”

“And if you can persuade them to go away—“ began Mrs. Tarne; but her daughter had already disappeared, and was parleying through the keyhole with the strangers without.

“Such hospitality as we can offer, gentlemen, shall be at your service, providing always that you treat us with the respect due to gentlewomen and your hosts.”

“Trust to that,” was the reply. “I will answer for myself and my companions, Mistress Pemberthy.”

“You give me your word of honour?”

“My word of honour,” he repeated; “our words of honour, and speaking for all my good friends present; is it not so, men?”

“Ay, ay—that 's right,” chorused the good friends; and then Sophie Tarne, not without an extra plunging of the heart beneath her white crossover, unlocked the stout oaken door and let in her unwelcome visitors.

Seven out of the eight seemed to tumble in all at once, pushing against one another in their eagerness to enter, laughing, shouting, and stamping with the heels of their jack−boots on the bright red pantiles of the hall. The eighth intruder followed —a tall, thin man, pale−faced and stern and young, with a heavy horseman's cloak falling from his shoulders, the front of which was gathered up across his arms. A handsome and yet worn face —the face of one who had seen better days and kown brighter times—a picturesque kind of vagabond, take him in the candle−light. He raised his hat and bowed low to Sophie Tarne, not offering to shake hands as the rest of them had done who where crowding around her; then he seemed to stand suddenly between them and their salutations, and to brush them unceremoniously aside.

“You see to those horses, Stango and Grapp,” he said, singling out the most obtrusive and the most black−muzzled of his gang. “Mistress Pemberthy will perhaps kindly trust us for a while with the keys of the stables and corn−bins.”

“They are here,” said Sophie, detaching them from a bunch of keys which, in true housewifely fashion, hung from her girdle. “The farm servants are away in the village, or they should help you, sir.”

“We are in the habit of helping ourselves−very much,” said one of the highwaymen, drily. “Pray don't apologise on that score, mistress.”

Two of the men departed; five of them stalked into the farm parlour, flourishing their big hats and executing clumsy scrapings with their feet while bowing in mock fashion to the two nervous widows, who sat in one corner regarding them askance: the leader of these lawless ones dropped his cloak from his shoulders, left it trailing on the pantile floor, and made a rapid signal with his hand to Sophie to pause an instant before she entered the room.

“Treat them with fair words, and not too much strong waters,” he said, quickly; “we have a long ride before us.”

He said it like a warning, and Sophie nodded as though she took his advice and was not ungrateful for it. Then they both went into the parlour and joined the company; and the maid−servant, becoming used to the position or making the best of it, began to bustle about and wait upon their visitors, who had already drawn up their seats to the supper−table, which had been spread with good things two hours ago anticipative of the return Reuben Pemberthy to Maythorpe.

It was an odd supper−party at which Sophie Tarne presided, the highwaymen insisting, with much clamour and some emphatic oaths, that they would have no old women like Mrs. Tarne and Mrs. Pemberthy at the head of the table. Sophie was a pretty wench, and so must do the honours of the feast.

“The young girl's health, gentlemen, with three times three, and may her husband be a match for her in good looks,” cried one admiring knight of the road; and then the toast was drunk. The ale flowed freely, and there was much laughter and loud jesting.

The man whom they called “Guy” and “Captain” sat by Sophie's side. He ate very little, and kept a watchful eye upon his men after Stango and his companion had come in from the stable and completed the number. He exchanged at first but few words with Sophie, though he surveyed her with a grave attention that brought the colour to her cheeks. He was a man upon guard. Presently he said:

“You bear your position well. You are not alarmed at these wild fellows?”

“No—not now. I don't think they would hurt me. Besides—”

“Besides—what? “he asked, as she paused.

“I have your word for them.”

“Yes,” he answered; “but it is only a highwayman's word.”

"I can trust it"

"These men can be demons when they like, Mistress Pemberthy."

Sophie did not think it worth while to inform the gentleman that her name was not Pemberthy; it could not possibly matter to him, and there was a difficulty in explaining the relationship she bore to the family.

"Why are you with such men as these?" she asked, wonderingly.

"Where should I be? Where can I be else?" he asked, lightly now; but it was with a forced lightness of demeanour, or Sophie Tarne was very much deceived.

"Helping your king, not warring against him and his laws," said Sophie, very quickly.

"I owe no allegiance to King George. I have always been a ne'er−do−well, despised and scouted by a hard father and a villainous brother or two, and life with these good fellows here is, after all, to my mind. There's independence in it, and I prefer to be independent; and danger, and I like danger. A wronged man wrongs others in his turn, mistress; and it is my turn now."

"Two wrongs cannot make a right."

"Oh, I do not attempt the impossible, Mistress Pemberthy."

"What will be the end of this—to you?"

"The gallows—if I cannot get my pistol out in time."

He laughed lightly and naturally enough as Sophie shrank in terror from him. One could see he was a desperate man enough, despite his better manners; probably as great an outcast as the rest of them, and as little to be trusted.

"That is a dreadful end to look forward to," she said.

"I don't look forward. What is the use—when *that* is the prospect?"

"Your father—your brothers—"

"Would be glad that the end came soon," he concluded. "They are waiting for it patiently. They have prophesied it for the last five years."

"They know then?"

"Oh yes; I have taken care that they should know," he answered, laughing defiantly again.

"And your mother—does she know?"

He paused, and looked at her very hard.

"God forbid."

"She is—"

"She is in heaven, where nothing is known of what goes on upon earth."

"How can you tell that?"

"There would be no peace in heaven otherwise, Mistress Pemberthy; only great grief, intense shame, misery, despair, madness, at the true knowledge of us all," he said, passionately. "On earth we men are hypocrites and liars, devils and slaves."

"Not all men," said Sophie, thinking of Reu Pemberthy.

"I have met none other. Perhaps I have sought none other—all my own fault, they will tell you where my father is; where," he added, bitterly, "they are worse than I am, and yet, oh, so respectable."

"You turned highwayman to—to—"

"To spite them, say. It is very near the truth."

"It will be a poor excuse to the mother, when you see her again."

"Eh?"

But Sophie had no time to continue so abstruse a subject with this misanthropical freebooter. She clapped her hand to her side and gave a little squeak of astonishment.

"What is the matter?" asked Captain Guy.

"My keys! They have taken my keys."

And, sure enough, while Sophie Tarne had been talking to the captain, some one had severed the keys from her girdle and made off with them, and there was only a clean−cut black ribbon dangling at her waist instead.

"That villain Stango," exclaimed the captain "I saw him pass a minute ago. He leaned over and whispered to you, Kits. You remember?"

"Stango?" said Kits, with far too innocent an expression to be genuine.

“Yes, Stango; you know he did.”

“I dare say he did. I don't gainsay it, Captain, but I don't know where he has gone.”

“But *I_will know,” cried the captain, striking his hand upon the table and making every glass and plate jump thereon. “I will have no tricks played here without my consent. Am I your master, or are you all mine?”*

And here, we regret to say, Captain Guy swore a good deal, and became perfectly unheroic and inelegant and unromantic. But his oaths had more effect upon his unruly followers than his protests, and they sat looking at him in a half−sullen, half−shamefaced manner, and would have probably succumbed to his influence had not attention been diverted and aroused by the reappearance of Stango, who staggered in with four or five great black bottles heaped high in his arms. A tremendous shout of applause and delight heralded his return to the parlour.

“We have been treated scurvily, my men,” cried Stango, “exceedingly scurvily; the best and strongest stuff in the cellar has been kept back from us. It's excellent—I've been tasting it first, lest you should all be poisoned; and there's more where this come from—oceans more of it!”

“Hurrah for Stango!”

The captain's voice was heard once more above the uproar, but it was only for a minute longer. There was a rush of six men toward Stango; a shouting, scrambling, fighting for the spirits which he had discovered; a crash of one black bottle to the floor, with the spirit streaming over the polished boards, and the unceremonious tilting over of the upper part of the supper−table in the ruffians' wild eagerness for drink.

“To horse, to horse, men! Have you forgotten how far we have to go?” cried the captain.

But they had forgotten everything, and did not heed him. They were drinking strong waters, and were heedless of the hour and the risks they ran by a protracted stay there. In ten minutes from that time Saturnalia had set in, and pandemonium seemed to have unloosed its choicest specimens They sang, they danced, they raved, they blasphemed, they crowed like cocks, they fired pistols at the chimney ornaments, they chased the maidservants from one room to another, they whirled round the room with Mrs. Tarne and Mrs. Pemberthy, they would have made a plunge at Sophie Tarne for partner had not the captain, very white and stern now, stood close to her side with a pistol at full cock in his right hand.

“I shall shoot the first man down who touches you,” he said, between his set teeth.

“I will get away from them soon. For heaven's sake—for mine—do not add to the horror of this night, sir,” implored Sophie.

He paused.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, in a low tone of voice, “but—but I am powerless to help you unless I quell these wolves at once. They are going off for more drink.”

“What is to be done?”

“Can you sing, Mistress Pemberthy?”

“Yes, a little; at least, they say so,” she said, blushing at her own self−encomium.

“Sing something—to gain time. I will slip away while you are singing, and get the horses round to the front door. Do not be afraid.”

“Gentlemen,” he cried, in a loud voice, and bringing the handle of his pistol smartly on the head of the man nearest to him to emphasise his discourse, “Mistress Pemberthy will oblige the company with a song. Order and attention for the lady!”

“A song! a song!” exclaimed the highwaymen, clapping their hands and stamping their heels upon the floor. And then, amid the pause which followed, Sophie Tarne began a plaintive little ballad in a sweet, tremulous voice, which gathered strength as she proceeded,

It was a strange scene awaiting the return of Reuben Pemberthy, whose tall form stood in the doorway before Sophie had finished her sweet, simple rendering of an old English ballad. Reuben's round blue eyes were distended with surprise, and his mouth, generally very set and close, like the mouth of a steel purse, was on this especial occasion, and for a while, wide open. Sophie Tarne singing her best to amuse this vile and disorderly crew, who sat or stood around the room half drunk, and with glasses in their hands, pipes in their mouths, and the formidable, old−fashioned horse−pistols in their pockets!

And who was the handsome man, with the long, black, flowing hair, and a pale face, standing by Sophie's side—his Sophie—in a suit of soiled brocade and tarnished lace, with a Ramilie cocked hat under his arm and a pistol in his hand? The leader of these robbers, the very man who had stopped him on the king's highway three

hours ago and taken every stiver which he had brought away from Barnet; who had, with the help of these other scoundrels getting mad drunk on his brandy, taken away his horse and left him bound to a gate by the roadside because he would not be quietly robbed, but must make a fuss over it and fight and kick in a most unbecoming fashion, and without any regard for the numbers by whom he had been assailed.

“I did not think you could sing like that,” said the captain, quietly and in a low voice, when Sophie had finished her song, and a great shout of approval was echoing throughout the farm and many hundred yards beyond it.

“You have not got the horses ready,” said Sophie, becoming aware that he was still at her side. “You said—you promised—”

“I could not leave you while you were singing Did you know that was my mother's song?”

“How should I know that?”

“No—no. But how strange—how—ah! there is your brother at the door. I have had the honour of meeting Master Pemberthy of Finchley earlier this evening, I think. A brave young gentleman; you should be proud of him.”

“My bro—oh! it is Reu. O Reu, Reu, where have you been? Why did you not come before to help us—to tell us what to do?” And Sophie Tarne ran to him and put her arms round his neck and burst into tears. It was not a wise step on Sophie's part, but it was the reaction at the sight of her sweetheart, at the glimpse, as it were, of deliverance.

“There, there, don't cry, Sophie; keep a stout heart!” he whispered. “If these villains have robbed us, they will not be triumphant long. It will be my turn to crow presently.”

“I—I don't understand.”

“I can't explain now. Keep a good face—ply them with more drink—watch me. Well, my friends,” he said, in a loud voice, “you have stolen a march upon me this time; but I've got home, you see, in time to welcome you to Maythorpe and share in your festivity. I'm a Pemberthy, and not likely to cry over spilled milk. More liquor for the gentlemen, you wenches, and be quick with it. Captain, here's to you and your companions, and next time you catch a Pemberthy. thy, treat him more gently in return for a welcome here. More liquor, girls; the gentlemen are thirsty after their long ride.”

Reuben drank to the healths of the gentlemen by whom he was surrounded; he was very much at home in his own house, very cool and undismayed, having recovered from his surprise at finding an evening party being celebrated there. The highwaymen were too much excited to see anything remarkable in the effusion of Reuben Pemberthy's greeting; these were lawless times, when farmers and highwaymen were often in accord, dealt in one another's horses, and drove various bargains at odd seasons and in odd corners of the market−places; and Reuben Pemberthy was not unknown to them, though they had treated him with scant respect upon a lonely country road, and when they were impressed by the fact that he was riding homeward with well−lined pockets after a day's huckstering. They cheered Mr. Pemberthy's sentiments, all but the captain, who regarded him very critically, although bowing very low while his health was drunk.

“My cousin and my future bride, gentlemen will sing you another song; and I don't mind following suit myself, just to show there is no ill feeling between us; and our worthy captain, he will oblige after me, I am sure. It may be a good many years before we meet again.”

“It may,” said the captain, laconically.

“I—I cannot sing any more, Reuben,” cried Sophie.

“Try, Sophie, for all our sakes; our home's sake—the home they would strip, or burn to the ground, if they had only the chance.”

“Why do you wish to keep them here?” Sophie whispered back to him.

“I was released by a troop of soldiers who were coming in this direction,” he said, hurriedly. They have gone on toward Finchley in search of these robbers, but, failing to find them, they will return here as my guests till morning. That was their promise.”

“Oh!”

Sophie could not say more. Reuben had left her side, and was talking and laughing with Stango as though he loved him.

“Your sweetheart, then, this cock o' the game?” said the captain to Sophie, as he approached her once more.

“Yes.”

“'I had need wish you much joy, for I see but little toward it,' as the poet says,” he remarked, bluntly. “He will not make you a good husband.”

“You cannot say that.”

“It's a hard face that will look into yours, mistress, and when trouble comes, it will not look pleasantly. You are going to sing again? I am glad.”

“You promised to go away—long since.”

“I did. But the host has returned, and I distrust him. I am waiting now to see the end of it.”

“No—no—I hope not. Pray go, sir.”

“Is there danger?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so. I am fond of danger, I have told you. It braces me up; it—why are you so pale?”

“You have been kind to me, and you have saved me from indignity. Pray take your men away at once.”

“They will not go, and I will not desert them.”

“For my sake—do!”

“A song! a song! No more love−making tonight, Captain. A song from the farmer's pretty lass!” cried out the men.

And then Sophie began to sing again, this time a love−song, the song of a maiden waiting for her soldier boy to come back from the wars; a maiden waiting for him, listening for him, hearing the tramp of his regiment on the way toward her. She looked at Captain Guy as she sang, and with much entreaty in her gaze, and he looked back at her from under the cock of his hat, which he had pulled over his brows; then he wavered and stole out of the room. Kits was at the door, still with his mug of brandy in his hand. Guy seized him by the ear and took him out with him into the fresh air, where the white frost was and where the white moon was shining now.

“The soldiers are after us and know where we are, Kits. Pitch that stuff away.”

“Not if—”

“And get the horses ready—quick! I will be with you in a moment.”

He walked along the garden path in front of the big old farm, swung wide the farm gates, and propped them open. Then he went down on all fours and put his ear to the frost−bound country road and listened. “Yes,” he added, “two miles away, and coming on sharp. Why not let them come? What does it matter how soon?” He strode back, however, with quick steps. Five minutes afterward he was at the door of the farm parlour again, with his cloak over his shoulder and his riding−whip in his hand.

“Boys, the redcoats are upon us!” he shouted “Each man to his horse.”

“We are betrayed then!”

“We won't go and leave all the good things in this house,” cried Stango. “Why, it's like the Bank of England upstairs, and I have the keys. I—”

“Stango, I shall certainly put a bullet through your head if you attempt to do anything more save to thank our worthy hose for his hospitality and give him up his keys. Do you hear?” he thundered forth. “Will you hang us all, you fool, by your delay?”

The highwaymen were scurrying out of the room now, a few in too much haste to thank the givers of the feast, the others bowing and shaking hands in mock burlesque of their chief. Stango had thrown down his keys and run for it.

“Sorry we must leave you, Master Pemberthy,” said the captain, “but I certainly have the impression that a troop of horse soldiers is coming in this direction. Pure fancy, probably; but one cannot risk anything in these hard times. Your purse, sir, which I took this afternoon—I shall not require it. Buy Mistress Sophie a wedding with it. Good−night.”

He bowed low, but he did not smile till he met Sophie's frightened looks; then he bowed still lower, hat in hand, and said good−night with a funny break in his voice and a longing look in his dark eyes that Sophie did not readily forget.

It was all like a dream after the highwaymen had put spurs to their horses and galloped away from Maythorpe Farm.

It will be fifteen years come next winter−time since the “Minions of the Moon” held high carnival at the farm

of Reuben Pemberthy. Save that the trees about the homestead are full of rustling green leaves and there is sunshine where the white frost lay, the farm looks very much the same; the great thatched roof has taken a darker tinge, and all the gold in it has turned to gray, and the walls are more weather−beaten than of yore; but it is the old farm still, standing “foursquare,” with the highroad to Finchley winding over the green hill yonder like a great, white, dusty snake Along the road comes a horseman at full speed, as though anxious to find a shelter before nightfall, for the king's highway in this direction is no safer than it used to be, and people talk of Abershaw and Barrington, and a man with sixteen strings to his hat, who are busy in this direction. But the days are long now, and it wants some hours before sundown, when the traveller leaps from his horse and stands under the broad eaves of the porch, where the creepers are growing luxuriantly and are full of fair white flowers.

The traveller is a good horseman, though he has passed the heyday of his youth. It is not for some three minutes afterward that his man−servant, hot and blown and powdered thick with dust, comes up on horseback after him and takes charge of his master's steed. The master is a man of forty years or more, and looking somewhat older than his years, his hair being very gray. He stoops a little between the shoulders too when off his guard, though he can look straight and stalwart enough when put to it. He is very dark,—a fiercer sun than that which shines on England has burned him a copper colour,—and he has a moustache that Munchausen might have envied.

He knocks at the door, and asks if Master Reuben Pemberthy can be seen at a moment's notice. The maid−servant looks surprised, but says, “My mistress is within, sir.”

“Reuben Pemberthy's wife, that is,” he mutters, pulling thoughtfully at his long moustache; “ah, well, perhaps she will see me.”

“What name shall I say?”

“Sir Richard Isshaw; but she will not know the name.”

He stands in the hall, looking about him critically; his man−servant, still mounted, goes slowly back toward the roadway with his master's horse and his own, where he remains in waiting. Presently, Sir Richard Isshaw is shown into the farm parlour, very cool and full of shadow, with great green plants on the broad recesses of the open window, and bees buzzing about them from the outer world.

A young woman in deep widow's weeds rises as he enters, and makes him one of those profound courtesies which were considered appropriate for the fair sex to display to those in rank and honour in the good old days when George was king, Surely a young woman still, despite the fifteen years that have passed, with a young supple figure and a pleasant unlined face. Eighteen years and fifteen only make thirty−three, and one can scarcely believe in time's inroads looking upon Sophie Pemberthy. The man cannot. He is surprised and he looks at her through tears in his dark eyes.

“You asked to see Mr. Reuben Pemberthy,” she says, sadly. “You did not know that—”

“No, I did not know,” he says, a little huskily; “I am a stranger to these parts; I have been long abroad.”

“May I inquire the nature of your errand, Sir Richard?” she asks, in a low voice. “Though I am afraid I cannot be of any service as regards any business of the farm.”

“How is that?” he asks, steadily keeping gaze upon her.

“The farm passes to Mr. Pemberthy's cousin in a few days' time.”

“Indeed! Then you—”

He pauses half−way for a reply, but it is long in coming. Only the humming of the bees disturbs the silence of the room.

“Then you leave here?” he concludes at last.

“Yes. It is only the male Pemberthys who rule,” she says.

“Your—your children?”

“My one little boy, my dear Algy, died before his father. It was a great disappointment to my husband that he should die. We female Pemberthys” she says, with a sudden real bright little smile that settles down into sadness again very quickly, “do not count for a great deal in the family.”

“How long has Mr. Pemberthy been dead?”

“Six months.”

“You are left poor?” he says, very quickly now.

“I—I don't think you have a right to ask me such a question, sir.”

“I have no right,” he replies. “These are foreign manners. Excuse them, please; don't mind me.”

Still he is persistent.

“From son to son's son, and the women left anywhere and anyhow—that is the Pemberthy law, I expect. I have seen the workings of such a law before. Not that I ought to complain,” he adds, with a forced laugh,—a laugh that Mrs. Pemberthy seems suddenly to remember,—“for I have profited thereby.”

“Indeed!” says the farmer's widow, for the want of a better answer at the moment.

