

FICTION

Louis Tracy

The Revellers

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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THE REVELLERS

BY

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AUTHOR OF
"THE WINGS OF THE MORNING,"
"THE POSTMASTER'S DAUGHTER,"
ETC., ETC.



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CHAPTER I

QUESTIONINGS

"And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

The voice of the reader was strident, his utterance uneven, his diction illiterate. Yet he concluded the 18th chapter of the second Book of Samuel with an unctuous force born of long familiarity with the text. His laborious drone revealed no consciousness of the humanism of the Jewish King. To suggest that the Bible contained a mine of literature, a series of stories of surpassing interest, portraying as truthfully the lives of the men and women of to-day as of the nomad race which a personal God led through the wilderness, would have provoked from this man's mouth a sluggish flood of protest. The slow-moving lips, set tight after each syllabic struggle, the shaggy eyebrows overhanging horn-rimmed spectacles, the beetling forehead and bull-like head sunk between massive shoulders, the very clutch of the big hands on the Bible held stiffly at a distance, bespoke a triumphant dogmatism that found as little actuality in the heartbroken cry of David as in a description of a seven-branched candlestick.

The boy who listened wondered why people should "think such a lot about" high priests and kings who died so long ago. David was interesting enough as a youth. The slaying of Goliath, the charming of Saul with sweet music on a harp, appealed to the vivid, if unformed, imagination of fourteen. But the temptation of the man, the splendid efforts of the monarch to rule a peevish people--these were lost on him. Worse, they wearied him, because, as it happened, he had a reasoning brain.

He refused to credit all that he heard. It was hard to believe that any man's hair could catch in an oak so that he should be lifted up between heaven and earth, merely because he rode beneath the tree on the back of a mule. This sounded like the language of exaggeration, and sturdy little Martin Court Bolland hated exaggeration.

Again, he took the winged words literally, and the ease with which David saw, heard, spoke to the Lord was disturbing. Such things were manifestly impossible if David resembled other men, and that there were similarities between the ruler of Israel and certain male inhabitants of Elmsdale was suggested by numberless episodes of the very human history writ in the Book of Kings.

"The Lord" was a terrific personality to Martin--a personality seated on a thunder-cloud, of which the upper rim of gold and silver, shining gloriously against a cerulean sky, was Heaven, and the sullen blackness beneath, from which thunder bellowed and lightning flashed, was Hell. How could a mere man, one who pursued women like a too susceptible plowman, one who "smote" his fellows, and "kissed" them, and ate with them, hold instant communion with the tremendous Unseen, the ruler of sun and storm, the mover of worlds?

"David inquired of the Lord"; "David said to the Lord"; "The Lord answered unto David"--these phrases tortured a busy intelligence, and caused the big brown eyes to flash restlessly toward the distant hills, while quick ears and retentive brain paid close heed to the text.

For it was the word, not the spirit, that John Bolland insisted on. The boy knew too well the penalty of forgetfulness. During half an hour, from five o'clock each day, he was led drearily through the Sacred Book; if he failed to answer correctly the five minutes' questioning which followed, the lesson was repeated, verse for verse, again, and yet again, as a punishment.

At half-past four o'clock the high tea of a north-country farmhouse was served. Then the huge Bible was produced solemnly, and no stress of circumstances, no temporary call of other business, was permitted to interfere with this daily task. At times, Bolland would be absent at fairs or detained in some distant portion of the farm. But Martin's "portion of the Scriptures" would be marked for careful reading, and severe corporal chastisement corrected any negligence. Such was the old farmer's mania in this regard that his portly, kind-hearted wife became as strict as John himself in supervising the boy's lesson, merely because she dreaded the scene that would follow the slightest lapse.

So Martin could answer glibly that Ahimaaz was the son of Zadok and that Joab plunged three darts into Absalom's heart while the scapegrace dangled from the oak. Of the love that David bore his son, of the statecraft that impelled a servant of Israel to slay the disturber of the national peace, there was never a hint. Bolland's stark Gospel was harshly definite. There was no channel in his gnarled soul for the turbulent life-stream flowing through the ancient text.

The cold-blooded murder of Absalom, it is true, induced in the boy's mind a certain degree of belief in the narrative, a belief somewhat strained by the manner of Absalom's capture. Through his brain danced a *tableau vivant* of the scene in the wood. He saw the gayly caparisoned mule gallop madly away, leaving its rider struggling with desperate arms to

free his hair from the rough grasp of the oak.

Then, through the trees came a startled man-at-arms, who ran back and brought one other, a stately warrior in accouterments that shone like silver. A squabble arose between them as to the exact nature of the King's order concerning this same Absalom, but it was speedily determined by the leader, Joab, snatching three arrows from the soldier's quiver and plunging them viciously, one after the other, into the breast of the man hanging between the heaven and the earth.