“I am a younger son; but all my brothers have been away by wars or pestilence, and I am “sent” for in hot haste—I, who had shaken the dust of England from my feet for fifteen years.”

“Fifteen years?”

“Almost. Don't you recollect the last time I was in this room?”

“You—in this room, Sir Richard?”

“Yes; try and remember when that was. I only come to look at the old place and you, just for once, before I go away again. Try and think, Mistress Pemberthy, as I used to call you”

She looks into the red, sunburnt face, starts, blushes, and looks away.

“Yes, I remember. You are—”

“Well?”

“Captain Guy!”

“Yes, that is it; Richard Guy Isshaw, younger son, who went wholly to the bad—who turned highwayman—whom *you* saved. The only one out of the eight,—the rest were hanged at Tyburn and Kennington, poor devils,—and thought I would ride over and thank you, and see you once more. Your husband would have hanged me, I dare say—but there, there, peace to his soul.”

“Amen,” whispers Sophie Pemberthy.

“You saved me; you set me thinking of my young mother, who died when I was a lad and loved me much too well; and you taught me there were warm and loving hearts in the world; and when I went away from here I went away from the old life. I cannot say how that was; but,” shrugging his shoulders, “so it was.”

“It was a call,” said Sophie, piously.

“A call to arms, for I went to the wars. And what is it now that brings me back here to thank you—an old, time−worn reprobate, turned soldier and turned respectable!—what is that?”

“I don't know.”

“Another call, depend upon it. A call to Maythorpe, where I expected to find a fat farmer and his buxom partner and a crowd of laughing boys and girls; where I hoped I might be of help to some of them, if help were needed. And,” he adds, “I find only you—and you just the same fair, bright girl I left behind me long ago.”

“Oh no.”

“It is like a dream; it is very remarkable to me. Yes, it's another call, Mistress Pemberthy, depend upon it.”

And it is not the last call, either. The estate of Richard Isshaw lies not so many miles from Maythorpe Farm that a good long ride cannot overcome the distance between them. And the man turned respectable—the real baronet—is so very much alone and out of place in his big house that he knows not what to do.

And Mistress Pemberthy is very much alone too, and going out alone into the world, almost friendless, and with only two hundred pounds and perhaps the second−best bed—who knows?—as her share of her late loving, but rather hard and unsympathetic, husband's worldly goods.

And folks do say, Finchley way, that pretty Mistress Pemberthy will be Lady Isshaw before the winter sets in, and that it will be exactly fifteen years since these two first set eyes upon each

THE FOUR−FIFTEEN EXPRESS

BY AMELIA B. EDWARDS

The events which I am about to relate took place between nine and ten years ago. Sebastopol had fallen in the early spring, the peace of Paris had been concluded since March, our commercial relations with the Russian empire were but recently renewed; and I, returning home after my first northward journey since the war, was well pleased with the prospect of spending the month of December under the hospitable and thoroughly English roof of my excellent friend, Jonathan Jelf, Esq., of Dumbleton Manor, Clayborough, East Anglia. Travelling in the interests of the wellknown firm in which it is my lot to be a junior partner, I had been called upon to visit not only the capitals of Russia and Poland, but had found it also necessary to pass some weeks among the trading ports of the Baltic; whence it came that the year was already far spent before I again set foot on English soil, and that, instead of shooting pheasants with him, as I had hoped, in October, I came to be my friend's guest during the more genial Christmas−tide.

My voyage over, and a few days given up to business in Liverpool and London, I hastened down to Clayborough with all the delight of a school−boy whose holidays are at hand. My way lay by the Great East Anglian line as far as Clayborough station, where I was to be met by one of the Dumbleton carriages and conveyed across the remaining nine miles of country. It was a fogey afternoon, singularly warm for the 4th of December, and I had arranged to leave London by the 4:15 express. The early darkness of winter had already closed in; the lamps were lighted in the carriages; a clinging damp dimmed the windows, adhered to the door−handles, and pervaded all the atmosphere; while the gas−jets at the neighbouring book−stand diffused a luminous haze that only served to make the gloom of the terminus more visible. Having arrived some seven minutes before the starting of the train, and, by the connivance of the guard, taken sole possession of empty compartment, I lighted my travelling−lamp, made myself particularly snug, and settled down to the undisturbed enjoyment of a book and a cigar. Great, therefore, was my disappointment when, at the last moment, a gentleman came hurrying along the platform, glanced into my carriage, opened the locked door with a private key, a stepped in.

It struck me at the first glance that I had seen him before—a tall, spare man, thin−lipped, light−eyed, with an ungraceful stoop in the shoulders and scant gray hair worn somewhat long upon collar. He carried a light waterproof coat, an umbrella, and a large brown japanned deed−box, which last he placed under the seat. This done, he felt carefully in his breast−pocket, as if to make certain of the safety of his purse or pocket−book, laid his umbrella in the netting overhead, spread the waterproof across his knees, and exchanged his hat for a travelling−cap of some Scotch mateial. By this time the train was moving out of the station and into the faint gray of the wintry twilight beyond.

I now recognised my companion. I recognised him from the moment when he removed his hat and uncovered the lofty, furrowed, and somewhat narrow brow beneath. I had met him, as I distinctly remembered, some three years before, at the very house for which, in all probability, he was now bound, like myself. His name was Dwerrihouse, he was a lawyer by profession, and, if I was not greatly mistaken, was first cousin to the wife of my host. I knew also that he was a man eminently “well−to−do,” both as regarded his professional and private means. The Jelfs entertained him with that sort of observant courtesy which falls to the lot of the rich relation, the children made much of him, and the old butler, albeit somewhat surly “to the general,” treated him with deference. I thought, observing him by the vague mixture of lamplight and twilight, that Mrs. Jelf's cousin looked all the worse for the three years' wear and tear which had gone over his head since our last meeting. He was very pale, and had a restless light in his eye that I did not remember to have observed before. The anxious lines, too, about his mouth were deepened, and there was a cavernous, hollow look about his cheeks and temples which seemed to speak of sickness or sorrow. He had glanced at me as he came in, but without any gleam of recognition in his face. Now he glanced again, as I fancied, somewhat doubtfully. When he did so for the third or fourth time I ventured to address him.

“Mr. John Dwerrihouse, I think?”

“That is my name,” he replied.

“I had the pleasure of meeting you at Dumbleton about three years ago.”

Mr. Dwerrihouse bowed.

“I thought I knew your face,” he said; “but your name, I regret to say—”

“Langford—William Langford. I have known Jonathan Jelf since we were boys together at Merchant Taylor's, and I generally spend a few weeks at Dumbleton in the shooting season. I suppose we are bound for the same destination?”

“Not if you are on your way to the manor,” he replied. “I am travelling upon business,—rather troublesome business too,—while you, doubtless, have only pleasure in view.”

“Just so. I am in the habit of looking forward to this visit as to the brightest three weeks in all the year.”

“It is a pleasant house,” said Mr. Dwerrihouse.

“The pleasantest I know.”

“And Jelf is thoroughly hospitable.”

“The best and kindest fellow in the world!”

“They have invited me to spend Christmas week with them,” pursued Mr. Dwerrihouse, after a moment's pause.

“And you are coming?”

“I cannot tell. It must depend on the issue of this business which I have in hand. You have heard perhaps that we are about to construct a branch line from Blackwater to Stockbridge.”

I explained that I had been for some months away from England, and had therefore heard nothng of the contemplated improvement. Mr. Dwerrihouse smiled complacently.

“It *will* be an improvement,”he said,” a great improvement. Stockbridge is a flourishing town, and needs but a more direct railway communicaion with the metropolis to become an important centre of commerce. This branch was my own idea. I brought the project before the board, and have myself superintended the execution of it up to the present time.”

“You are an East Anglian director, I presume?”

“My interest in the company,” replied Mr. Dwerringhouse, “is threefold. I am a director, I am a considerable shareholder, and, as head of the firm of Dwerrihouse, Dwerrihouse Craik, I am the company's principal solicitor.”

Loquacious, self−important, full of his pet project, and apparently unable to talk on any other subject, Mr. Dwerrihouse then went on to tell of the opposition he had encountered and the obstacles he had overcome in the cause of the Stockbridge branch. I was entertained with a multitude of local details and local grievances. The rapacity of one squire, the impracticability of another, the indignation of the rector whose glebe was threatened, the culpable indifference of the Stockbridge townspeople, who could *not* be brought to see that their most vital interests hinged upon a junction with the Great East Anglian line; the spite of the local newspaper, and the unheard−of difficulties attending the Common question, were each and all laid before me with a circumstantiality that possessed the deepest interest for my excellent fellow−traveller, but none whatever for myself. From these, to my despair, he went on to more intricate matters: to the approximate expenses of construction per mile; to the estimates sent in by different contractors; to the probable traffic returns of the new line; to the provisional clauses of the new act as enumerated in Schedule D of the company's last half−yearly report; and so on and on and on, till my head ached and my attention flagged and my eyes kept closing in spite of every effort that I made to keep them open. At length I was roused by these words:

“Seventy−five thousand pounds, cash down” “Seventy−five thousand pounds, cash down,” I repeated, in the liveliest tone I could assume. “That is a heavy sum.”

“A heavy sum to carry here,” replied Mr. Dwerrihouse, pointing significantly to his breastpocket, “but a mere fraction of what we shall ultimately have to pay.”

“You do not mean to say that you have seventy−five thousand pounds at this moment upon your person?” I exclaimed.

“My good sir, have I not been telling you so for the last half−hour?” said Mr. Dwerrihouse, testily. “That money has to be paid over at half−past eight o'clock this evening, at the office of Sir Thomas's solicitors, on completion of the deed of sale.”

“But how will you get across by night from Blackwater to Stockbridge with seventy−five thousand pounds in your pocket?”

“To Stockbridge!” echoed the lawyer. “I find I have made myself very imperfectly understood. I thought I had explained how this sum only carries us as far as Mallingford,—the first stage, as it were, of our journey,—and how our route from Blackwater to Mallingford lies entirely through Sir Thomas Liddell's property.”

“I beg your pardon,” I stammered. “I fear my thoughts were wandering. So you only go as far as Mallingford to−night?”

“Precisely. I shall get a conveyance from the 'Blackwater Arms.' And you?”

'Oh, Jelf sends a trap to meet me at Clayborbough! Can I be the bearer of any message from you?”

“You may say, if you please, Mr. Langford, that I wished I could have been your companion all the way, and that I will come over, if possible, before Christmas.”

“Nothing more?”

Mr. Dwerrihouse smiled grimly. “Well,” he said, “you may tell my cousin that she need not burn the hall down in my honour *time*, and that I shall be obliged if she will order the blue−room chimney to be swept before I arrive.”

“That sounds tragic. Had you a conflagration on the occasion of your last visit to Dumbleton?”

“Something like it. There had been no fire lighted in my bedroom since the spring, the flue was foul, and the rooks had built in it; so when I went up to dress for dinner I found the room full of smoke and the chimney on fire. Are we already at Blackwater?”

The train had gradually come to a pause while Mr. Dwerrihouse was speaking, and, on putting my head out of the window, I could see the station some few hundred yards ahead. There was another train before us blocking the way, and the guard was making use of the delay to collect the Blackwater tickets. I had scarcely ascertained our position when the ruddy−faced official appeared at our carriage door.

“Tickets, sir!” said he.

“I am for Clayborough,” I replied, holding out the tiny pink card.

He took it, glanced at it by the light of his little lantern, gave it back, looked, as I fancied, somewhat sharply at my fellow−traveller, and disappeared.

“He did not ask for yours,” I said, with some surprise.

“They never do,” replied Mr. Dwerrihouse; “they all know me, and of course I travel free.”

“Blackwater! Blackwater!” cried the porter, running along the platform beside us as we glided into the station.

Mr. Dwerrihouse pulled out his deed−box, put his travelling−cap in his pocket, resumed his hat, took down his umbrella, and prepared to be gone.

“Many thanks, Mr. Langford, for your society,” he said, with old−fashioned courtesy. “I wish you a good−evening.”

“Good−evening,” I replied, putting out my hand.

But he either did not see it or did not choose to see it, and, slightly lifting his hat, stepped out upon the platform. Having done this, he moved slowly away and mingled with the departing crowd.

Leaning forward to watch him out of sight, I trod upon something which proved to be a cigar−case. It had fallen, no doubt, from the pocket of his waterproof coat, and was made of dark morocco leather, with a silver monogram upon the side. I sprang out of the carriage just as the guard came up to lock me in.

“Is there one minute to spare?” I asked, eagerly. “The gentleman who travelled down with me from town has dropped his cigar−case; he is not yet out of the station.”

“Just a minute and a half, sir,” replied the guard. “You must be quick.”

I dashed along the platform as fast as my feet could carry me. It was a large station, and Mr. Dwerrihouse had by this time got more than half−way to the farther end.

I, however, saw him distinctly, moving slowly with the stream. Then, as I drew nearer, I saw that he had met some friend, that they were talking as they walked, that they presently fell back somewhat from the crowd and stood aside in earnest conversation. I made straight for the spot where they were waiting. There was a vivid gas−jet just above their heads, and the light fell full upon their faces. I saw both distinctly—the face of Mr. Dwerrihouse and the face of his companion. Running, breathless, eager as I was, getting in the way of porters and passengers, and fearful every instant lest I should see the train going on without me, I yet observed that the

new−comer was considerably younger and shorter than the director, that he was sandy−haired, mustachioed, small−featured, and dressed in a close−cut suit of Scotch tweed. I was now within a few yards of them. I ran against a stout gentleman, I was nearly knocked down by a luggage−truck, I stumbled over a carpet−bag; I gained the spot just as the driver's whistle warned me to return.

To my utter stupefaction, they were no longer there. I had seen them but two seconds before—and they were gone! I stood still; I looked to right and left; I saw no sign of them in any direcion. It was as if the platform had gaped and swallowed them.

“There were two gentlemen standing here a moment ago,” I said to a porter at my elbow; “which way can they have gone?”

“I saw no gentlemen, sir,” replied the man. The whistle shrilled out again. The guard, far up the platform, held up his arm, and shouted to me to “come on!”

“If you're going on by this train, sir,” said the porter, “you must run for it.”

I did run for it, just gained the carriage as the train began to move, was shoved in by the guard, and left, breathless and bewildered, with Mr. Dwerrihouse's cigar−case still in my hand.

It was the strangest disappearance in the world; It was like a transformation trick in a pantomime. They were there one moment,—palpably there, walking, with the gaslight full upon their faces,—and the next moment they were gone. There was no door near, no window, no staircase; it was a mere slip of barren platform, tapestried with big advertisements. Could anything be more mysteious?

It was not worth thinking about, and yet, for my life, I could not help pondering upon it—pondering, wondering, conjecturing, turning it over and over in my mind, and beating my brains for a solution of the enigma. I thought of it all the way from Blackwater to Clayborough. I thought of it all the way from Clayborough to Dumbleton, as I rattled along the smooth highway in a trim dog−cart, drawn by a splendid black mare and driven by the silentest and dapperest of East Anglian grooms.

We did the nine miles in something less than an hour, and pulled up before the lodge−gates just as the church clock was striking half−past seven. A couple of minutes more, and the warm glow of the lighted hall was flooding out upon the gravel, a hearty grasp was on my hand, and a clear jovial voice was bidding me “welcome to Dumbleton.”

“And now, my dear fellow,” said my host, when the first greeting was over, “you have no time to spare. We dine at eight, and there are people coming to meet you, so you must just get the dressing business over as quickly as may be. By the way, you will meet some acquaintances; the Biddulphs are coming, and Prendergast (Prendergast of the Skirmishers) is staying in the house. Adieu! Mrs. Jelf will be expecting you in the drawing−room.”

I was ushered to my room—not the blue room, of which Mr. Dwerrihouse had made disagreeable experience, but a pretty little bachelor's chamber, hung with a delicate chintz and made cheerful by a blazing fire. I unlocked my portmanteau. I tried to be expeditious, but the memory of my railway adventure haunted me. I could not get free of it; I could not shake it off. It impeded me, worried me, it tripped me up, it caused me to mislay my studs, to mistie my cravat, to wrench the buttons off my gloves. Worst of all, it made me so late that the party had all assembled before I reached the drawing−room. I had scarcely paid my respects to Mrs. Jelf when dinner was announced, and we paired off, some eight or ten couples strong, into the dining−room.

I am not going to describe either the guests or the dinner. All provincial parties bear the strictest family resemblance, and I am not aware that an East Anglian banquet offers any exception to the rule. There was the usual country baronet and his wife; there were the usual country parsons and their wives; there was the sempiternal turkey and haunch of venison. Vanitas vanitatum. There is nothing new under the sun.

I was placed about midway down the table. I had taken one rector's wife down to dinner, and I had another at my left hand. They talked across me, and their talk was about babies; it was dreadfully dull. At length there came a pause. The entrees had just been removed, and the turkey had come upon the scene. The conversation had all along been of the languidest, but at this moment it happened to have stagnated altogether. Jelf was carving the turkey; Mrs. Jelf looked as if she was trying to think of something to say; everybody else was silent. Moved by an unlucky impulse, I thought I would relate my adventure.

“By the way, Jelf,” I began, “I came down part of the way to−day with a friend of yours.”

“Indeed!” said the master of the feast, slicing scientifically into the breast of the turkey. “With whom, pray?”

"With one who bade me tell you that he should, if possible, pay you a visit before Christmas."

"I cannot think who that could be," said my friend, smiling.

"It must be Major Thorp," suggested Mrs. Jelf.

I shook my head.

"It was not Major Thorp," I replied; "it was a near relation of your own, Mrs. Jelf."

"Then I am more puzzled than ever," rep! my hostess. "Pray tell me who it was."

"It was no less a person than your cousin, Mr. John Dwerrihouse."

Jonathan Jelf laid down his knife and fork. Mrs. Jelf looked at me in a strange, startled way, and said never a word.

"And he desired me to tell you, my dear madam, that you need not take the trouble to burn the hall down in his honour this time, but only to have the chimney of the blue room swept before his arrival."

Before I had reached the end of my sentence I became aware of something ominous in the faces of the guests. I felt I had said something which I had better have left unsaid, and that for some unexplained reason my words had evoked a general consternation. I sat confounded, not daring to utter another syllable, and for at least two whole minutes there was dead silence round the toble. Then Captain Prendergast came to the rescue.

"You have been abroad for some months, have you not, Mr. Langford?" he said, with the desperation of one who flings himself into the breach.

"I heard you had been to Russia. Surely you have something to tell us of the state and temper of the country after the war?"

I was heartily grateful to the gallant Skirmisher for this diversion in my favour. I answered him, I fear, somewhat lamely; but he kept the conversation up, and presently one or two others joined in and so the difficulty, whatever it might have been, was bridged over—bridged over, but not repaired. A something, an awkwardness, a visible constraint remained. The guests hitherto had been simply dull, but now they were evidently uncomfortable and embarrassed.

The dessert had scarcely been placed upon the table when the ladies left the room. I seized the opportunity to select a vacant chair next Captain Prendergast.

"In heaven's name," I whispered, "what was the matter just now? What had I said?"

"You mentioned the name of John Dwerrihouse."

"What of that? I had seen him not two hours before."

"It is a most astounding circumstance that you should have seen him," said Captain Prendergast. "Are you sure it was he?"

"As sure as of my own identity. We were talking all the way between London and Blackwater. But why does that surprise you?"

"*Because*" replied Captain Prendergast, dropping his voice to the lowest whisper—"*because John Dwerrihouse absconded three months ago with seventy−five thousand pounds of the company's money, and has never been heard of since*."

John Dwerrihouse had absconded three months ago—and I had seen him only a few hours back! John Dwerrihouse had embezzled seventy−five thousand pounds of the company's money, yet told me that he carried that sum upon his person! Were ever facts so strangely incongruous, so difficult to reconcile? How should he have ventured again into the light of day? How dared he show himself along the line? Above all, what had he been doing throughout those mysterious three months of disappearance?

Perplexing questions these—questions which at once suggested themselves to the minds of all concerned, but which admitted of no easy solution. I could find no reply to them. Captain Prendergast had not even a suggestion to offer. Jonathan Jelf, who seized the first opportunity of drawing me aside and learning all that I had to tell, was more amazed and bewildered than either of us. He came to my room that night, when all the guests were gone, and we talked the thing over from every point of view; without, it must be confessed, arriving at any kind of conclusion.

"I do not ask you," he said," whether you can have mistaken your man. That is impossible."

"As impossible as that I should mistake some stranger for yourself."

"It is not a question of looks or voice, but of facts. That he should have alluded to the fire in the blue room is proof enough of John Dwerrihouse's identity. How did he look?"

“Older, I thought; considerably older, paler, and more anxious.”

He has had enough to make him look anxious, anyhow, “said my friend, gloomily, “be he innocent or guilty.”

“I am inclined to believe that he is innocent,” I replied. “He showed no embarrassment when I addressed him, and no uneasiness when the guard came round. His conversation was open to a fault. I might almost say that he talked too freely of the business which he had in hand.”

“That again is strange, for I know no one more reticent on such subjects. He actually told you that he had the seventy−five thousand pounds in his pocket?”

“He did.”

“Humph! My wife has an idea about it, and she may be right—”

“What idea?”

“Well, she fancies—women are so clever, you know, at putting themselves inside people's motives —she fancies that he was tempted, that he did actually take the money, and that he has been concealing himself these three months in some wild part of the country, struggling possibly with his conscience all the time, and daring neither to abscond with his booty nor to come back and restore it.”

“But now that he has come back?”

“That is the point. She conceives that he has probably thrown himself upon the company's mercy, made restitution of the money, and, being forgiven, is permitted to carry the business through as if nothing whatever had happened.”

“The last,” I replied, “is an impossible case. Mrs. Jelf thinks like a generous and delicate minded woman, but not in the least like a board of railway directors. They would never carry forgiveness so far.”

“I fear not; and yet it is the only conjecture that bears a semblance of likelihood. However we can run over to Clayborough to−morrow and see if anything is to be learned. By the way Prendergast tells me you picked up his cigar−case.”

“I did so, and here it is.”

Jelf took the cigar−case, examined it by the light of the lamp, and said at once that it was beyond doubt Mr. Dwerrihouse's property, and that he remembered to have seen him use it.

“Here, too, is his monogram on the side,” he added—“ a big J transfixing a capital D. He used to carry the same on his note−paper.”

“It offers, at all events, a proof that I was not dreaming.”

“Ay, but it is time you were asleep and dreaming now. I am ashamed to have kept you up so long. Good−night.”

“Good−night, and remember that I am more than ready to go with you to Clayborough or Blackwater or London or anywhere, if I can be of the least service.”

“Thanks! I know you mean it, old friend, and it may be that I shall put you to the test, Once more, good−night.”

So we parted for that night, and met again in the breakfast−room at half−past eight next morning. It was a hurried, silent, uncomfortable meal; none of us had slept well, and all were thinking of the same subject. Mrs. Jelf had evidently been crying. Jelf was impatient to be off, and both Captain Prendergast and myself felt ourselves to be in the painful position of outsiders who are involuntarily brought into a domestic trouble. Within twenty minutes after we had left the breakfast−table the dog−cart was brought round, and my friend and I were on the road to Clayborough.

“Tell you what it is, Langford,” he said, as we sped along between the wintry hedges,” I do not much fancy to bring up Dwerrihouse's name at Clayborough. All the officials know that he is my wife's relation, and the subject just now is hardly a pleasant one. If you don't much mind, we will make the 11:10 to Blackwater. It's an important station, and we shall stand a far better chance of picking up information there than at Clayborough.”

So we took the 11:10, which happened to be an express, and, arriving at Blackwater about a quarter before twelve, proceeded at once to prosecute our inquiry.

We began by asking for the station−master, a big, blunt, businesslike person, who at once averred that he knew Mr. John Dwerrihouse pefectly well, and that there was no director on the line whom he had seen and spoken to so frequently.

“He used to be down here two or three times a week about three months ago,” said he, “when the new line

was first set afoot; but since then, you know, gentlemen—”

He paused significantly.

Jelf flushed scarlet.

“Yes, yes,” he said, hurriedly; “we know all about that. The point now to be ascertained is whether anything has been seen or heard of him lately.”

“Not to my knowledge,” replied the stationmaster.

“He is not known to have been down the line any time yesterday, for instance?”

The station−master shook his head.

“The East Anglian, sir,” said he, “is about the last place where he would dare to show himself. Why, there isn't a station−master, there isn't guard, there isn't a porter, who doesn't know Mr. Dwerrihouse by sight as well as he knows his own face in the looking−glass, or who wouldn't telegrapg for the police as soon as he had set eyes on him at any point along the line. Bless you, sir! there's been a standing order out against him ever since the 25th of September last.”

“And yet,” pursued my friend, “a gentleman who travelled down yesterday from London to Clayborough by the afternoon express testifies that he saw Mr. Dwerrihouse in the train, and that Mr. Dwerrinhouse alighted at Blackwater station.”

“Quite impossible, sir,” replied the station−master promptly.

“Why impossible?”

“Because there is no station along the line where he is so well known or where he would run so great a risk. It would be just running his head into the lion's mouth; he would have been mad to come nigh Blackwater station; and if he had come he would have been en arrested before he left the platform.”

“Can you tell me who took the Blackwater tickets of that train?”

“I can, sir. It was the guard, Benjamin Sommers.”

“And where can I find him?”

“You can find him, sir, by staying here, if you please, till one o'clock. He will be coming through with the up express from Crampton, which stays in Blackwater for ten minutes.”

We waited for the up express, beguiling the time as best we could by strolling along the Blackwater road till we came almost to the outskirts of the town, from which the station was distant nearly a couple of miles. By one o'clock we were back again upon the platform and waiting for the train. It came punctually, and I at once recognised the ruddy−faced guard who had gone down with my train the evening before.

“The gentlemen want to ask you something about Mr. Dwerrihouse, Somers,” said the station−master, by way of introduction.

The guard flashed a keen glance from my face to Jelf's and back again to mine.

“Mr. John Dwerrihouse, the late director?” said he, interrogatively.

“The same,” replied my friend. “Should you know him if you saw him?”

“Anywhere, sir.”

“Do you know if he was in the 4:15 express yesterday afternoon?”

“He was not, sir.”

“How can you answer so positively?”

“Because I looked into every carriage and saw every face in that train, and I could take my oath that Mr. Dwerrihouse was not in it. This gentleman was,” he added, turning sharply upon me. “I don't know that I ever saw him before in my life, but I remember *his* face perfectly. You nearly missed taking your seat in time at this station, sir, and you got out at Clayborough.”

“Quite true, guard,” I replied; “but do you not remember the face of the gentleman who travelled down in the same carriage with me as far as here?”

“It was my impression, sir, that you travelled down alone,” said Somers, with a look of some surprise.

“By no means. I had a fellow−traveller as far as Blackwater, and it was in trying to restore him the cigar−case which he had dropped in the carriage that I so nearly let you go on without me.”

“I remember your saying something about a cigar−case, certainly,” replied the guard; “but—”

“You asked for my ticket just before we entered station.”

“I did, sir.”

“Then you must have seen him. He sat in the corner next the very door to which you came.”

“No, indeed; I saw no one.”

I looked at Jelf. I began to think the guard was in the ex−director's confidence, and paid for his silence.

“If I had seen another traveller I should have asked for his ticket,” added Somers. “Did you see me ask for his ticket, sir?”

“I observed that you did not ask for it, but he explained that by saying—“ I hesitated. I feared I might be telling too much, and so broke off abruptly.

The guard and the station−master exchanged glances. The former looked impatiently at his watch.

“I am obliged to go on in four minutes more sir,” he said.

“One last question, then,” interposed Jelf, with a sort of desperation. “If this gentleman's fellow traveller had been Mr. John Dwerrihouse, and he had been sitting in the corner next the door in which you took the tickets, could you have failed to see and recognise him?”

“No, sir; it would have been quite impossible!”

“And you are certain you did *not* see him?”

“As I said before, sir, I could take my oath, I did not see him. And if it wasn't that I don't like to contradict a gentleman, I would say I could also take my oath that this gentlemen was quite alone in the carriage the whole way from London to Clayborough. Why, sir,” he added dropping his voice so as to be inaudible to the station−master, who had been called away to speak to some person close by, “you expressly asked me to give you a compartment to yourself, and I did so. I locked you in, and you were so good as to give me something for myself.”

“Yes; but Mr. Dwerrihouse had a key of his own.”

“I never saw him, sir; I saw no one in that compartment but yourself. Beg pardon, sir; my time's up.”

And with this the ruddy guard touched his cap and was gone. In another minute the heavy panting of the engine began afresh, and the “train” glided slowly out of the station.

We looked at each other for some moments in silence. I was the first to speak.

“Mr. Benjamin Somers knows more than he chooses to tell,” I said.

“Humph! do you think so?”

“It must be. He could not have come to the door without seeing him; it's impossible.”

“There is one thing not impossible, my dear fellow.”

“What is that?”

“That you may have fallen asleep and dreamed the whole thing.”

“Could I dream of a branch line that I had never heard of? Could I dream of a hundred and one business details that had no kind of interest for me? Could I dream of the seventy−five thousand pounds?”

“Perhaps you might have seen or heard some vague account of the affair while you were abroad. It might have made no impression upon you at the, and might have come back to you in your dreams, recalled perhaps by the mere names of the stations on the line.”

“What about the fire in the chimney of the blue room—should I have heard of that during my journey?”

“Well, no; I admit there is a difficulty about that point.”

“And what about the cigar−case?”

“Ay, by Jove! there is the cigar−case. That *is* a stubborn fact. Well, it's a mysterious affair, and it will need a better detective than myself, I fancy, to clear it up. I suppose we may as well go home.”

A week had not gone by when I received a letter from the secretary of the East Anglian Railway Company, requesting the favour of my attendance at a special board meeting not then many days distant. No reasons were alleged and no apologies offered for this demand upon my time, but they had heard, it was clear, of my inquiries anent the missing director, and had a mind to put me through some sort of official examination upon the subject. Being still a guest at Dumbleton Hall, I had to go up to London for the purpose and Jonathan Jelf accompanied me. I found the direction of the Great East Anglian line represented by a party of some twelve or fourteen gentlemen seated in solemn conclave round a huge green baize table, in a gloomy board room adjoining the London terminus.

Being courteously received by the chairman (who at once began by saying that certain statements of mine respecting Mr. John Dwerrihouse had come to the knowledge of the direction, and that they in consequence

desired to confer with me on those points), we were placed at the table and the inquiry proceeded in due form.

I was first asked if I knew Mr. John Dwerrihouse, how long I had been acquainted with him, and whether I could identify him at sight. I was then asked when I had seen him last. To which I replied, “On the 4th of this present month, December, 1856.” Then came the inquiry of where I had seen him on that fourth day of December; to which I replied that I met him in a first−class compartment of the 4:15 down express, that he got in just as the train was leaving the London terminus, and that he alighted at Blackwater station. The chairman then inquired whether I had held any communication with my fellow−traveller; whereupon I related, as nearly as I could remember it, the whole bulk and substance of Mr. John Dwerrihouse's diffuse information respecting the new branch line.

To all this the board listened with profound attention, while the chairman presided and the secretary took notes. I then produced the cigar−case. It was passed from hand to hand, and recognised by all. There was not a man present who did not remember that plain cigar−case with its silver monogram, or to whom it seemed anything less entirely corroborative of my evidence. When at length I had told all that I had to tell, the chairman whispered something to the secretary; the secretary touched a silver hand−bell, and the guard, Benjamin Somers, was ushered into the room. He was then examined as carefully as myself. He declared that he knew Mr. John Dwerrihouse perfectly well, that he could not be mistaken in him, that he remembered going down with the 4:15 express on the afternoon in question, that he remembered me, and that, there being one or two empty first−class compartments on that especial afternoon, he had, in compliance with my request, placed me in a carriage by myself. He was positive that I remained alone in that compartment all the way from London to Claylborough. He was ready to take his oath that Dwerrihouse was neither in that carriage with me nor in any compartment of that train. He remembered distinctly to have examined my ticket to Blackwater; was certain that there was no one else at that time in the carriage; could not have failed to observe a second person, if there had been one; had that second person been Mr. John Dwerrihouse, should have quietly double−locked the door of the carriage and have at once given information to the Blackwater station−master. So clear, so decisive, so ready, was Somers with this testimony, that the board looked fairly puzzled.

“You hear this person's statement, Mr. Langford,” said the chairman. “It contradicts yours in every particular. What have you to say in reply?”

“I can only repeat what I said before. I am quite as positive of the truth of my own assertions as Mr. Somers can be of the truth of his.”

“You say that Mr. Dwerrihouse alighted in Blackwater, and that he was in possession of a private key. Are you sure that he had not alighted by means of that key before the guard came round for the tickets?”

“I am quite positive that he did not leave the carriage till the train had fairly entered the station, and the other Blackwater passengers alighted. I even saw that he was met there by a friend.”

“Indeed! Did you see that person distinctly?”

“Quite distinctly.”

“Can you describe his appearance?”

“I think so. He was short and very slight, sandy−haired, with a bushy moustache and beard, and he wore a closely fitting suit of gray tweed. His age I should take to be about thirty−eight or forty.”

“Did Mr. Dwerrihouse leave the station in this person's company?”

“I cannot tell. I saw them walking together down the platform, and then I saw them standing inside under a gas−jet, talking earnestly. After that I lost sight of them quite suddenly, and just then my train went on, and I with it.”

The chairman and secretary conferred together in an undertone. The directors whispered to one another. One or two looked suspiciously at the guard. I could see that my evidence remained unshaken, and that, like myself, they suspected some complicity between the guard and the defaulter.

“How far did you conduct that 4:15 express on the day in question, Somers?” asked the chairman.

“All through, sir,” replied the guard, “from London to Crampton.”

“How was it that you were not relieved at Clayborough? I thought there was always a change of guards at Clayborough.”

“There used to be, sir, till the new regulations came in force last midsummer, since when the guards in charge of express trains go the whole way through.”

The chairman turned to the secretary.

“I think it would be as well,” he said, “if we had the day−book to refer to upon this point.”

Again the secretary touched the silver handbell, and desired the porter in attendance to summon Mr. Raikes. From a word or two dropped by another of the directors I gathered that Mr. Raikes was one of the under−secretaries.

He came, a small, slight, sandy−haired, keen−eyed man, with an eager, nervous manner, and a forest of light beard and moustache. He just showed himself at the door of the board room, and, being requested to bring a certain day−book from a certain shelf in a certain room, bowed and vanished.

He was there such a moment, and the surprise of seeing him was so great and sudden, that it was not till the door had closed upon him that I found voice to speak. He was no sooner gone, however, than I sprang to my feet.

“That person,” I said, “is the same who met Mr. Dwerrihouse upon the platform at Blackwater!”

There was a general movement of surprise. The chairman looked grave and somewhat agitated.

“Take care, Mr. Langford,” he said; “take care what you say.”

“I am as positive of his identity as of my own.”

“Do you consider the consequences of your words? Do you consider that you are bringing a charge of the gravest character against one of the company's servants?”

“I am willing to be put upon my oath, if necessary. The man who came to that door a minute since is the same whom I saw talking with Mr. Dwerrihouse on the Blackwater platform. Were he twenty times the company's servant, I could say neither more nor less.”

The chairman turned again to the guard.

“Did you see Mr. Raikes in the train or on the platform?” he asked.

Somers shook his head.

“I am confident Mr. Raikes was not in the train,” he said, “and I certainly did not see him on the platform.”

The chairman turned next to the secretary.

“Mr. Raikes is in your office, Mr. Hunter,” he said. “Can you remember if he was absent on the 4th instant?”

“I do not think he was,” replied the secretary, “but I am not prepared to speak positively. I have been away most afternoons myself lately, and Mr. Raikes might easily have absented himself if he had been disposed.”

At this moment the under−secretary returned with the day−book under his arm.

“Be pleased to refer, Mr. Raikes,” said the chairman, “to the entries of the 4th instant, and see what Benjamin Somers's duties were on that day.”

Mr. Raikes threw open the cumbrous volume, and ran a practised eye and finger down some three or four successive columns of entries. Stopping suddenly at the foot of a page, he then read aloud that Benjamin Somers had on that day conducted the 4:15 express from London to Crampton.

The chairman leaned forward in his seat, looked the under−secretary full in the face, and said, quite sharply and suddenly:

“Where were you, Mr. Raikes, on the same afternoon?”

“*I*, sir?”

“You, Mr. Raikes. Where were you on the afternoon and evening of the 4th of the present month?”

“Here, sir, in Mr. Hunter's office. Where else should I be?”

There was a dash of trepidation in the under−secretary's voice as he said this, but his look of surprise was natural enough.

“We have some reason for believing, Mr. Raikes, that you were absent that afternoon without leave. Was this the case?”

“Certainly not, sir. I have not had a day's holiday since September. Mr. Hunter will bear me out in this.”

Mr. Hunter repeated what he had previously said on the subject, but added that the clerks in the adjoining office would be certain to know. Whereupon the senior clerk, a grave, middle−aged person in green glasses, was summoned and interrogated.

His testimony cleared the under−secretary at once. He declared that Mr. Raikes had in no instance, to his knowledge, been absent during office hours since his return from his annual holiday in September.

I was confounded. The chairman turned to me with a smile, in which a shade of covert annoyance was scarcely apparent.

“You hear, Mr. Langford?” he said.

“I hear, sir; but my conviction remains unshaken.”

“I fear, Mr. Langford, that your convictions are very insufficiently based,” replied the chairman, with a doubtful cough.” I fear that you 'dream dreams,' and mistake them for actual occurrences. It is a dangerous habit of mind, and might lead to dangerous results. Mr. Raikes here would have found himself in an unpleasant position had he not proved so satisfactory an alibi.”

I was about to reply, but he gave me no time.

“I think, gentlemen,” he went on to say, addressing the board,” that we should be wasting time to push this inquiry further. Mr. Langford's evidence would seem to be of an equal value throughout. The testimony of Benjamin Somers disproves his first statement, and the testimony of the last witness disproves his second. I think we may conclude that Mr. Langford fell asleep in the train on the occasion of his journey to Clayborough, and dreamed an unusually vivid and circumstantial dream, of which, however, we have now heard quite enough.”

There are few things more annoying than to find one's positive convictions met with incredulity. I could not help feeling impatience at the turn that affairs had taken. I was not proof against the civil sarcasm of the chairman's manner. Most intolerable of all, however, was the quiet smile lurking about the corners of Benjamin Somers's mouth, and the half−triumphant, half−malicious gleam in the eyes of the under−secretary. The man was evidently puzzled and somewhat alarmed. His looks seemed furtively to interrogate me. Who was I? What did I want? Why had I come there to do him an ill turn with his empoyers? What was it to me whether or no he was absent without leave?

Seeing all this, and perhaps more irritated by it than the thing deserved, I begged leave to detain the attention of the board for a moment longer. Jelf plucked me impatiently by the sleeve.

“Better let the thing drop,” he whispered. “The chairman's right enough; you dreamed it, and the less said now the better.”

I was not to be silenced, however, in this fashion. I had yet something to say, and I would say it. It was to this effect: that dreams were not usually productive of tangible results, and that I requested to know in what way the chairman conceived I had evolved from my dream so substantial and well−made a delusion as the cigar−case which I had had the honour to place before him at the commencement of our interview.

“The cigar−case, I admit, Mr. Langford,” the chairman replied, “is a very strong point in your evidence. It is your *only* strong point, however, and there is just a possibility that we may all be misled by a mere accidental resemblance. Will you permit me to see the case again?”

“It is unlikely,” I said, as I handed it to him, “that any other should bear precisely this monogram, and yet be in all other particulars exactly similar.”

The chairman examined it for a moment in silence, and then passed it to Mr. Hunter. Mr. Hunter turned it over and over, and shook his head.

“This is no mere resemblance,” he said. “It is John Dwerrihouse's cigar−case to a certainty. I remember it perfectly; I have seen it a hundred times.”

“I believe I may say the same,” added the chairman; “yet how account for the way in which Mr. Langford asserts that it came into his possession?”

“I can only repeat,” I replied, “that I found it on the floor of the carriage after Mr. Dwerrihouse had alighted. It was in leaning out to look after him that I trod upon it, and it was in running after him for the purpose of restoring it that I saw or believed I saw, Mr. Raikes standing aside with him in earnest conversation.”

Again I felt Jonathan Jelf plucking at my sleeve.

“Look at Raikes,” he whispered; “look at Raikes!”

I turned to where the under−secretary had been standing a moment before, and saw him, white as death, with lips trembling and livid, stealing toward the door.

To conceive a sudden, strange, and indefinite suspicion, to fling myself in his way, to take him by the shoulders as if he were a child, and turn his craven face, perforce, toward the board, were with me the work of an instant.

“Look at him!” I exclaimed. “Look at his face! I ask no better witness to the truth of my words.”

The chairman's brow darkened.

“Mr. Raikes,” he said, sternly, “if you know anything you had better speak.”

Vainly trying to wrench himself from my grasp, the under−secretary stammered out an incohereent denial.

“Let me go,” he said. “I know nothin—you have no right to detain me—let me go!”

“Did you, or did you not, meet Mr. John Dwerrihouse at Blackwater station? The charge brought against you is either true or false. If true, you will do well to throw yourself upon the mercy of the board and make full confession of all that you know.”

The under−secretary wrung his hands in an agony of helpless terror.

“I was away!” he cried. “I was two hundred miles away at the time! I know nothing about it—I have nothing to confess—I am innocent—I call God to witness I am innocent!”

“Two hundred miles away!” echoed the chairman. “What do you mean?”

“I was in Devonshire. I had three weeks' leave of absence—I appeal to Mr. Hunter—Mr. Hunter knows I had three weeks' leave of absence! I was in Devonshire all the time; I can prove I was in Devonshire!”

Seeing him so abject, so incoherent, so wild with apprehension, the directors began to whisper gravely among themselves, while one got quietly up and called the porter to guard the door.

“What has your being in Devonshire to do with the matter?” said the chairman. “When were you in Devonshire?”

“Mr. Raikes took his leave in September,” said the secretary, “about the time when Mr. Dwerrihouse disappeared.”

“I never even heard that he had disappeared till I came back!”

“That must remain to be proved,” said the chairman. “I shall at once put this matter in the hands of the police. In the meanwhile, Mr. Raikes, being myself a magistrate and used to deal with these cases, I advise you to offer no resistance but to confess while confession may yet do you service. As for your accomplice—”

The frightened wretch fell upon his knees.

“I had no accomplice!” he cried, “Only have mercy upon me—only spare my life, and I will confess all! I didn't mean to harm him! I didn't mean to hurt a hair of his head! Only have mercy upon me, and let me go!”

The chairman rose in his place, pale and agitated.

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed, “what horrible mystery is this? What does it mean?”

“As sure as there is a God in heaven,” said Jonathan Jelf, “it means that murder has been done.”

“No! no! no!” shrieked Raikes, still upon his knees, and cowering like a beaten hound, “Not murder! No jury that ever sat could bring it in murder. I thought I had only stunned him—I never meant to do more than stun him! Manslaughter——manslaughter—not murder!”

Overcome by the horror of this unexpected revelation, the chairman covered his face with his hand and for a moment or two remained silent.

“Miserable man,” he said at length, “you have betrayed yourself.”

“You bade me confess! You urged me to throw myself upon the mercy of the board!”

“You have confessed to a crime which no one suspected you of having committed,” replied the chairman, “and which this board has no power either to punish or forgive. All that I can do for you it to advise you to submit to the law, to plead guilty, and to conceal nothing. When did you do this deed?”

The guilty man rose to his feet, and leaned heavily against the table. His answer came reluctantly, like the speech of one dreaming.

“On the 22d of September!”

On the 22d of September! I looked in Jonathan Jelf's face, and he in mine. I felt my own smiling with a strange sense of wonder and dread. I saw his blanch suddenly, even to the lips.

“Merciful Heaven!” he whispered. “*What was it, then, that you saw in the train?*”

What was it that I saw in the train? That question remains unanswered to this day. I have never been able to reply to it. I only know that it bore the living likeness of the murdered man, whose body had then been lying some ten weeks under a rough pile of branches and brambles and rotting leaves, at the bottom of a deserted chalk−pit about half−way between Blackwater and Mallingford. I know that it spoke and moved and looked as that man spoke and moved and looked in life; that I heard, or seemed to hear, things revealed which I could never otherwise have learned; that I was guided, as it were, by that vision on the platform to the identification of the murderer; and that, a passive instrument myself, I was destined, by means of these mysterious teachings to bring about the ends of justice. For these things I have never been able to account.

As for that matter of the cigar−case, it proved, on inquiry, that the carriage in which I travelled down that afternoon to Clayborough had not been in use for several weeks, and was, in point of fact, the same in which poor John Dwerrihouse had performed his last journey. The case had doubtless been dropped by him, and had lain unnoticed till I found it.

Upon the details of the murder I have no need to dwell. Those who desire more ample particulars may find them, and the written confession of Augustus Raikes, in the files of the “Times” for 1856. Enough that the under−secretary, knowing the history of the new line, and following the negotiation step by step through all its stages, determined to waylay Mr. Dwerrihouse, rob him of the seventy−five thousand pounds, and escape to America with his booty.

In order to effect these ends he obtained leave of absence a few days before the time appointed for the payment of the money, secured his passage across the Atlantic in a steamer advertised to start on the 23d, provided himself with a heavily loaded “life−preserver,” and went down to Blackwater to await the arrival of his victim. How he met him on the platform with a pretended message from the board, how he offered to conduct him by a short cut across the fields to Mallingford, how, having brought him to a lonelyplace, he struck him down with the life−preserver, and so killed him, and how, finding what he had done, he gged the body to the verge of an out−of−the−way chalk−pit, and there flung it in and piled it over with branches and brambles, are facts still fresh in the memories of those who, like the connoisseurs in De Quincey's famous essay, regard murder as a fine art. Strangely enough, the murderer having done his work, was afraid to leave the country. He declared that he had not intended to take the director's life, but only to stun and rob him and that, finding the blow had killed, he dared not fly for fear of drawing down suspicion upon his own head. As a mere robber he would have been safe in the States, but as a murderer he would inevitably have been pursued and given up to justice. So he forfeited his passage, returned to the office as usual at the end of his leave, and locked up his ill−gotten thousands till a more convenient opportunity. In the meanwhile he had the satisfaction of finding that Mr. Dwerrihouse was universally believed to have absconded with the money, no one knew how or whither.

Whether he meant murder or not, however, Mr. Augustus Raikes paid the full penalty of his crime, and was hanged at the Old Bailey in the second week in January, 1857. Those who desire to make his further acquaintance may see him any day (admirably done in wax) in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's exhibition, in Baker Street. He is there to be found in the midst of a select society of ladies and gentlemen of atrocious memory, dressed in the close−cut tweed suit which he wore on the evening of the murder, and holding ing in his hand the identical life−preserve, with which he committed it.

THE WRONG BLACK BAG

BY ANGELO LEWIS

It was the eve of Good Friday. Within the modest parlour of No. 13 Primrose Terrace a little man, wearing a gray felt hat and a red neck−tie, stood admiring himself in the looking−glass over the mantelpiece. Such a state of things anywhere else would have had no significance whatever; but circumstances proverbially alter cases. At 13 Primrose Terrace it approached the dimensions of a portent.

Not to keep the reader in suspense, the little man was Benjamin Quelch, clerk in the office of Messrs. Cobble Clink, coal merchants, and he was about to carry out a desperate resolution. Most men have some secret ambition; Benjamin's was twofold. For years he had yearned to wear a soft felt hat and to make a trip to Paris, and for years Fate, in the person of Mrs. Quelch, had stood in the way and prevented the indulgence of his longing. Quelch being, as we have hinted, exceptionally small of stature, had, in accordance with mysterious law of opposites, selected the largest lady of his acquaintance as the partner of his joys. He himself was of a meek and retiring disposition. Mrs. Quelch, on the other hand, was a woman of stern and decided temperament, with strong views upon most subjects. She administered Benjamin's finances, regulated his diet, and prescribed for him when his health was out order. Though fond of him in her own way, she ruled him with a rod of iron, and on three points she was inflexible. To make up for his insignificance of stature, she insisted on his wearing the tallest hat that money could procure, to the exclusion of all other head−gear; secondly, on the ground that it looked more “professional,” she would allow him none but black silk neckties; and lastly, she would not let him smoke. She had further an intense repugnance to all things foreign, holding as an article of faith that no good thing, whether in art, cookery, or morals, was to be found on other than English soil. When Benjamin once, in a rash moment, suggested a trip to Boulogne by way of summer holiday, the suggestion was received in a manner that took away his appetite for a week afterward.

The prohibition of smoking Quelch did not much mind; for, having in his salad days made trial of a cheap cigar, the result somehow satisfies him that tobacco was not in his line, and he ceased to yearn for it accordingly. But the tall hat and the black necktie were constant sources of irritation. He had an idea, based on his having once won a drawing prize at school, that nature had intended him for an artist, and he secretly lamented the untoward fate which had thrown him away upon coals. Now the few artists Benjamin had chanced to meet affected a soft and slouchy style of head−gear, and a considerable amount of freedom, generally with a touch of colour, in the region of the neck. Such, therefore, in the fitness of things, should have been the hat and such the neck−gear of Benjamin Quelch, and the veto of his wife only made him yearn for them the more intensely.

In later years he had been seized with a longing to see Paris. It chanced that a clerk in the same office, one Peter Flipp, had made one of a personally conducted party on a visit to the gay city.

The cost of the trip had been but five guineas; but never, surely, were five guineas so magnificently invested. There was a good deal of romance about Flipp, and it may be that his accounts were not entirely trustworthy; but they so fired the imagination of our friend Benjamin that he had at once begun to hoard up surreptitious sixpences, with the hope that some day he too might, by some unforeseen combination of circumstances, be enabled to visit the enchanted city.

And at last that day had come. Mrs. Quelch, her three children and her one domestic, had gone to Lowestoft for an Easter outing, Benjamin and a deaf charwoman, Mrs. Widger, being left in charge of the family belongings. Benjamin's Easter holidays were limited to Good Friday and Easter Monday, and, as it seemed hardly worth while that he should travel so far as Lowestoft for such short periods, Mrs. Quelch had thoughtfully arranged that he should spend the former day at the British Museum and the latter at the Zoological Gardens. Two days after her departure, however, Mr. Cobble called Quelch into his private office and told him that if he liked he might for once take holiday from the Friday to the Tuesday inclusive, and join his wife at the seaside.

Quelch accepted the boon with an honest intention of employing it as suggested. Indeed, he had even begun a letter to his wife announcing the pleasing intelligence, and had got as far as “My dear Penelope,” when a wild and

wicked thought struck him: why should he not spend his unexpected holiday in Paris?

Laying down his pen, he opened his desk: and counted his secret hoard. It amounted to five pounds seventeen, twelve shillings more than Flipp's outlay. There was no difficulty in that direction, and nobody would be any the wiser. His wife would imagine that he was in London, while his employers would believe him to be at Lowestoft. There was a brief struggle in his mind, but the tempter prevailed, and, with a courage worthy of a better cause, he determined to risk it and—*go*.

And thus it came to pass that, on the evening of our story, Benjamin Quelch, having completed his packing,—which merely comprised what he was accustomed to call his “night things,” neatly bestowed in a small black hand−bag belonging to Mrs. Quelch,—stood before the looking−glass and contemplated his guilty splendour, the red necktie and the soft gray felt hat, purchased out of surplus funds. He had expended a couple of guineas in a second−class return ticket, and another two pounds in “coupons,” entitling him to bed, breakfast, and dinner for five days at certain specified hotels in Paris. This outlay, with half a crown for a pair of gloves, and a bribe of five shillings to secure the silence of Mrs. Widger, left him with little more than a pound in hand, but this small surplus would no doubt amply suffice for his modest needs.

His only regret, as he gazed at himself in the glass was that he had not had time to grow a moustache, the one thing needed to complete his artistic appearance. But time was fleeting, and he dared not linger over the enticing picture. He stole along the passage, and softly opened the street door. As he did so a sudden panic came over him, and he felt half inclined to abandon his rash design. But as he wavered he caught sight of the detested tall hat hanging up in the passage, and he hesitated no longer. He passed out, and, closing the door behind him, started at a brisk pace for Victoria station.

His plans had been laid with much ingenuity, though at a terrible sacrifice of his usual straight−forwardness. He had written a couple of letters to Mrs. Quelch, to be posted by Mrs. Widger on appropriate days, giving imaginary accounts of his visits to the British Museum and Zoological Gardens, with pointed allusions to the behavior of the elephant, and other circumstantial particulars. To insure the posting of these in proper order, he had marked the dates in pencil on the envelopes in the corner usually occupied by the postage−stamp, so that when the latter was affixed the figures would be concealed. He explained the arrangement to Mrs. Widger, who promised that his instructions should be faithfully carried out.

After a sharp walk he reached the railway−station, and in due course found himself steaming across the Channel to Dieppe. The passage was not especially rough, but to poor Quelch, unaccustomed as he was to the sea, it seemed as if the boat must go to the bottom every moment. To the bodily pains of seasickness were added the mental pains of remorse, and between the two he reached Dieppe more dead than alive; indeed, he would almost have welcomed death as a release from his sufferings.

Even when the boat had arrived at the pier he still remained in the berth he had occupied all night, and would probably have continued to lie there had not the steward lifted him by main force to his feet. He seized his black bag with a groan, and staggered on deck. Here he felt a little better, but new terrors seized him at the sight of the gold−laced officials and blue−bloused porters, who lined each side of the gangway, all talking at the top of their voices, and in tones which seemed, to his unaccustomed ear, to convey a thirst for British blood. No sooner had he landed than he was accosted by a ferocious−looking personage (in truth, a harmless custom−house officer), who asked him in French whether he had anything to declare, and made a movement to take his bag in order to mark it as “passed.” Quelch jumped to the conclusion that the stranger was a brigand bent on depriving him of his property, and he held on to the bag with such tenacity that the douanier naturally inferred there was something specially contraband about it. He proceeded to open it, and produced, among sundry other feminine belongings, a lady's frilled and furbelowed night−dress, from which, as he unrolled it, fell a couple of bundles of cigars!

Benjamin's look of astonishment as he saw these unexpected articles produced from his hand−bag was interpreted by the officials as a look of guilt. As a matter of fact, half stupefied by the agonies of the night, he had forgotten the precise spot where he had left his own bag, and had picked up in its stead one belonging to the wife of a sporting gentleman on his way to some races at Longchamps. Desiring to smuggle a few “weeds,” and deeming that the presence of such articles would be less likely to be suspected among a lady's belongings, the sporting gentleman had committed them to his companion's keeping. Hand−bags, as a rule, are “passed” unopened, and such would probably have been the case in the present instance had not Quelch's look of panic excited suspicion. The real owners of the bag had picked up Quelch's which it precisely resembled, and were

close behind him on the gangway. The lady uttered an exclamation of dismay as she saw the contents of her bag spread abroad by the customs officer, but was promptly silenced by her husband. “Keep your blessed tongue quiet,” he whispered, “If a bloomin' idiot chooses to sneak our bag, and then to give himself away to the first man that looks at him, he must stand the racket.” Whereupon the sporting gentleman and lady, first taking a quiet peep into Benjamin's bag to make sure that it contained nothing compromising, passed the examiner with a smile of conscious innocence, and, after an interval for refreshment at the buffet, took their seats in the train for Paris.

Meanwhile poor Quelch was taken before a pompous individual with an extra large moustache and a double allowance of gold lace on his cap and charged not only with defrauding the revenue, but with forcibly resisting an officer in the execution of his duty. The accusation being in French, Quelch did not understand a word of it, and in his ignorance took it for granted that he was accused of stealing the strange bag and its contents. Visions of imprisonment, penal servritude nay, even capital punishment, floated before his bewildered brain. Finally the official with the large moustache made a speech to him in French, setting forth that for his dishonest attempt to smuggle he must pay a fine of a hundred francs. With regard to the assault on the official, as said official was not much hurt, he graciously agreed to throw that in and make no charge for it. When he had fully explained matters to his own satisfaction he waited to receive the answer of the prisoner; but none was forthcoming, for the best of reasons. It finally dawned on the official that Quelch might not understand French, and he therefore proceeded to address him in what he considered to be his native tongue.

“You smoggle—smoggle seegar. Zen it must zat you pay amende, hundred francs. You me understand? Hundred francs—pay! pay! pay!” At each repetition of the last word he brought down a dirty fist into the palm of the opposite hand immediately under Quelch's nose. “Hundred francs—Engleesh money, four pound.”

Quelch caught the last words, and was relieved to find that it was merely a money payment that was demanded of him. But he was little better off, for, having but a few shillings in his pocket, to pay four pounds was as much out of his power as if it had been four hundred. He determined to appeal to the mercy of his captors. “Not got,” he said, apologetically, with a vague idea that by speaking very elementary English he came somehow nearer to French, “That all,” he continued, producing his little store and holding it out beseechingly to the official. “*Pas assez,* not enouf,” growled the latter. Quelch tried again in all his pockets, but only succeeded in finding another threepenny piece. The officer shook his head, and, after a brief discussion with his fellows, said, “*Comment−vous appelez−vous, monsieur?* How do you call yourself?”

With a vague idea of keeping his disgrace from his friends, Quelch rashly determined to give a false name. If he had had a few minutes to think it over he would have invented one for the occasion, but his imagination was not accustomed to such sudden calls, and, on the question being repeated, he desperately gave the name of his next−door neighbour, Mr. Henry Fladgate. “Henri Flodgett,” repeated the officer as he wrote it down.

“*Et vous demeurez?* You live where?” And Quelch proceeded to give the address of Mr. Fladgate, 11 Primrose Terrace. “*Tres bien.* I send teleg−r−r−amme. *Au violon!*” And poor Benjamin was ignominiously marched to the local police station.

Meanwhile Quelch's arrangements at home were scarcely working as he had intended. The estimable Mrs. Widger, partly by reason of her deafness and partly of native stupidity, had only half understood his instructions about the letters. She knew she was to stamp them and she knew she was to post them, but the dates in the corners might have been runic inscriptions for any idea they conveyed to her obfuscated intellect. Accordingly, the first time she visited her usual house of call, which was early on the morning of Good Friday, she proceeded, in her own language, to “get the dratted things off her mind” by dropping them both into the nearest pillar−box.

On the following day, therefore, Mrs. Quelch at Lawestoft was surprised to find on the breakfast−table *two* letters in her Benjamin's handwriting. Her surprise was still greater when, on opening them, she found one to be a graphic account of a visit to the Zoological Gardens on the following Monday. The conclusion was obvious: either Benjamin had turned prophet, and had somehow got ahead of the almanac, or he was “carrying on” in some very underhand manner. Mrs. Quelch decided for the latter alternative, and determined to get to the bottom of the matter at once. She cut a sandwich, put on her bonnet, and, grasping her umbrella in a manner which boded no good to any one who stayed her progress, started by the next train for Liverpool Street.

On reaching home she extracted from the weeping Widger, who had just been spending the last of Benjamin's five shillings, and was far gone in depression and gin and water, that her “good gentleman” had not been home since Thursday night. This was bad enough, but there was still more conclusive evidence that he was up to no

good, in the shape of his tall hat, which hung, silent accuser, on the last peg in the passage.

Having pumped Mrs. Widger till there was no more (save tears) to be pumped out of her, Mrs. Quelch, still firmly grasping her umbrella, proceeded next door, on the chance that her neighbour, Mrs. Fladgate, might be able to give her some information. She found Mrs. Fladgate weeping in the parlour with an open telegram before her. Being a woman who did not stand upon ceremony, she read the telegram, which was dated from Dieppe and ran as follows: “Monsieur Fladgate here detained for to have smuggle cigars. Fine to pay, one hundred franc. Send money and he will be release.”

“Oh, the men, the men!” ejaculated Mrs. Quelch, as she dropped into an arm−chair. “They're all alike. First Benjamin, and now Fladgate! I shouldn't wonder if they had gone off together.”

“You don't mean to say Mr. Quelch has gone too?” sobbed Mrs. Fladgate.

“He has taken a shameful advantage of my absence. He has not been home since Thursday evening, and his hat is hanging up in the hall.”

“You don't think he has been m−m−murdered?”

“I'm not afraid of *that*,” replied Mrs. Quelch, “it wouldn't be worth anybody's while. But what has he got on his head? that's what I want to know. Of course, if he's with Mr. Fladgate in some foreign den of iniquity, that accounts for it.”

“Don't foreigners wear hats?” inquired Mrs. Fladgate, innocently.

“Not the respectable English sort, I'll bet bound,” replied Mrs. Quelch; “some outlandish rubbish, I dare say. But I thought Mr. Fladgate on his Scotch journey.” (Mr. Fladgate, it should be stated, was a traveller in the oil and colour line.)

“So he is. I mean, so he ought to be. In fact I expected him home to−day. But now he's in p−p−prison, and I may never see him any m−mo−more.” And Mrs. Fladgate wept afresh.

“Stuff and nonsense!” retorted Mrs. Quelch.

“You've only to send the money they ask for, and they'll be glad enough to get rid of him. But I wouldn't hurry; I'd let him wait a bit—you'll see him soon enough, never fear.”

The prophecy was fulfilled sooner than the prophet expected. Scarcely were the words out of her mouth when a cab was heard to draw up at the door, and a moment later Fladgate himself, a big, jovial man, wearing a white hat very much on one side, entered the room and threw a bundle of rugs on the sofa.

“Home again, old girl, and glad of it! Mornin', Mrs. Quelch,” said the new−comer.

Mrs. Fladgate gazed at him doubtfully for a mooment, and then flung her arms round his neck, ejaculating, “Saved, saved!”

“Martha,” said Mrs. Quelch, reprovingly, “have you no self−respect? Is *this* the way you deal to so shameful a deception?” Then, turning the supposed offender, “So, Mr. Fladgate, you have escaped from your foreign prison.”

“Foreign, how much? Have you both gone dotty, ladies? I've just escaped from a third−class carriage on the London and Northwestern. The space is limited, but I never heard it called a foreign prison.”

“It is useless to endeavour to deceive us,” said Mrs. Quelch, sternly. “Look at that telegram, Mr. Fladgate, and deny it if you can. You have been gadding about in some vile foreign place with my misguided husband.”

“Oh, Quelch is in it too, is he? Then it *must* be a bad case. But let's see what we have been up to, for, 'pon my word, I'm quite in the dark at present.”

He held out his hand for the telegram, and read it carefully. “Somebody's been having a lark with you, old lady,” he said to his wife. “You know well enough where I've been—my regular northern journey, and nowhere else.”

“I don't believe a word of it,” said Mrs. Quelch, “you men are all alike—deceivers, every one of you.”

“Much obliged for your good opinion, Mrs. Quelch. I had no idea Quelch was such a bad lot. But, so far as I am concerned, the thing's easily tested. Here is the bill for my bed last night at Carlisle. Now if I was in Carlisle and larking about at Dieppe at the same time, perhaps you'll kindly explain how I managed it.”

Mrs. Quelch was staggered, but not convinced. “But if—if you were at Carlisle, where is Benjamin, and what does this telegram mean?”

“Not being a wizard, I really can't say; but concerning Quelch, we shall find him, never fear. When did he disappear?”

Mrs. Quelch told her story, not forgetting the mysterious letter.

“I think I see daylight,” said Fladgate. “The party who has got into that mess is Quelch, and, being frightened out of his wits, he has given my name instead of his own. That's about the size of it!”

“But Benjamin doesn't smoke; and how should he come to be at Dieppe?”

“Went for a holiday, I suppose. As for smoking, I shouldn't have thought he was up to it; but with that sat−upon sort of man—begging your pardon, Mrs. Quelch—you never know where he may break out. Worms will turn, you know, and sometimes they take a wrong turning.”

“But Benjamin would never dare—”

“That's just it. He daren't do anything when you've got your eye on him. When you haven't perhaps he may, and perhaps he mayn't. The fact is, you hold up his head too tight, and if he jibs now and then you can't wonder at it.”

“You have a very coarse way of putting things, Mr. Fladgate. Mr. Quelch is not a horse, that I am aware of.”

“We won't quarrel about the animal, my dear madam, but you may depend upon it, my solution's right. A hardened villain, like myself, say, would never have got into such a scrape, but Quelch don't know enough of the world to keep himself out of mischief. They've got him in quod, that's clear, and the best thing you can do is to send the coin and get him out again.”

“Send money to those swindling Frenchmen? Never! If Benjamin is in prison I will fetch him out myself.”

“You would never risk that dreadful sea passage!” exclaimed Mrs. Fladgate. “And how will you manage the language? You don't understand French.”

“Oh, I shall do very well,” said the heroic woman. “They won't talk French to *me*!”

That same night a female passenger crossed by the boat from Newhaven to Dieppe. The passage was rough, and the passenger was very seasick; but she still sat grimly upright, never for one moment relaxing her grasp on the handle of her silk umbrella. What she went through on landing, how she finally obtained her husband's release, and what explanations passed between the reunited pair, must be left to the reader's imagination, for Mrs. Quelch never told the story. Twenty−four hours later a four−wheeled cab drew up at the Quelchs' door, and from it descended, first a stately female, and then a woe−begone little man, in a soft felt hat and a red necktie, both sorely crushed and soiled, with a black bag in his hand. “Is there a fire in the kitchen?” asked Mrs. Quelch the moment she set foot in the house. Being assured that there was, she proceeded down the kitchen stairs, Quelch meekly following her. “Now,” she said, pointing to the black bag, “those—things!” Benjamin opened the bag, and tremblingly took out the frilled night−dress and the cigars. His wife pointed to the fire, and he meekly laid them on it. “Now that necktie.” The necktie followed the cigars. “And that thing;” and the hat crowned the funeral pile.

The smell was peculiar, and to the ordinary nose disagreeable, but to Mrs. Quelch it was as the odour of burnt incense. She watched the heap as it smouldered away, and finally dispersed the embers by a vigorous application of the poker.

“Now, Benjamin,” she said to her trembling spouse, “I forgive you. But if ever again—”

The warning was left unspoken, but it was not needed. Benjamin's one experience has more than satisfied his yearning for soft raiment and foreign travel, and his hats are taller than ever.

THE THREE STRANGERS

BY THOMAS HARDY

Among the few features of agricultural England which retain an appearance but little modified by the lapse of centuries may be reckoned the high, grassy, and furzy downs, coombs, or eweleases, as they are indifferently called, that fill a large area of certain counties in the south and southwest. If any mark of human occupation is met with hereon it usually takes the form of the solitary cottage of some shepherd.

Fifty years ago such a lonely cottage stood on such a down, and may possibly be standing there now. In spite of its loneliness, however, the spot, by actual measurement, was not more than five miles from a county town. Yet what of that? Five miles of irregular upland, during the long, imnimical seasons, with their sleets, snows, rains, and mists, afford withdrawing space enough to isolate a Timon or a Nebuchadnezzar; much less, in fair weather, to please that less repellent tribe, the poets, philosophers, artists, and others who “conceive and meditate of pleasant things.”

Some old earthen camp or barrow, some clump of trees, at least some starved fragment of ancient hedge, is usually taken advantage of in the execution of these forlorn dwellings; but in the present case such a kind of shelter had been disregarded. Higher Crowstairs, as the house was called, stood quite detached and undefended. The only reason for its precise situation seemed to be the crossing of two foot−paths at right angles hard by, which may have crossed there and thus for a good five hundred years. The house was thus exposed to the elements on all sides. But, though the wind up here blew unmistakably when it did blow, and the rain hit hard whenever it fell, the various weathers of the winter season were not quite so formidable on the coomb as they were imagined to be by dwellers on low ground. The raw rimes were not so pernicious as in the hollows, and the frosts were scarcely so severe. When the shepherd and his family who tenanted the house were pitied for their sufferings from the exposure, they said that upon the whole they were less inconvenienced by “wuzzes and flames” (hoarses and phlegms) than when they had lived by the stream of a snug neighbouring valley.

The night of March 28, 182−, was precisely one of the nights that were wont to call forth these expressions of commiseration. The level rain−storm smote walls, slopes, and hedges like the cloth−yard shafts of Senlac and Crecy. Such sheep and outdoor animals as had no shelter stood with their buttocks to the wind, while the tails of little birds trying to roost on some scraggy thorn were blown inside out like umbrellas. The gable end of the cottage was stained with wet, and the eaves−droppings flapped against the wall. Yet never was commiseration for the shepherd more misplaced. For that cheerful rustic was entertaining a large party in glorification of the christening of his second girl.

The guests had arrived before the rain began to fall, and they were all now assembled in the chief or living room of the dwelling. A glance into the apartment at eight o'clock on this eventful evening would have resulted in the opinion that it was as cosey and comfortable a nook as could be wished for in boisterous weather. The calling of its inhabitant was proclaimed by a number of highly polished sheep−crooks without stems, that were hung ornamentally over the fireplace, the curl of each shining crook varying, from the antiquated type engraved in the patriarchal pictures of old family Bibles to the most approved fashion of the last local sheep fair. The room was lighted by half a dozen candles, having wicks only a trifle smaller than than the grease which enveloped them, in sticks that were never used but at high−days, holy days, and family feasts. The lights were scattered about the room, two of them standing on the chimney−piece. This position of candles was in itself significant. Candles on the chimney−piece always meant a party.

On the hearth, in front of a back brand to give substance, blazed a fire of thorns, that crackled “like the laughter of the fool.”

Nineteen persons were gathered here. Of these, five women, wearing gowns of various bright hues, sat in chairs along the wall; girls shy and not shy filled the window−bench; four men, including Charley Jake, the hedge−carpenter, Elijah New, the parish clerk, and John Pitcher, a neighbouring dairyman, the shepherd's father−in−law, lolled in the settle; a young man and maid, who were blushing over tentative pourparlers on a

life−companionship, sat beneath the corner cupboard; and an elderly engaged man of fifty or upward moved restlessly about from spots where his betrothed was not to the spot where she was. Enjoyment was pretty general, and so much the more prevailed in being unhampered by conventional restrictions. Absolute confidence in one another's good opinion begat perfect ease, while the finishing stroke of manner, amounting to a truly princely serenity, was lent to the majority by the absence of any expression or trait denoting that they wished to get on in the world, enlarge their minds, or do any eclipsing thing whatever, which nowadays so generally nips the bloom and bonhomie of all except the two extremes of the social scale.

Shepherd Fennel had married well, his wife being a dairyman's daughter from the valley below, who brought fifty guineas in her pocket—and kept them there till they should be required for ministering to the needs of a coming family. This frugal woman had been somewhat exercised as to the character that should be given to the gathering. A sit−still party had its advantages; but an undisturbed position of ease in chairs and settles was apt to lead on the men to such an unconscionable deal of toping that they would sometimes fairly drink the house dry. A dancing−party was the alternative; but this, while avoiding the foregoing objection on the score of good drink, had a counterbalancing disadvantage in the matter of good victuals, the ravenous appetites engendered by the exercise causing immense havoc in the buttery. Shepherdess Fennel fell back upon the intermediate plan of mingling short dances with short periods of talk and singing, so as to hinder any ungovernable rage in either. But this scheme was entirely confined to her own gentle mind; the shepherd himself was in the mood to exhibit the most reckless phases of hospitality.

The fiddler was a boy of those parts, about twelve years of age, who had a wonderful dexterity in jigs and reels, though his fingers were so small and short as to necessitate a constant shifting for the high notes, from which he scrambled back to the first position with sounds not of unmixed purity of tone. At seven the shrill “tweedledee” of this youngster had begun, accompanied by a booming ground bass from Elijah New, the parish clerk, who had thoughtfully brought with him his favourite musical instrument, the serpent. Dancing was instantaneous, Mrs. Fennel privately enjoining the players on no account to let the dance exceed the length of a quarter of an hour.

But Elijah and the boy, in the excitement of their position, quite forgot the injunction. Moreover, Oliver Giles, a man of seventeen, one of the dancers, who was enamoured of his partner, a fair girl of thirty−three rolling years, had recklessly handed a new crown−piece to the musicians as a bribe to keep going as long as they had muscle and wind. Mrs. Fennel, seeing the steam begin to generate on the countenances of her guests, crossed over and touched the fiddler's elbow and put her hand on the serpent's mouth. But they took no notice, and, fearing she might lose her character of genial hostess if she were to interfere too markedly, she retired and sat down helpless. And so the dance whizzed on with cumulative fury, the performers moving in their planet−like courses, direct and retrograde, from apogee to perigee, till the hand of the well−kicked clock at the bottom of the room had travelled over the circumference of an hour.

While these cheerful events were in course of enactment within Fennel's pastoral dwelling, an incident having considerable bearing on the party had occurred in the gloomy night without. Mrs. Fennel's concern about the growing fierceness of the dance corresponded in point of time with the ascent of a human figure to the solitary hill of Higher Crowstairs from the direction of the distant town. This personage strode on through the rain without a pause, following the little worn path which, farther on in its course, skirted the shepherd's cottage.

It was nearly the time of full moon, and on this account, though the sky was lined with a uniform sheet of dripping cloud, ordinary objects out of doors were readily visible. The sad, wan light revealed the lonely pedestrian to be a man of supple frame; his gait suggested that he had somewhat passed the period of perfect and instinctive agility, though not so far as to be otherwise than rapid of motion when occasion required. In point of fact, he might have been about forty years of age. He appeared tall; but a recruiting sergeant, or other person accustomed to the judging of men's heights by the eye, would have discerned that this was chiefly owing to his gauntness, and that he was not more than five feet eight or nine.

Notwithstanding the regularity of his tread, there was caution in it, as in that of one who mentally feels his way; and, despite the fact that it was not a black coat nor a dark garment of any sort that he wore, there was something about him which suggested that he naturally belonged to the black−coated tribes of men. His clothes were of fustian and his boots hobnailed, yet in his progress he showed not the mud−accustomed bearing of hobnailed and fustianed peasantry.

By the time that he had arrived abreast of the shepherd's premises, the rain came down, or rather came along, with yet more determined violence. The outskirts of the little homestead partially broke the force of wind and rain, and this induced him to stand still. The most salient of the shepherd's domestic erections was an empty sty at the forward corner of his hedgeless garden, for in these latitudes the principle of masking the homelier features of your establishment by a conventional frontage was unknown. The traveller's eye was attracted to this small building by the pallid shine of the wet slates that covered it. He turned aside, and, finding it empty, stood under the pentroof for shelter.

While he stood, the boom of the serpent within and the lesser strains of the fiddler reached the spot, as an accompaniment to the surging hiss of the flying rain on the sod, its louder beating on the cabbage−leaves of the garden, on the eight or ten beehives just discernible by the path, and its dripping from the eaves into a row of buckets and pans that had been placed under the walls of the cottage; for at Higher Crowstairs, as at all such elevated domiciles, the grand difficulty of housekeeping was an insufficiency of water, and a casual rainfall was utilised by turning out as catchers every utensil that the house contained. Some queer stories might be told of the contrivances for economy in suds and dish−waters that are absolutely necessitated in upland habitations during the droughts of summer. But at this season there were no such exigencies; a mere acceptance of what the skies bestowed was sufficient for an abundant store.

At last the notes of the serpent ceased and the house was silent. This cessation of activity aroused the solitary pedestrian from the reverie into which he had lapsed, and, emerging from the shed, with an apparently new intention, he walked up the path to the house door. Arrived here, his first act was to kneel down on a large stone beside the row of vessels and to drink a copious draught from one of them. Having quenched his thirst, he rose and lifted his hand to knock, but paused with his eye upon the panel. Since the dark surface of the wood revealed absolutely nothing, it was evident that he must be mentally looking through the door, as if he wished to measure thereby all the possibilities that a house of this sort might include, and how they might bear upon the question of his entry.

In his indecision he turned and surveyed the scene around. Not a soul was anywhere visible. The garden path stretched downward from his feet, gleaming like the track of a snail; the roof of the little well (mostly dry), the well−cover, the top rail of the garden gate, were varnished with the same dull liquid glaze; while, far away in the vale, a faint whiteness of more than usual extent showed that the rivers were high in the meads. Beyond all this winked a few bleared lamplights through the beating drops, lights that denoted the situation of the county town from which he had appeared to come. The absence of all notes of life in that direction seemed to clinch his intentions, and he knocked at the door.

Within a desultory chat had taken the place of movement and musical sound. The hedge−carpenter was suggesting a song to the company, which nobody just then was inclined to undertake, so that the knock afforded a not unwelcome diversion.

“Walk in!” said the shepherd, promptly.

The latch clicked upward, and out of the night our pedestrian appeared upon the door−mat. The shepherd arose, snuffed two of the nearest candies, and turned to look at him.

Their light disclosed that the stranger was dark in complexion and not unprepossessing as to feature. His hat, which for a moment he did not remove, hung low over his eyes, without concealing that they were large, open, and determined, moving with a flash rather than a glance round the room. He seemed pleased with the survey, and, baring his shaggy head, said, in a rich, deep voice, “The rain is so heavy, friends, that I ask leave to come in and rest awhile.”

“To be sure, stranger,” said the shepherd. “And, faith, you've been lucky in choosing your time, for we are having a bit of a fling for a glad cause—though, to be sure, a man could hardly wish that glad cause to happen more than once a year.”

“Nor less,” spoke up a woman; “for 'tis best to get your family over and done with as soon as you can, so as to be all the earlier out of the fag o't.”

“And what may be this glad cause?” asked the stranger.

“A birth and christening,” said the shepherd.

The stranger hoped his host might not be made unhappy either by too many or too few of such episodes, and, being invited by a gesture to a pull at the mug, he readily acquiesced. His manner, which before entering had been

so dubious, was now altogether that of a careless and candid man.

“Late to be traipsing athwart this coomb—hey?” said the engaged man of fifty.

“Late it is, master, as you say. I'll take a seat in the chimney−corner if you have nothing to urge against it, ma'am, for I am a little moist on the side that was next the rain.”

Mrs. Shepherd Fennel assented, and made room for the self−invited comer, who, having got completely inside the chimney−corner, stretched out his legs and his arms with the expansiveness of a person quite at home.

“Yes, I am rather thin in the vamp,” he said, freely, seeing that the eyes of the shepherd's wife fell upon his boots, “and I am not well fitted, either. I have had some rough times lately, and have been forced to pick up what I can get in the way of wearing; but I must find a suit better fit for working−days when I reach home.”

“One of hereabouts?” she inquired.

“Not quite that—farther up the country.”

“I thought so. And so am I; and by your tongue you come from my neighbourhood.”

“But you would hardly have heard of me,” he said, quickly. “My time would be long before yours, ma'am, you see.”

This testimony to the youthfulness of his hostess had the effect of stopping her cross−examination.

“There is only one thing more wanted to make me happy,” continued the new−comer; “and that is a little 'baccy, which I am sorry to say I am out of.”

“I'll fill your pipe,” said the shepherd.

“I must ask you to lend me a pipe likewise.”

“A smoker, and no pipe about ye?”

“I have dropped it somewhere on the road.”

The shepherd filled and handed him a new clay pipe, saying as he did so, “Hand me your 'baccy−box; I'll fill that too, now I am about it.”

The man went through the movement of searching his pockets.

“Lost that too?” said his entertainer, with some surprise.

“I am afraid so,” said the man, with some confusion “Give it to me in a screw of paper.”

Lighting his pipe at the candle with a suction that drew the whole flame into the bowl, he resettled himself in the corner, and bent his looks upon the faint steam from his damp legs as if he wished say no more.

Meanwhile the general body of guests had been taking little notice of this visitor by reason of an absorbing discussion in which they were engaged with the band about a tune for the next dance The matter being settled, they were about to stand up, when an interruption came in the shape of another knock at the door.

At sound of the same the man in the chimney−corner took up the poker and began stirring the fire as if doing it thoroughly were the one aim of his existence, and a second time the shepherd said, “Walk in!” In a moment another man stood upon the straw−woven door−mat. He too was a stranger.

This individual was one of a type radically different from the first. There was more of the commonplace in his manner, and a certain jovial cosmopolitanism sat upon his features. He was several years older than the first arrival, his hair being slightly frosted, his eyebrows bristly, and his whiskers cut back from his cheeks. His face was rather full and flabby, and yet it was not altogether a face without power. A few grog−blossoms marked the neighbourhood of his nose. He flung back his long drab greatcoat, revealing that beneath it he wore a suit of cinder−gray shade throughout, large, heavy seals, of some metal or other that would take a polish, dangling from his fob as his only personal ornament. Shaking the water−drops from his low−crowned, glazed hat, he said, “I must ask for a few minutes' shelter, comrades, or I shall be wetted to my skin before I get to Casterbridge.”

“Make yerself at home, master,” said the shepherd, perrhaps a trifle less heartily than on the first occasion. Not that Fennel had the least tinge of niggardliness in his composition, but the room was far from large, spare chairs were not numerous, and damp companions were not altogether comfortable at close quarters for the women and girls in their bright−coloured gowns.

However, the second comer, after taking off his greatcoat and hanging his hat on a nail in one of the ceiling beams as if he had been specially invited to put it there, advanced, and sat down at the table. This had been pushed so closely into the chimney−corner, to give all available room to the dancers, that its inner edge grazed the elbow of the man who had ensconced himself by the fire, and thus the two strangers were brought into close companionship. They nodded to each other way of breaking the ice of unacquaintance, and the first stranger

handed his neighbour the large mug—a huge vessel of brown ware, having its upper edge worn away, like a threshold, by the rub of whole genealogies of thirsty lips that had gone the way of all flesh, and bearing the following inscription burned upon its rotund side in yellow letters:

THERE IS NO FUN UNTILL I CUM.

The other man, nothing loath, raised the mug to his lips, and drank on and on and on, till a curious blueness overspread the countenance of the shepherd's wife, who had regarded with no little surprise the first stranger's free offer to the second of what did not belong to him to dispense.

“I knew it!” said the toper to the shepherd, with much satisfaction. “When I walked up your garden afore coming in, and saw the hives all of a row, I said to myself, 'Where there's bees there's honey, and where there's honey there's mead.' But mead of such a truly comfortable sort as this I really didn't expect to meet in my older days.” He took yet another pull at the mug, till it assumed an ominous horizontality.

“Glad you enjoy it!” said the shepherd, warmly.

“It is goodish mead,” assented Mrs. Fennel, with an absence of enthusiasm which seemed to say that it was possible to buy praise for one's cellar at too heavy a price. “It is trouble enough to make—and really I hardly think we shall make any more. For honey sells well, and we can make shift with a drop o' small mead and metheglin for common use from the comb washings.”

“Oh, but you'll never have the heart!” reproachfully cried the stranger in cinder gray, after taking up the mug a third time and setting it down empty. “I love mead, when 't is old like this, as I love to go to church o' Sundays or to relieve the needy any day of the week.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” said the man in the chimney−corner, who, in spite of the taciturnity induced by the pipe of tobacco, could not or would not refrain from this slight testimony to his comrade's humour.

Now the old mead of those days, brewed of the purest first−year or maiden honey, four pounds to gallon,—with its due complement of whites of eggs, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, mace, rosemary, yeast, and processes of working, bottling, and cellaring,—tasted remarkably strong; but it did not taste so strong as it actually was. Hence, presently the stranger in cinder gray at the table, moved by its creeping influence, unbuttoned his waistcoat, threw himself back in his chair, spread his legs, and made his presence felt in various ways.

“Well, well, as I say,” he resumed, “I am going to Casterbridge, and to Casterbridge I must go. I should have been almost there by this time; but the rain drove me in to ye, and I'm not sorry for it.”

“You don't live in Casterbridge?” said the shepherd.

“Not as yet, though I shortly mean to move there.”

“Going to set up in trade, perhaps?”

“No, no,” said the shepherd's wife; “it is easy to see that the gentleman is rich and don't want to work at anything.”

The cinder−gray stranger paused, as if to consider whether he would accept that definition of himself. He presently rejected it by answering, “Rich is not quite the word for me, dame. I do work, and I must work. And even if I only get to Casterbridge by midnight I must begin work there at eight to−morrow morning. Yes, het or wet, blow or snow, famine or sword, my day's work to−morrow must be done.”

“Poor man! Then, in spite o' seeming, you be worse off than we?” replied the shepherd's wife.

“'Tis the nature of my trade, men and maidens. 'Tis the nature of my trade more than my poverty. But really and truly, I must up and off, or I sha'n't get a lodging in the town.”

However, the speaker did not move, and directly added,

“There's time for one more draught of friendship before I go, and I'd perform it at once if the mug were not dry.”

“Here's a mug o' small,” said Mrs. Fennel. “Small, we call it, though, to be sure, 'tis only the first wash o' the combs.”

“No,” said the stranger, disdainfully; “I won't spoil your first kindness by partaking o' your second.

“Certainly not,” broke in Fennel. “We don't increase and multiply every day, and I'll fill the mug again.” He went away to the dark place under the stairs where the barrel stood. The shepherdess followed him.

“Why should you do this?” she said, reproachfully, as soon as they were alone. “He's emptied it once, though it held enough for ten people; and now he's not contented wi' the small, but must needs call for more o' the strong!

And a stranger unbeknown to any of us! For my part, I don't like the look o' the man at all."

"But he's in the house, my honey, and 'tis a wet night, and a christening. Daze it, what's a cup of mead more or less? There'll be plenty more next bee−burning."

"Very well—this time, then," she answered, looking wistfully at the barrel. "But what is the man's calling, and where is he one of, that he should come in and join us like this?"

"I don't know. I'll ask him again."

The catastrophe of having the mug drained dry at one pull by the stranger in cinder gray was effectually guarded against this time by Mrs. Fennel. She poured out his allowance in a small cup, keeping the large one at a discreet distance from him. When he had tossed off his portion the shepherd renewed his inquiry about the stranger's occupation.

The latter did not immediately reply, and the man in the chimney−corner, with sudden demonstrativeness, said, "Anybody may know my trade —I'm a wheelwright."

"A very good trade for these parts," said the shepherd.

"And anybody may know mine−if they've the sense to find it out," said the stranger in cinder gray.

"You may generally tell what a man is by his claws," observed the hedge−carpenter, looking at his hands. "My fingers be as full of thorns as an old pincushion is of pins."

The hands of the man in the chimney−corner instinctively sought the shade, and he gazed into the fire as he resumed his pipe. The man at the table took up the hedge−carpenter's remark, and added smartly, "True; but the oddity of my trade is that, instead of setting a mark upon me, it sets a mark upon my customers."

No observation being offered by anybody in elucidation of this enigma, the shepherd's wife once more called for a song. The same obstacles presented themselves as at the former time: one had no voice, another had forgotten the first verse. The stranger at the table, whose soul had now risen to a good working temperature, relieved the difficulty by exclaiming that, to start the company, he would sing himself. Thrusting one thumb into the armhole of his waistcoat, he waved the other hand in the air, and, with an extemporising gaze at the shining sheep−crooks above the mantelpiece, began:

"Oh, my trade it is the rarest one,
Simple shepherds all,
My trade is a sight to see;
For my customers I tie, and take them up on high,
And waft 'em to a far countree."

The room was silent when he had finished the verse, with one exception, that of the man in the chimney−corner, who, at the singer's word, "Chorus!" joined him in a deep bass voice of musical relish:

"And waft 'em to a far countree."

Oliver Giles, John Pitcher, the dairyman, the parish clerk, the engaged man of fifty, the row of young women against the wall, seemed lost in thought not of the gayest kind. The shepherd looked meditatively on the ground; the shepherdess gazed keenly at the singer, and with some suspicion; she was doubting whether this stranger was merely singing an old song from recollection, or composing one there and then for the occasion. All were as perplexed at the obscure revelation as the guests at Belshazzar's feast, except the man in the chimney−corner, who quietly said, "Second verse, stranger," and smoked on.

The singer thoroughly moistened himself from his lips inward, and went on with the next stanza, as requested:

"My tools are but common ones,
Simple shepherds all,
My tools are no sight to see: A little hempen string, and a post whereon to swing,
Are implements enough for me."

Shepherd Fennel glanced round. There was no longer any doubt that the stranger was answering his question rhythmically. The guests one and all started back with surpressed exclamations. The young woman engaged to the man of fifty fainted half−way, and would have proceeded, but, finding him wanting in alacrity for catching her, she sat down trembling.

"Oh, he's the—" whispered the people in the background, mentioning the name of an ominous public officer. "He's come to do it. 'T is to be at Casterbridge gaol to−morrow—the man for sheep−stealing—the poor clock−maker we heard of, who used to live away at Anglebury and had no work to do—Timothy Sommers,

whose family were a−starving, and so he went out of Anglebury by the highroad, and took a sheep in open daylight, defying the farmer and the farmer's wife and the farmer's man and every man Jack among 'em. He" (and they nodded toward the stranger of the terrible trade) "is come from up the country to do it because there's not enough to do in his own county town, and he's got the place here, now our own county man's dead; he's going to live in the same cottage under the prison wall."

The stranger in cinder gray took no notice of this whispered string of observations, but again wetted his lips. Seeing that his friend in the chimney−corner was the only one who reciprocated his joviality in any way, he held out his cup toward that appreciative comrade, who also held out his own. They clinked together, the eyes of the rest of the room hanging upon the singer's actions. He parted his lips for the third verse, but at that moment another knock was audible upon the door. This time the knock was faint and hesitating.

The company seemed scared; the shepherd looked with consternation toward the entrance, and it was with some effort that he resisted his alarmed wife's deprecatory glance, and uttered for the third time the welcoming words, "Walk in!"

The door was gently opened, and another man stood upon the mat. He, like those who had preceded him, was a stranger. This time it was a short, small personage, of fair complexion, and dressed in a decent suit of dark clothes.

"Can you tell me the way to—" he began; when, gazing round the room to observe the nature of the company among whom he had fallen, his eyes lighted on the stranger in cinder gray. It was just at the instant when the latter, who had thrown his mind into his song with such a will that he scarcely heeded the interruption, silenced all whispers and inquiries by bursting into his third verse:

"To−morrow is my working−day,
Simple shepherds all,
To−morrow is a working−day for me; For the farmer's sheep is slain, and the lad who did it ta'en,
And on his soul may God ha' merc−y!"

The stranger in the chimney−corner, waving cup with the singer so heartily that his mead splashed over on the hearth, repeated in his bass voice as before:

"And on his soul may God ha' mercy!"

All this time the third stranger had been standing in the doorway. Finding now that he did not come forward or go on speaking, the guests particularly regarded him. They noticed, to their surprise, that he stood before them the picture of abject terror−his knees trembling, his hand shaking so violently that the door−latch, by which he supported himself, rattled audibly; his white lips were parted, and his eyes fixed on the merry officer of justice in the middle of the room. A moment more, and he had turned, closed the door, and fled.

"What a man can it be?" said the shepherd.

The rest, between the awfulness of their late discovery and the odd conduct of this third visitor, looked as if they knew not what to think, and said nothing. Instinctively they withdrew farther and farther from the grim gentleman in their midst, whom some of them seemed to take for the prince of darkness himself, till they formed a remote circle, an empty space of floor being left between them and him—

"Circulus, cujus centrum diabolus."

The room was so silent—though there were more than twenty people in it—that nothing could be heard but the patter of the rain against the window−shutters, accompanied by the occasional hiss of a stray drop that fell down the chimney into the fire, and the steady puffing of the man in the corner, who had now resumed his pipe of long clay.

The stillness was unexpectedly broken. The distant sound of a gun reverberated through the air, apparently from the direction of the county town.

"Be jiggered!" cried the stranger who had sung the song, jumping up.

"What does that mean?" asked several.

"A prisoner escaped from the gaol—that 's what it means."

All listened. The sound was repeated, and none of them spoke but the man in the chimney−corner, who said quietly, "I've often been told that in this county they fire a gun at such times, but I never heard it till now."

"I wonder if it is *my* man?" murmured personage in cinder gray.

"Surely it is!" said the shepherd, involuntarily. "And surely we've seen him! That little man who looked in at

the door by now, and quivered like a leaf when he seed ye and heard your song."

"His teeth chattered, and the breath went out of his body," said the dairyman.

"And his heart seemed to sink within him like a stone," said Oliver Giles.

"And he bolted as if he'd been shot at," said the hedge−carpenter.

"True—his teeth chattered, and his heart seemed to sink, and he bolted as if he'd been shot at," slowly summed up the man in the chimney−corner.

"I didn't notice it," remarked the grim songster.

"We were all a−wondering what made him run off in such a fright," faltered one of the women against the wall, "and now't is explained."

The firing of the alarm−gun went on at intervals, low and sullenly, and their suspicions became a certainty. The sinister gentleman in cinder gray roused himself. "Is there a constable here?" he asked, in thick tones. "If so, let him step forward."

The engaged man of fifty stepped quavering out of the corner, his betrothed beginning to sob on the back of the chair.

"You are a sworn constable?"

"I be, sir."

"Then pursue the criminal at once, with assistance, and bring him back here. He can't have gone far."

"I will, sir, I will—when I've got my staff. I'll home and get it, and come sharp here, and start in a body."

"Staff! never mind your staff—the man'll be gone!"

"But I can't do nothing without my staff—can I, William, and John, and Charles Jake? No; for there's the king's royal crown a−painted on en in yaller and gold, and the lion and the unicorn, so as when I raise en up and hit my prisoner't is made a lawful blow thereby. I wouldn't 'tempt to take up a man without my staff—no, not I. If I hadn't the law to gie me courage, why, instead o' my taking him up he might take up me!"

"Now, I'm a king's man myself, and can give you authority enough for this," said the formidable person in cinder gray. "Now then, all of ye, be ready. Have ye any lanterns?"

"Yes; have ye any lanterns? I demand it," said the constable.

"And the rest of you able−bodied—"

"Able−bodied men—yes—the rest of ye," said the constable.

"Have you some good stout staves and pitchforks—"

"Staves and pitchforks—in the name o' the law. And take 'em in yer hands and go in quest, and do as we in authority tell ye."

Thus aroused, the men prepared to give chase. The evidence was, indeed, though circumstantial, so convincing that but little argument was needed to show the shepherd's guests that, after what they had seen, it would look very much like connivance if they did not instantly pursue the unhappy third stranger, who could not as yet have gone more than a few hundred yards over such uneven country.

A shepherd is always well provided with lanterns; and, lighting these hastily, and with hurdle−staves in their hands, they poured out of the door, taking a direction along the crest of the hill, away from the town, the rain having fortunately a little abated.

Disturbed by the noise, or possibly by unpleasant dreams of her baptism, the child who had been christened began to cry heartbrokenly in the room overhead. These notes of grief came down through the chinks of the floor to the ears of the women below, who jumped up, one by one, and seemed glad of the excuse to ascend and comfort the baby; for the incidents of the last half−hour greatly oppressed them. Thus in the space of two or three minutes the room on the ground floor was deserted quite.

But it was not for long. Hardly had the sound of footsteps died away when a man returned round the corner of the house from the direction the pursuers had taken. Peeping in at the door, and seeing nobody there, he entered leisurely. It was the stranger of the chimney−corner, who had gone out with the rest. The motive of his return was shown by his helping himself to a cut piece of skimmer−cake that lay on a ledge beside where he had sat, and which he had apparently forgotten to take with him. He also poured out half a cup more mead from the quantity that remained, ravenously eating and drinking these as he stood. He had not finished when another figure came in just as quietly—the stranger in cinder gray.

"Oh, you here?" said the latter, smiling. "I thought you had gone to help in the capture." And this speaker also

revealed the object of his return by looking solicitously round for the fascinating mug of old mead.

“And I thought you had gone,” said the other, continuing his skimmer−cake with some effort.

“Well, on second thoughts, I felt there were enough without me,” said the first, confidentially, “and such a night as it is, too. Besides, 't is the business o' the government to take care of its criminals, not mine.”

“True, so it is; and I felt as you did—that were enough without me.”

“I don't want to break my limbs running over the humps and hollows of this wild country.”

“Nor I, either, between you and me.”

“These shepherd people are used to it—simpleminded souls, you know, stirred up to anything a moment. They'll have him ready for me before the morning, and no trouble to me at all.”

“They'll have him, and we shall have saved ourselves all labour in the matter.”

“True, true. Well, my way is to Casterbridge, and't is as much as my legs will do to take me that far. Going the same way?”

“No, I am sorry to' say. I have to get home over there” (he nodded indefinitely to the right), “and I feel as you do—that it is quite enough for my legs to do before bedtime.”

The other had by this time finished the mead in the mug, after which, shaking hands at the door and wishing each other well, they went their several ways.

In the meantime the company of pursuers had reached the end of the hog's−back elevation which dominated this part of the coomb. They had decided on no particular plan of action, and, finding that the man of the baleful trade was no longer in their company, they seemed quite unable to form any such plan now. They descended in all directions down the hill, and straightway several of the parties fell into the snare set by nature for all misguided midnight ramblers over the lower cretaceous formation. The “lynchets,” or flint slopes, which belted the escarpment at intervals of a dozen yards, took the less cautious ones unawares, and, losing their footing on the rubbly steep, they slid sharply downward, the lanterns rolling from their hands to the bottom, and there lying on their sides till the horn was scorched through.

When they had again gathered themselves together, the shepherd, as the man who knew the country best, took the lead, and guided them round these treacherous inclines. The lanterns, which seemed rather to dazzle their eyes and warn the fugitive than to assist them in the exploration, were extinguished, due silence was observed, and in this more rational order they plunged into the vale. It was a grassy, briery, moist channel, affording some shelter to any person who had sought it; but the party perambulated it in vain, and ascended on the other side. Here they wandered apart, and after an interval closed together again to report progress. At the second time of closing in they found themselves near a lonely oak, the single tree on this part of the upland, probably sown there by a passing bird some hundred years before; and here, standing a little to one side of the trunk, as motionless as the trunk itself, appeared the man they were in quest of, his outline being well defined against the sky beyond. The band noiselessly drew up and faced him.

“Your money or your life!” said the constable, sternly, to the still figure.

“No, no,” whispered John Pitcher. “'Tisn't our side ought to say that. That's the doctrine of vagabonds like him, and we be on the side of the law.”

“Well, well,” replied the constable, impatiently, “I must say something, mustn't I? And if you had all the weight o' this undertaking upon your mind perhaps you'd say the wrong thing too. Prisoner at the bar, surrender, in the name of the Fath—the crown, I mane!”

The man under the tree seemed now to notice them for the first time, and, giving them no opportunity whatever for exhibiting their courage, he strolled slowly toward them. He was, indeed, the little man, the third stranger, but his trepidation had in a great measure gone.

“Well, travellers,” he said, “did I hear ye speak to me?”

“You did; you've got to come and be our prisoner at once,” said the constable. “We arrest ye on the charge of not biding in Casterbridge gaol in a decent, proper manner, to be hung to−morrow morning. Neighbours, do your duty, and seize the culpet!”

On hearing the charge, the man seemed enlightened, and, saying not another word, resigned himself with preternatural civility to the search−party, who, with their staves in their hands, surrounded him on all sides, and marched him back toward the shepherd's cottage.

It was eleven o'clock by the time they arrived. The light shining from the open door, a sound of men's voices

within, proclaimed to them, as they approached the house, that some new events had arisen in their absence. On entering they discovered the shepherd's living−room to be invaded by officers from Casterbridge gaol and a well−known magistrate who lived at the nearest country−seat, intelligence of the escape having become generally circulated.

“Gentlemen,” said the constable, “I have brought back your man—not without risk and danger, but every one must do his duty. He is inside this circle of able−bodied persons, who have lent me useful aid, considering their ignorance of crown work. Men, bring forward your prisoner.” And the third stranger was led to the light.

“Who is this?” said one of the officials.

“The man,” said the constable.

“Certainly not,” said the other turnkey, and the first corroborated his statement.

“But how can it be otherwise?” asked the constable. “Or why was he so terrified at sight o' the singing instrument of the law?” Here he related the strange behaviour of the third stranger on entering the house.

“Can't understand it,” said the officer, coolly. All I know is that it is not the condemned man. He's quite a different character from this one; a gauntish fellow, with dark hair and eyes, rather good−looking, and with a musical bass voice that, if you heard it once, you'd never mistake as long as you lived.”

“Why, souls,'t was the man in the chimney−corner!”

“Hey—what?” said the magistrate, coming forward after inquiring particulars from the shepherd in the background. “Haven't you got the man after all?”

“Well, sir,” said the constable, “he's the man we were in search of, that's true; and yet he's not the man we were in search of. For the man we were in search of was not the man we wanted, sir, if you understand my every−day way; for 't was the man in the chimney−corner.”

“A pretty kettle of fish altogether!” said the magistiate. “You had better start for the other man at once.”

The prisoner now spoke for the first time. The mention of the man in the chimney−corner seemed to have moved him as nothing else could do. “Sir,” he said, stepping forward to the magistrate, “take no more trouble about me. The time is come when I may as well speak. I have done nothing; my crime is that the condemned man is my brother. Early this afternoon I left home at Anglebury to tramp it all the way to Casterbridge gaol to bid him farewell. I was benighted, and called here to rest and ask the way. When I opened the door I saw before me the very man, my brother, that I thought to see in the condemned cell at Casterbridge. He was in this chimney−corner; and, jammed close to him, so that he could not have got out if he had tried, was the executioner who'd come to take his life, singing a song about it, and not knowing that it was his victim who was close by, joining in to save appearances. My brother looked a glance of agony at me, and I knew he meant, 'Don't reveal what you see; my life depends on it.' I was so terror−struck that I could hardly stand, and, not knowing what I did, I turned and hurried away.”

The narrator's manner and tone had the stamp of truth, and his story made a great impression on around.

“And do you know where your brother is at the present time?” asked the magistrate.

“I do not. I have never seen him since I closed this door.”

“I can testify to that, for we've been between ye ever since,” said the constable.

Where does he think to fly to? What is his occupation?”

“He's a watch−and clock−maker, sir.”

“'A said 'a was a wheelwright—a wicked rogue,” said the constable.

“The wheels o' clocks and watches he meant, no doubt,” said Shepherd Fennel. “I thought his hands were palish for's trade.”

“Well, it appears to me that nothing can be gained by retaining this poor man in custody,” the magistrate; “your business lies with the other unquestionably.”

And so the little man was released offhand; but he looked nothing the less sad on that account, it being beyond the power of magistrate or constable to rase out the written troubles in his brain, for they concerned another, whom he regarded with more solicitude than himself. When this was done, and the man had gone his way, the night was found to be so far advanced that it was deemed useless to renew the search before the next morning.

Next day, accordingly, the quest for the clever sheep−stealer became general and keen—to all appearance, at least. But the intended punishment was cruelly disproportioned to the transgression, and the sympathy of a great many country folk in that district was strongly on the side of the fugitive. Moreover, his marvellous coolness and

daring under the unprecedented circumstances of the shepherd's party won their admiration. So that it may be questioned if all those who ostensibly made themselves so busy in exploring woods and fields and lanes were quite so thorough when it came to the private examination of their own lofts and outhouses. Stories were afloat of a mysterious figure being occasionally seen in some old overgrown trackway or other, remote from turnpike roads; but when a search was instituted in any of these suspected quarters nobody was found. Thus the days and weeks passed without tidings.

In brief, the bass−voiced man of the chimney−corner was never recaptured. Some said that he went across the sea, others that he did not, but buried himself in the depths of a populous city.

At any rate, the gentleman in cinder gray never did his morning's work at Casterbridge, nor met anywhere at all for business purposes the comrade with whom he had passed an hour of relaxation in the lonely house on the coomb.

The grass has long been green on the graves of Shepherd Fennel and his frugal wife; the guests who made up the christening−party have mainly followed their entertainers to the tomb; the baby in whose honour they all had met is a matron in the sear and yellow leaf; but the arrival of the three strangers at the shepherd's that night, and the details connected therewith, is a story as well known as ever in the country about Higher Crowstairs.

MR. LISMORE AND THE WIDOW

BY WILKIE COLLINS

Late in the autumn, not many years since, a public meeting was held at the Mansion House, London, under the direction of the Lord Mayor.

The list of gentlemen invited to address the audience had been chosen with two objects in view. Speakers of celebrity, who would rouse public enthusiasm, were supported by speakers connected with commerce, who would be practically useful in explaining the purpose for which the meeting was convened. Money wisely spent in advertising had produced the customary result: every seat was occupied before the proceedings began.

Among the late arrivals, who had no choice but to stand or to leave the hall, were two ladies. One of them at once decided on leaving the hall.

“I shall go back to the carriage,” she said, “and wait for you at the door.”

Her friend answered, “I sha'n't keep you long. He is advertised to support the second resolution; I want to see him, and that is all.”

An elderly gentleman, seated at the end of a bench, rose and offered his place to the lady who remained. She hesitated to take advantage of his kindness, until he reminded her that he had heard what she said to her friend. Before the third resolution was proposed his seat would be at his own disposal again. She thanked him, and without further ceremony took his place. He was provided with an opera−glass, which he more than once offered to her when famous orators appeared on the platform. She made no use of it until a speaker, known in the City as a ship−owner, stepped forward to support the second resolution.

His name (announced in the advertisements) was Ernest Lismore.

The moment he rose the lady asked for the opera−glass. She kept it to her eyes for such a length of time, and with such evident interest in Mr. Lismore, that the curiosity of her neighbours was aroused. Had he anything to say in which a lady (evidently a stranger to him) was personally interested? There was nothing in the address that he delivered which appealed to the enthusiasm of women. He was undoubtedly a handsome man, whose appearance proclaimed him to be in the prime of life, midway, perhaps, between thirty and forty years of age. But why a lady should persist in keeping an opera−glass fixed on him all through his speech was a question which found the general ingenuity at a loss for a reply.

Having returned the glass with an apology, the lady ventured on putting a question next. “Did it strike you, sir, that Mr. Lismore seemed to be out of spirits?” she asked.

“I can't say it did, ma'am.”

“Perhaps you noticed that he left the platform the moment he had done?”

This betrayal of interest in the speaker did not escape the notice of a lady seated on the bench in front. Before the old gentleman could answer she volunteered an explanation.

“I am afraid Mr. Lismore is troubled by anxieties connected with his business,” she said. “My husband heard it reported in the City yesterday that he was seriously embarrassed by the failure—−”

A loud burst of applause made the end of the sentence inaudible. A famous member of Parliament had risen to propose the third resolution. The polite old man took his seat, and the lady left the hall to join her friend.

“Well, Mrs. Callender, has Mr. Lismore disappointed you?”

“Far from it! But I have heard a report about him which has alarmed me: he is said to be seriously troubled about money matters. How can I find out his address in the City?”

“We can stop at the first stationer's shop we pass, and ask to look at the directory. Are you going to pay Mr. Lismore a visit?”

“I am going to think about it.”

The next day a clerk entered Mr. Lismore's private room at the office, and presented a visiting−card. Mrs. Callender had reflected, and had arrived at a decision. Underneath her name she had written these explanatory words: “An important business.”

“Does she look as if she wanted money?” Mr. Lismore inquired.

“Oh dear, no! She comes in her carriage.”

“Is she young or old?”

“Old, sir.”

To Mr. Lismore, conscious of the disastrous influence occasionally exercised over busy men by youth and beauty, this was a recommendation in itself. He said, “Show her in.”

Observing the lady as she approached him with the momentary curiosity of a stranger, he noticed that she still preserved the remains of beauty. She had also escaped the misfortune, common to persons at her time of life, of becoming too fat. Even to a man's eye, her dressmaker appeared to have made the most of that favourable circumstance. Her figure had its defects concealed, and its remaining merits set off to advantage. At the same time she evidently held herself above the common deceptions by which some women seek to conceal their age. She wore her own gray hair, and her complexion bore the test of daylight. On entering the room, she made her apologies with some embarrassment. Being the embarrassment of a stranger (and not of a youthful stranger) it failed to impress Mr. Lismore favourably.

“I am afraid I have chosen an inconvenient time for my visit,” she began.

“I am at your service,” he answered, a little stiffly, “especially if you will be so kind as to mention your business with me in few words.”

She was a woman of some spirit, and that reply roused her.

“I will mention it in one word,” she said, smartly.” My business is—gratitude.”

He was completely at a loss to understand what she meant, and he said so plainly. Instead of explaining herself she put a question.

“Do you remember the night of the 11th of March, between five and six years since?”

He considered for a moment.

“No,” he said, “I don't remember it. Excuse me Mrs. Callender, I have affairs of my own to attend to which cause me some anxiety—−”

“Let me assist your memory, Mr. Lismore, and I will leave you to your affairs. On the date that I have referred to you were on your way to the railway−station at Bexmore, to catch the night express from the north to London.”

As a hint that his time was valuable the ship−owner had hitherto remained standing. He now took his customary seat, and began to listen with some interest. Mrs. Callender had produced her effect on him already.

“It was absolutely necessary,” she proceeded, “that you should be on board your ship in the London docks at nine o'clock the next morning. If you had lost the express the vessel would have sailed without you.”

The expression of his face began to change to surprise.

“Who told you that?” he asked.

“You shall hear directly. On your way into the town your carriage was stopped by an obstruction on the highroad. The people of Bexmore were looking at a house on fire.”

He started to his feet.

“Good heavens! are you the lady?”

She held up her hand in satirical protest.

“Gently, sir! You suspected me just now of wasting your valuable time. Don't rashly conclude that I am the lady until you find that I am acquainted with the circumstances.”

“Is there no excuse for my failing to recognise you?” Mr. Lismore asked. “We were on the dark side of the burning house; you were fainting, and I—”

“And you,” she interposed, “after saving me at the risk of your own life, turned a deaf ear to my poor husband's entreaties when he asked you to wait till I had recovered my senses.”

“Your poor husband? Surely, Mrs. Callender, he received no serious injury from the fire?”

“The firemen rescued him under circumstances of peril,” she answered, “and at his great age he sank under the shock. I have lost the kindest and best of men. Do you remember how you parted from him—burned and bruised in saving me? He liked to talk of it in his last illness. 'At least,' he said to you, 'tell me the name of the man who preserved my wife from a dreadful death.' You threw your card to him out of the carriage window, and away you went at a gallop to catch your train. In all the years that have passed I have kept that card, and have vainly inquired for my brave sea−captain. Yesterday I saw your name on the list of speakers at the Mansion

House, Need I say that I attended the meeting? Need I tell you now why I come here and interrupt you in business hours?”

She held out her hand. Mr. Lismore took it in silence, and pressed it warmly.

“You have not done with me yet,” she resumed, with a smile. “Do you remember what I said of my errand when I first came in?”

“You said it was an errand of gratitude.”

“Something more than the gratitude which only says 'thank you,'“ she added. “Before I explain myself, however, I want to know what you have been doing, and how it was that my inquiries failed to trace you after that terrible night.” The appearance of depression which Mrs. Calender had noticed at the public meeting showed itself again in Mr. Lismore's face. He sighed as he answered her.

“My story has one merit,” he said: “it is soon told. I cannot wonder that you failed to discover me. In the first place, I was not captain of my ship at that time; I was only mate. In the second place, I inherited some money, and ceased to lead a sailor's life, in less than a year from the night of the fire. You will now understand what obstacles were in the way of your tracing me. With my little capital I started successfully in business as a ship−owner. At the time I naturally congratulated myself on my own good fortune. We little know, Mrs. Callender, what the future has in store for us.”

He stopped. His handsome features hardened, as if he were suffering (and concealing) pain. Before it was possible to speak to him there was a knock at the door. Another visitor without an appointment had called; the clerk appeared again with a card and a message.

“The gentleman begs you will see him, sir. He has something to tell you which is too important to be delayed.”

Hearing the message, Mrs. Callender rose immediately.

“It is enough for to−day that we understand each other,” she said. “Have you any engagement to−morrow after the hours of business?”

“None.”

She pointed to her card on the writing−table. “Will you come to me to−morrow evening at that address? I am like the gentleman who has just called: I too have my reason for wishing to see you.”

He gladly accepted the invitation. Mrs. Callender stopped him as he opened the door for her.

“Shall I offend you,” she said, “if I ask a strange question before I go? I have a better motive, mind, than mere curiosity. Are you married?”

“No.”

“Forgive me again,” she resumed. “At my age you cannot possibly misunderstand me; and yet—”

She hesitated. Mr. Lismore tried to give her confidence. “Pray don't stand on ceremony, Mrs. Callender. Nothing that *you* can ask me need be prefaced by an apology.”

Thus encouraged, she ventured to proceed. “You may be engaged to be married?” she suggested. “Or you may be in love?”

He found it impossible to conceal his surprise, but he answered without hesitation.

“There is no such bright prospect in *my* life,” he said. “I am not even in love.”

She left him with a little sigh. It sounded like a sigh of relief.

Ernest Lismore was thoroughly puzzled. What could be the old lady's object in ascertaining that he was still free from a matrimonial engagement? If the idea had occurred to him in time he might have alluded to her domestic life, and might have asked if she had children. With a little tact he might have discovered more than this. She had described her feeling toward him as passing the ordinary limits of gratitude, and she was evidently rich enough to be above the imputation of a mercenary motive. Did she propose to brighten those dreary prospects to which he had alluded in speaking of his own life? When he presented himself at her house the next evening would she introduce him to a charming daughter?

He smiled as the idea occurred to him. “An appropriate time to be thinking of my chances of marriage!” he said to himself. “In another month I may be a ruined man.”

The gentleman who had so urgently requested an interview was a devoted friend, who had obtained a means of helping Ernest at a serious crisis in his affairs.

It had been truly reported that he was in a position of pecuniary embarrassment, owing to the failure of a

mercantile house with which he had been intimately connected. Whispers affecting his own solvency had followed on the bankruptcy of the firm. He had already endeavoured to obtain advances of money on the usual conditions, and had been met by excuses for delay. His friend had now arrived with a letter of introduction to a capitalist, well known in commercial circles for his daring speculations and for his great wealth.

Looking at the letter, Ernest observed that the envelope was sealed. In spite of that ominous innovation on established usage in cases of personal introduction, he presented the letter. On this occasion he was not put off with excuses. The capitalist flatly declined to discount Mr. Lismore's bills unless they were backed by responsible names.

Ernest made a last effort.

He applied for help to two mercantile men whom he had assisted in *their* difficulties, and whose names would have satisfied the money−lender. They were most sincerely sorry, but they too refused.

The one security that he could offer was open, it must be owned, to serious objections on the score of risk. He wanted an advance of twenty thousand pounds, secured on a homeward−bound ship and cargo. But the vessel was not insured, and at that stormy season she was already more than a month overdue. Could grateful colleagues be blamed if they forgot their obligations when they were asked to offer pecuniary help to a merchant in this situation? Ernest returned to his office without money and without credit.

A man threatened by ruin is in no state of mind to keep an engagement at a lady's tea−table. Ernest sent a letter of apology to Mrs. Callender, alleging extreme pressure of business as the excuse for breaking his engagement.

“Am I to wait for an answer, sir?” the messenger asked.

“No; you are merely to leave the letter.”

In an hour's time, to Ernest's astonishment, the messenger returned with a reply.

“The lady was just going out, sir, when I rang at the door,” he explained, “and she took the letter from me herself. She didn't appear to know your handwriting, and she asked me who I came from. When I mentioned your name I was ordered to wait.”

Ernest opened the letter.

“DEAR MR. LISMORE: One of us must speak out, and your letter of apology forces me to be that one. If you are really so proud and so distrustful as you seem to be, I shall offend you; if not, I shall prove myself to be your friend.

“Your excuse is 'pressure of business'; the truth (as I have good reason to believe) is 'want of money.' I heard a stranger at that public meeting say that you were seriously embarrassed by some failure in the City.

“Let me tell you what my own pecuniary position is in two words: I am the childless widow of a rich man—”

Ernest paused. His anticipated discovery of Mrs. Callender's “charming daughter” was in his mind for the moment. “That little romance must return to the world of dreams,” he thought, and went on with the letter.

“After what I owe to you, I don't regard it as repaying an obligation; I consider myself as merely performing a duty when I offer to assist you by a loan of money.

“Wait a little before you throw my letter into the waste−paper basket.

“Circumstances (which it is impossible for me to mention before we meet) put it out of my power to help you—unless I attach to my most sincere offer of service a very unusual and very embarrassing condition. If you are on the brink of ruin that misfortune will plead my excuse—and your excuse too, if you accept the loan on my terms. In any case, I rely on the sympathy and forbearance of the man to whom I owe my life.

“After what I have now written, there is only one thing to add: I beg to decline accepting your excuses, and I shall expect to see you to−morrow evening, as we arranged. I am an obstinate old woman, but I am also your faithful friend and servant,

“MARY CALLENDER.”

Ernest looked up from the letter. “What can this possibly mean?” he wondered.

But he was too sensible a man to be content with wondering; he decided on keeping his engagement.

What Dr. Johnson called “the insolence of wealth” appears far more frequently in the houses of the rich than in the manners of the rich. The reason is plain enough. Personal ostentation is, in the very nature of it, ridiculous; but the ostentation which exhibits magnificent pictures, priceless china, and splendid furniture, can purchase good taste to guide it, and can assert itself without affording the smallest opening for a word of depreciation or a look

of contempt. If I am worth a million of money, and if I am dying to show it, I don't ask you to look at me, I ask you to look at my house.

Keeping his engagement with Mrs. Callender, Ernest discovered that riches might be lavishly and yet modestly used.

In crossing the hall and ascending the stairs, look where he might, his notice was insensibly won by proofs of the taste which is not to be purchased, and the wealth which uses, but never exhibits, its purse. Conducted by a man−servant to the landing on the first floor, he found a maid at the door of the boudoir waiting to announce him. Mrs. Callender advanced to welcome her guest, in a simple evening dress, perfectly suited to her age. All that had looked worn and faded in her fine face by daylight was now softly obscured by shaded lamps. Objects of beauty surrounded her, which glowed with subdued radiance from their background of sober colour. The influence of appearances is the strongest of all outward influences, while it lasts. For the moment the scene produced its impression on Ernest, in spite of the terrible anxieties which consumed him. Mrs. Callender in his office was a woman who had stepped out of her appropriate sphere. Mrs. Callender in her own house was a woman who had risen to a new place in his estimation.

“I am afraid you don't thank me for forcing you to keep your engagement,” she said, with her friendly tones and her pleasant smile.

“Indeed I do thank you,” he replied. “Your beautiful house and your gracious welcome have persuaded me into forgetting my troubles—for a while.”

The smile passed away from her face. “Then it is true,” she said, gravely.

“Only too true.”

She led him to a seat beside her, and waited to speak again until her maid had brought in the tea.

“Have you read my letter in the same friendly spirit in which I wrote it? “she asked, when they were alone again.

“I have read your letter gratefully, but—”

“But you don't know yet what I have to say. Let us understand each other before we make any objections on either side. Will you tell me what your present position is—at its worst? I can, and will, speak plainly when my turn comes, if you will honour me with your confidence. Not if it distresses you,” she added, observing him attentively. He was ashamed of his hesitation, and he made amends for it.

“Do you thoroughly understand me?” he asked, when the whole truth had been laid before her without reserve.

She summed up the result in her own words: “If your overdue ship returns safely within a month from this time, you can borrow the money you want without difficulty. If the ship is lost, you have no alternative, when the end of the month comes, but to accept a loan from me or to suspend payment. Is that the hard truth?”

“It is.”

“And the sum you require is—twenty thousand pounds?”

“Yes.”

“I have twenty times as much money as that, Mr. Lismore, at my sole disposal—on one condition.”

“The condition alluded to in your letter?”

“Yes.”

“Does the fulfilment of the condition depend in some way on any decision of mine?”

“It depends entirely on you.”

That answer closed his lips.

With a composed manner and a steady hand, she poured herself out a cup of tea. “I conceal it from you,” she said, “but I want confidence Here” (she pointed to the cup) “is the friend of women, rich or poor, when they are in trouble. What I have now to say obliges me to speak in praise of myself. I don't like it; let me get it over as soon as I can. My husband was very fond of me; he had the most absolute confidence in my discretion, and in my sense of duty to him and to myself. His last words before he died were words that thanked me for making the happiness of his life. As soon as I had in some degree recovered after the affliction that had fallen on me, his lawyer and executor produced a copy of his will, and said there were two clauses in it which my husband had expressed a wish that I should read. It is needless to say that I obeyed.” mit to certain restrictions, which, remembering my position, you will understand and excuse.

"We are to live together, it is unnecessary to say, as mother and son. The marriage ceremony is to be strictly private, and you are so to arrange our affairs that, immediately afterward, we leave England for any foreign place which you prefer. Some of my friends, and (perhaps) some of your friends, will certainly misinterpret our motives, if we stay in our own country, in a manner which would be unendurable to a woman like me.

"As to our future lives, I have the most perfect confidence in you, and I should leave you in the same position of independence which you occupy now. When you wish for my company you will always be welcome. At other times you are your own master. I live on my side of the house, and you live on yours; and I am to be allowed my hours of solitude every day in the pursuit of musical occupations, which have been happily associated with all my past life, and which I trust confidently to your indulgence.

"A last word, to remind you of what you may be too kind to think of yourself.

"At my age, you cannot, in the course of nature. be troubled by the society of a grateful old woman for many years. You are young enough to look forward to another marriage, which shall be something more than a mere form. Even if you meet with the happy woman in my lifetime, honestly tell me of it, and I promise to tell her that she has only to wait.

"In the meantime, don't think, because I write composedly, that I write heartlessly. You pleased and interested me when I first saw you at the public meeting. I don't think I could have proposed what you call this sacrifice of myself to a man who had personally repelled me, though I have felt my debt of gratitude as sincerely as ever. Whether your ship is safe or whether your ship is lost, old Mary Callender likes you, and owns it without false shame.

"Let me have your answer this evening, either personally or by letter, whichever you like best."

Mrs. Callender received a written answer long before the evening. It said much in few words:

"A man impenetrable to kindness might be able to resist your letter. I am not that man. Your great heart has conquered me."

The few formalities which precede marriage by special license were observed by Ernest. While the destiny of their future lives was still in suspense, an unacknowledged feeling of embarrassment on either side kept Ernest and Mrs. Callender apart. Every day brought the lady her report of the state of affairs in the City, written always in the same words: "No news of the ship."

On the day before the ship−owner's liabilities became due the terms of the report from the City remained unchanged, and the special license was put to its contemplated use. Mrs. Callender's lawyer and Mrs. Callender's maid were the only persons trusted with the secret. Leaving the chief clerk in charge of the business, with every pecuniary demand on his employer satisfied in full, the strangely married pair quitted England.

They arranged to wait for a few days in Paris, to receive any letters of importance which might have been addressed to Ernest in the interval. On the evening of their arrival a telegram from London was waiting at their hotel. It announced that the missing ship had passed up channel—undiscovered in a fog until she reached the Downs —on the day before Ernest's liabilities fell due.

"Do you regret it?" Mrs. Lismore said to her husband.

"Not for a moment!" he answered.

They decided on pursuing their journey as far as Munich.

Mrs. Lismore's taste for music was matched by Ernest's taste for painting. In his leisure hours he cultivated the art, and delighted in it. The picture−galleries of Munich were almost the only galleries in Europe which he had not seen. True to the engagements to which she had pledged herself, his wife was willing to go wherever it might please him to take her. The one suggestion she made was that they should hire furnished apartments. If they lived at a hotel friends of the husband or the wife (visitors like themselves to the famous city) might see their names in the book or might meet them at the door.

They were soon established in a house large enough to provide them with every accommodation which they required. Ernest's days were passed in the galleries, Mrs. Lismore remaining at home, devoted to her music, until it was time to go out with her husband for a drive. Living together in perfect amity and concord, they were nevertheless not living happily. Without any visible reason for the change, Mrs. Lismore's spirits were depressed. On the one occasion when Ernest noticed it she made an effort to be cheerful, which it distressed him to see. He allowed her to think that she had relieved him of any further anxiety. Whatever doubts he might feel were doubts delicately concealed from that time forth.

But when two people are living together in a state of artificial tranquillity, it seems to be a law of nature that the element of disturbance gathers unseen, and that the outburst comes inevitably with the lapse of time.

In ten days from the date of their arrival at Munich the crisis came. Ernest returned later than usual from the picture−gallery, and, for the first time in his wife's experience, shut himself up in his own room.

He appeared at the dinner hour with a futile excuse. Mrs. Lismore waited until the servant had withdrawn.

“Now, Ernest,” she said, “it's time to tell me the truth.”

Her manner, when she said those few words, took him by surprise. She was unquestionably confused, and, instead of looking at him, she trifled with the fruit on her plate. Embarrassed on his side, he could only answer:

“I have nothing to tell.”

“Were there many visitors at the gallery?” she asked.

“About the same as usual.”

“Any that you particularly noticed?” she went on. “I mean among the ladies.”

He laughed uneasily.

“You forget how interested I am in the pictures,” he said.

There was a pause. She looked up at him, and suddenly looked away again; but—he saw it plainly—there were tears in her eyes.

“Do you mind turning down the gas?” she said. “My eyes have been weak all day.”

He complied with her request the more readily, having his own reasons for being glad to escape the glaring scrutiny of the light.

“I think I will rest a little on the sofa,” she resumed. In the position which he occupied his back would have been now turned on her. She stopped him when he tried to move his chair. “I would rather not look at you, Ernest,” she said, “when you have lost confidence in me.”

Not the words, but the tone, touched all that was generous and noble in his nature. He left his place and knelt beside her, and opened to her his whole heart.

“Am I not unworthy of you?” he asked, when it was over.

She pressed his hand in silence.

“I should be the most ungrateful wretch living,” he said, “if I did not think of you, and you only, now that my confession is made. We will leave Munich to−morrow, and, if resolution can help me, I will only remember the sweetest woman my eyes ever looked on as the creature of a dream.”

She hid her face on his breast, and reminded him of that letter of her writing which had decided the course of their lives.

“When I thought you might meet the happy woman in my lifetime I said to you, 'Tell me of it, and I promise to tell her that she has only to wait.' Time must pass, Ernest, before it can be needful to perform my promise, but you might let me see her. If you find her in the gallery to−morrow you might bring her here.”

Mrs. Lismore's request met with no refusal. Ernest was only at a loss to know how to grant it.

“You tell me she is a copyist of pictures,” his wife reminded him. “She will be interested in hearing of the portfolio of drawings by the great French artists which I bought for you in Paris. Ask her to come and see them, and to tell you if she can make some copies; and say, if you like, that I shall be glad to become acquainted with her.”

He felt her breath beating fast on his bosom. In the fear that she might lose all control over herself, he tried to relieve her by speaking lightly.

“What an invention yours is!” he said. “If my wife ever tries to deceive me, I shall be a mere child in her hands.”

She rose abruptly from the sofa, kissed him on the forehead, and said wildly, “I shall be better in bed!” Before he could move or speak she had left him.

The next morning he knocked at the door of his wife's room, and asked how she had passed the night.

“I have slept badly,” she answered, “and I must beg you to excuse my absence at breakfast−time.” She called him back as he was about to withdraw. “Remember,” she said, “when you return from the gallery to−day I expect that you will not return alone.”

Three hours later he was at home again. The young lady's services as a copyist were at his disposal; she had returned with him to look at the drawings.

The sitting−room was empty when they entered it. He rang for his wife's maid, and was informed that Mrs. Lismore had gone out. Refusing to believe the woman, he went to his wife's apartments. She was not to be found.

When he returned to the sitting−room the young lady was not unnaturally offended. He could make allowances for her being a little out of temper at the slight that had been put on her; but he was inexpressibly disconcerted by the manner—almost the coarse manner—in which she expressed herself.

“I have been talking to your wife's maid while you have been away,” she said. “I find you have married an old lady for her money. She is jealous of me, of course?”

“Let me beg you to alter your opinion,” he answered. “You are wronging my wife; she is incapable of any such feeling as you attribute to her.”

The young lady laughed. “At any rate, you are a good husband,” she said, satirically. “Suppose you own the truth: wouldn't you like her better if she was young and pretty like me ?”

He was not merely surprised, he was disgusted. Her beauty had so completely fascinated him when he first saw her that the idea of associating any want of refinement and good breeding with such a charming creature never entered his mind. The disenchantment to him was already so complete that he was even disagreeably affected by the tone of her voice; it was almost as repellent to him as thie exhibition of unrestrained bad temper which she seemed perfectly careless to conceal.

“I confess you surprise me,” he said, coldly.

The reply produced no effect on her. On the contrary, she became more insolent than ever.

“I have a fertile fancy,” she went on, “and your absurd way of taking a joke only encourages me! Suppose you could transform this sour old wife of yours, who has insulted me, into the sweetest young creature that ever lived by only holding up your finger, wouldn't you do it?”

This passed the limits of his endurance. “I have no wish,” he said, “to forget the consideration which is due to a woman. You leave me but one alternative.” He rose to go out of the room.

She ran to the door as he spoke, and placed herself in the way of his going out.

He signed to her to let him pass.

She suddenly threw her arms round his neck, kissed him passionately, and whispered, with her lips at his ear, “O Ernest, forgive me! Could I have asked you to marry me for my money if I had not taken refuge in a disguise?”

When he had sufficiently recovered to think he put her back from him. “Is there an end of the deception now?” he asked, sternly. “Am I to trust you in your new character?”

“You are not to be harder on me than I deserve,” she answered, gently. “Did you ever hear of an actress named Miss Max?”

He began to understand her. “Forgive me if I spoke harshly,” he said. “You have put me to a severe trial.”

She burst into tears. “Love,” she murmured. “is my only excuse.”

From that moment she had won her pardon. He took her hand and made her sit by him.

“Yes,” he said, “I have heard of Miss Max, and of her wonderful powers of personation; and I have always regretted not having seen her while she was on the stage.”

“Did you hear anything more of her, Ernest?”

“Yes; I heard that she was a pattern of modesty and good conduct, and that she gave up her profession at the height of her success to marry an old man.”

“Will you come with me to my room?” she asked. “I have something there which I wish to show you.”

It was the copy of her husband's will.

“Read the lines, Ernest, which begin at the top of the page. Let my dead husband speak for me.”

The lines ran thus:

“My motive in marrying Miss Max must be stated in this place, in justice to her, and, I will venture to add, in justice to myself. I felt the sincerest sympathy for her position. She was without father, mother, or friends, one of the poor forsaken children whom the mercy of the foundling hospital provides with a home. Her after life on the stage was the life of a virtuous woman, persecuted by profligates, insulted by some of the baser creatures associated with her, to whom she was an object of envy. I offered her a home and the protection of a father, on the only terms which the world would recognise as worthy of us. My experience of her since our marriage has been the experience of unvarying goodness, sweetness, and sound sense. She has behaved so nobly in a trying position

that I wish her (even in this life) to have her reward. I entreat her to make a second choice in marriage, which shall not be a mere form. I firmly believe that she will choose well and wisely, that she will make the happiness of a man who is worthy of her, and that, as wife and mother, she will set an example of inestimable value in the social sphere that she occupies. In proof of the heartfelt sincerity with which I pay my tribute to her virtues, I add to this, my will, the clause that follows."

With the clause that followed Ernest was already acquainted.

"Will you now believe that I never loved till I saw your face for the first time?" said his wife. "I had no experience to place me on my guard against the fascination—the madness, some people might call it—which possesses a woman when all her heart is given to a man. Don't despise me, my dear! Remember that I had to save you from disgrace and ruin. Besides, my old stage remembrances tempted me. I had acted in a play in which the heroine did—what I have done. It didn't end with me as it did with her in the story. *She* was represented as rejoicing in the success of her disguise. I have known some miserable hours of doubt and shame since our marriage. When I went to meet you in my own person at the picture−gallery, oh, what relief, what joy I felt when I saw how you admired me! It was not because I could no longer carry on the disguise; I was able to get hours of rest from the effort, not only at night, but in the daytime, when I was shut up in my retirement in the music−room, and when my maid kept watch against discovery. No, my love! I hurried on the disclosure because I could no longer endure the hateful triumph of my own deception. Ah, look at that witness against me! I can't bear even to see it."

She abruptly left him. The drawer that she had opened to take out the copy of the will also contained the false gray hair which she had discarded. It had only that moment attracted her notice. She snatched it up and turned to the fireplace.

Ernest took it from her before she could destroy it. "Give it to me," he said.

"Why?"

He drew her gently to his bosom, and answered, "I must not forget my old wife."

THE PHILOSOPHER IN THE APPLE ORCHARD

BY ANTHONY HOPE

It was a charmingly mild and balmy day. The sun shone beyond the orchard, and the shade was cool inside. A light breeze stirred the boughs of the old apple−tree under which the philosopher sat. None of these things did the philosopher notice, unless it might be when the wind blew about the leaves of the large volume on his knees, and he had to find his place again. Then he would exclaim against the wind, shuffle the leaves till he got the right page, and settle to his reading. The book was a treatise on ontology; it was written by another philosopher, a friend of this philosopher's; it bristled with fallacies, and this philosopher was discovering them all, and noting them on the fly−leaf at the end. He was not going to review the book (as some might have thought from his behaviour), or even to answer it in a work of his own. It was just that he found a pleasure in stripping any poor fallacy naked and crucifying it. Presently a girl in a white frock came into the orchard. She picked up an apple, bit it, and found it ripe. Holding it in her hand, she walked up to where the philosopher sat, and looked at him. He did not stir. She took a bite out of the apple, munched it, and swallowed it. The philosopher crucified a fallacy on the fly−leaf. The girl flung the apple away.

“Mr. Jerningham,” said she, “are you very busy?”

The philosopher, pencil in hand, looked up.

“No, Miss May,” said he, “not very.”

“Because I want your opinion.”

“In one moment,” said the philosopher, apologetically.

He turned back to the fly−leaf and began to nail the last fallacy a little tighter to the cross. The girl regarded him, first with amused impatience, then with a vexed frown, finally with a wistful regret. He was so very old for his age, she thought; he could not be much beyond thirty; his hair was thick and full of waves, his eyes bright and clear, his complexion not yet divested of all youth's relics.

“Now, Miss May, I'm at your service,” said the philosopher, with a lingering look at his impaled fallacy; and he closed the book, keeping it, however, on his knee.

The girl sat down just opposite to him.

“It's a very important thing I want to ask you,” she began, tugging at a tuft of grass, “and it's very—difficult, and you mustn't tell any one I asked you; at least, I'd rather you didn't.”

“I shall not speak of it; indeed, I shall probably not remember it,” said the philosopher.

“And you mustn't look at me, please, while I'm asking you.”

“I don't think I was looking at you, but if I was I beg your pardon,” said the philosopher, apologetically.

She pulled the tuft of grass right out of the ground, and flung it from her with all her force.

“Suppose a man—“ she began. “No, that's not right.”

“You can take any hypothesis you please,” observed the philosopher, “but you must verify it afterward, of course.”

“Oh, do let me go on. Suppose a girl, Mr. Jerningham—I wish you wouldn't nod.”

“It was only to show that I followed you.”

“Oh, of course you 'follow me,' as you call it. Suppose a girl had two lovers—you're nodding again—or, I ought to say, suppose there were two men who might be in love with a girl.”

“Only two?” asked the philosopher. “You see, any number of men *might be in love with*—“

“Oh, we can leave the rest out,” said Miss May, with a sudden dimple; “they don't matter.”

“Very well,” said the philosopher, “if they are irrelevant we will put them aside.”

“Suppose, then, that one of these men was, oh, *awfully* in love with the girl, and—and proposed, you know—”

“A moment!” said the philosopher, opening a note−book. “Let me take down his proposition. What was it?”

“Why, proposed to her—asked her to marry him,” said the girl, with a stare.

“Dear me! How stupid of me! I forgot that special use of the word. Yes?”

“The girl likes him pretty well, and her people approve of him, and all that, you know.”

“That simplifies the problem,” said the philosopher, nodding again.

“But she's not in—in love with him, you know. She doesn't *really* care for him—*much*. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly. It is a most natural state of mind.”

“Well then, suppose that there's another man —what are you writing?”

“I only put down (B)—like that,” pleaded the philosopher, meekly exhibiting his note−book.

She looked at him in a sort of helpless exasperation, with just a smile somewhere in the background of it.

“Oh, you really are—“ she exclaimed. “But let me go on. The other man is a friend of the girl's: he's very clever—oh, fearfully clever—and he's rather handsome. You needn't put that down.”

“It is certainly not very material,” admitted the philosopher, and he crossed out “handsome”; “clever” he left.

“And the girl is most awfully—she admires him tremendously; she thinks him just the greatest man that ever lived, you know. And she—she—“ The girl paused.

“I'm following,” said the philosopher, with pencil poised.

“She'd think it better than the whole world if —if she could be anything to him, you know.”

“You mean become his wife?”

“Well, of course I do—at least, I suppose I do.”

“You spoke rather vaguely, you know.”

The girl cast one glance at the philosopher as she replied:

“Well, yes; I did mean become his wife.”

“Yes. Well?”

“But,” continued the girl, starting on another tuft of grass, “he doesn't think much about those things. He likes her. I think he likes her—”

“Well, doesn't dislike her?” suggested the philosopher. “Shall we call him indifferent?”

“I don't know. Yes, rather indifferent. I don't think he thinks about it, you know. But she—she's pretty. You needn't put that down.”

“I was not about to do so,” observed the philosopher.

“She thinks life with him would be just heaven; and—and she thinks she would make him awfully happy. She would—would be so proud of him, you see.”

“I see. Yes?”

“And—I don't know how to put it, quite—she thinks that if he ever thought about it at all he might care for her; because he doesn't care for anybody else, and she's pretty—”

“You said that before.”

“Oh dear, I dare say I did. And most men care for somebody, don't they? Some girl, I mean.”

“Most men, no doubt,” conceded the philosopher.

“Well then, what ought she to do? It's not a real thing, you know, Mr. Jerningham. It's in —in a novel I was reading.” She said this hastily, and blushed as she spoke.

“Dear me! And it's quite an interesting case! Yes, I see. The question is, Will she act most wisely in accepting the offer of the man who loves her exceedingly, but for whom she entertains only a moderate affection—”

“Yes; just a liking. He's just a friend.”

“Exactly. Or in marrying the other whom she loves ex—”

“That's not it. How can she marry him? He hasn't—he hasn't asked her, you see.”

“True; I forgot. Let us assume, though, for the moment, that he has asked her. She would then have to consider which marriage would probably be productive of the greater sum total of—”

“Oh, but you needn't consider that.”

“But it seems the best logical order. We can afterward make allowance for the element of uncertainty caused by—”

“Oh no; I don't want it like that. I know perfectly well which she'd do if he—the other man you know—asked her.”

“You apprehend that—”

“Never mind what I 'apprehend.' Take it as I told you.”

“Very good. A has asked her hand, B has not.”

“Yes.”

“May I take it that, but for the disturbing influence of B, A would be a satisfactory—er—candidate?”

“Ye—es; I think so.”

“She therefore enjoys a certainty of considerable happiness if she marries A?”

“Ye—es; not perfect, because of—B, you know.”

“Quite so, quite so; but still a fair amount of happiness. Is it not so?”

“I don't—well, perhaps.”

“On the other hand, if B did ask her, we are to postulate a higher degree of happiness for her?”

“Yes, please, Mr. Jerningham—much higher.”

“For both of them?”

“For her. Never mind him.”

“Very well. That again simplifies the problem. But his asking her is a contingency only?”

“Yes, that's all.”

The philosopher spread out his hands.

“My dear young lady,” he said, “it becomes a question of degree. How probable or improbable is it?”

“I don't know; not very probable—unless—”

“Well?”

“Unless he did happen to notice, you know.”

“Ah, yes; we supposed that, if he thought of it, he would probably take the desired step—at least, that he might be led to do so. Could she not—er—indicate her preference?”

“She might try—no, she couldn't do much. You see, he—he doesn't think about such things.”

“I understand precisely. And it seems to me, Miss May, that in that very fact we find our solution.”

“Do we?” she asked.

“I think so. He has evidently no natural inclination toward her—perhaps not toward marriage at all. Any feeling aroused in him would be necessarily shallow and, in a measure, artificial, and in all likelihood purely temporary. Moreover, if she took steps to arouse his attention one of two things would be likely to happen. Are you following me?”

“Yes, Mr. Jerningham.”

“Either he would be repelled by her overtures, —which you must admit is not improbable,—and then the position would be unpleasant, and even degrading, for her; or, on the other hand, he might, through a misplaced feeling of gallantry—”

“Through what?”

“Through a mistaken idea of politeness, or a mistaken view of what was kind, allow himself to be drawn into a connection for which he had no genuine liking. You agree with me that one or other of these things would be likely?”

“Yes, I suppose they would, unless he did come to care for her.”

“Ah, you return to that hypothesis. I think it's an extremely fanciful one. No, she need not marry A; but she must let B alone.”

The philosopher closed his book, took off his glasses, wiped them, replaced them, and leaned back against the trunk of the apple−tree. The girl picked a dandelion in pieces. After a long pause she asked:

“You think B's feelings wouldn't be at all likely to—to change?”

“That depends on the sort of man he is. But if he is an able man, with intellectual interests which engross him—a man who has chosen his path in life—a man to whom women's society is not a necessity—”

“He's just like that,” said the girl, and she bit the head off a daisy.

“Then,” said the philosopher, “I see not the least reason for supposing that his feelings will change.”

“And would you advise her to marry the other —A?”

“Well, on the whole, I should. A is a good fellow (I think we made A a good fellow), he is a suitable match, his love for her is true and genuine—”

“It's tremendous!”

“Yes—and—er—extreme. She likes him. There is every reason to hope that her liking will develop into a sufficiently deep and stable affection. She will get rid of her folly about B, and make A a good wife. Yes, Miss

May, if I were the author of your novel I should make her marry A, and I should call that a happy ending."

A silence followed. It was broken by the philosopher.

"Is that all you wanted my opinion about, Miss May?" he asked, with his finger between the leaves of the treatise on ontology.

"Yes, I think so. I hope I haven't bored you?"

"I've enjoyed the discussion extremely. I had no idea that novels raised points of such psychological interest. I must find time to read one."

The girl had shifted her position till, instead of her full face, her profile was turned toward him. Looking away toward the paddock that lay brilliant in sunshine on the skirts of the apple orchard, she asked in low slow tones, twisting her hands in her lap:

"Don't you think that perhaps if B found out afterward—when she had married A, you know—that she had cared for him so very, very much, he might be a little sorry?"

"If he were a gentleman he would regret it deeply."

"I mean—sorry on his own account; that—that he had thrown away all that, you know?"

The philosopher looked meditative.

"I think," he pronounced, "that it is very possible he would. I can well imagine it."

"He might never find anybody to love him like that again," she said, gazing on the gleaming paddock.

"He probably would not," agreed the philosopher.

"And—and most people like being loved, don't they?"

"To crave for love is an almost universal instinct, Miss May."

"Yes, almost," she said, with a dreary little smile. "You see, he'll get old, and—and have no one to look after him."

"He will."

"And no home."

"Well, in a sense, none," corrected the philosopher, smiling. "But really you'll frighten me. I'm a bachelor myself, you know, Miss May."

"Yes," she whispered, just audibly.

"And all your terrors are before me."

"Well, unless—"

"Oh, we needn't have that 'unless,'" laughed the philosopher, cheerfully. "There's no 'unless' about it, Miss May."

The girl jumped to her feet; for an instant she looked at the philosopher. She opened her lips as if to speak, and at the thought of what lay at her tongue's tip her face grew red. But the philosopher was gazing past her, and his eyes rested in calm contemplation on the gleaming paddock.

"A beautiful thing, sunshine, to be sure," said he.

Her blush faded away into paleness; her lips closed. Without speaking, she turned and walked slowly away, her head drooping. The philosopher heard the rustle of her skirt in the long grass of the orchard; he watched her for a few moments.

"A pretty, graceful creature," said he, with a smile. Then he opened his book, took his pencil in his hand, and slipped in a careful forefinger to mark the fly−leaf.

The sun had passed mid−heaven and began to decline westward before he finished the book. Then he stretched himself and looked at his watch.

"Good gracious, two o'clock! I shall be late for lunch!" and he hurried to his feet.

He was very late for lunch.

"Everything's cold," wailed his hostess. "Where have you been, Mr. Jerningham?"

"Only in the orchard−reading."

"And you've missed May!"

"Missed Miss May? How do you mean? I had a long talk with her this morning—a most interesting talk."

"But you weren't here to say good−by. Now you don't mean to say that you forgot that she was leaving by the two−o'clock train? What a man you are!"

"Dear me! To think of my forgetting it!" said the philosopher, shamefacedly.

“She told me to say good−bye to you for her.”

“She's very kind. I can't forgive myself.”

His hostess looked at him for a moment; then she sighed, and smiled, and sighed again.

“Have you everything you want?” she asked.

“Everything, thank you,” said he, sitting down opposite the cheese, and propping his book (he thought he would just run through the last chapter again) against the loaf; “everything in the world that I want, thanks.”

His hostess did not tell him that the girl had come in from the apple orchard and run hastily upstairs, lest her friend should see what her friend did see in her eyes. So that he had no suspicion at all that he had received an offer of marriage—and refused it. And he did not refer to anything of that sort when he paused once in his reading and exclaimed:

“I'm really sorry I missed Miss May. That was an interesting case of hers. But I gave the right answer; the girl ought to marry A.”

And so the girl did.