Martin wondered if Absalom spoke to Joab. Did he cry for mercy? Did his eyes glare awfully at his relentless foe? Did he squeal pitiful gibberish like Tom Chandler did when he chopped off his fingers in the hay-cutter? How beastly it must be to be suspended by your own hair, and see a man come forward with three barbed darts which he sticks into your palpitating bosom, probably cursing you the while!

And then appeared from the depths of the wood ten young men, who behaved like cowardly savages, for they hacked the poor corpse with sword and spear, and made mock of a gallant if erring soldier who would have slain them all if he met them on equal terms.

This was the picture that flitted before the boy's eyes, and for one instant his tongue forgot its habitual restraint.

"Father," he said, "why didn't David ask God to save his son, if he wished him to live?"

"Nay, lad, I doan't knoa. You mun listen te what's written i' t' Book--no more an' no less. I doan't ho'd wi' their commentaries an' explanations, an' what oor passon calls anilitical disquisitions. Tak' t' Word as it stands. That's all 'at any man wants."

Now, be it observed that the boy used good English, whereas the man spoke in the broad dialect of the dales. Moreover, Bolland, an out-and-out Dissenter, was clannish enough to speak of "our" parson, meaning thereby the vicar of the parish, a gentleman whom he held at arm's length in politics and religion.

The latter discrepancy was a mere village colloquialism; the other--the marked difference between father and son--was startling, not alone by reason of their varying speech, but by the queer contrast they offered in manners and appearance.

Bolland was a typical yeoman of the moor edge, a tall, strong man, twisted and bent like the oak which betrayed Absalom, slow in his movements, heavy of foot, and clothed in brown corduroy which resembled curiously the weatherbeaten bark of a tree. There was a rugged dignity in his bearded face, and the huge spectacles he had now pushed high up on his forehead lent a semblance of greater age than he could lay claim to. Yet was he a lineal descendant of Gurth, the swineherd, Gurth, uncouth and unidealized.

The boy, a sturdy, country-built youngster in figure and attire, had a face of much promise. His brow was lofty and open, his mouth firm and well formed, his eyes fearless, if a trifle dreamy at times. His hands, too, were not those of a farmer's son. Strong they were and scarred with much use, but the fingers tapered elegantly, and the thumbs were long and straight.

Certainly, the heavy-browed farmer, with his drooping nether lip and clumsy spatulate digits, had not bequeathed these bucolic attributes to his son. As they sat there, in the cheerful kitchen where the sunbeams fell on sanded floor and danced on the burnished contents of a full "dresser," they presented a dissimilarity that was an outrage on heredity.

Usually, the reading ended, Martin effaced himself by way of the back door. Thence, through a garden orchard that skirted the farmyard, he would run across a meadow, jump two hedges into the lane which led back to the village street, and so reach the green where the children played after school hours.

He was forced early to practice a degree of dissimulation. Though he hated a lie, he at least acted a reverent appreciation of the chapter just perused. His boyish impulses lay with the cricketers, the minnow-catchers, the players of prisoner's base, the joyous patrons of well-worn "pitch" and gurgling brook. But he knew that the slightest indication of grudging this daily half-hour would mean the confiscation of the free romp until supper-time at half-past eight. So he paid heed to the lesson, and won high praise from his preceptor in the oft-expressed opinion:

"Martin will make a rare man i' time."

To-day he did not hurry away as usual. For one reason, he was going with a gamekeeper to see some ferreting at six o'clock, and there was plenty of time; for another, it thrilled him to find that there were episodes in the Bible quite as exciting as any in the pages of "The Scalp-Hunters," a forbidden work now hidden with others in the store of dried bracken at the back of the cow-byre.

So he said rather carelessly: "I wonder if he kicked?"

"You wunner if whea kicked?" came the slow response.

"Absalom, when Joab stabbed him. The other day, when the pigs were killed, they all kicked like mad."

Bolland laid down the Bible and glanced at Martin with a puzzled air. He was not annoyed or even surprised at the unlooked-for deduction. It had simply never occurred to him that one might read the Bible and construct actualities from the plain-spoken text.

"Hoo div' I knoa?" he said calmly; "it says nowt about it i' t' chapter."

Then Martin awoke with a start. He saw how nearly he had betrayed himself a second time, how ready were the lips to utter ungoverned thoughts.

He flushed slightly.

"Is that all for to-day, father?" he said.

Before Bolland could answer, there came a knock at the door.

"See whea that is," said the farmer, readjusting his spectacles.

A big, hearty-looking young man entered. He wore clothes of a sporting cut and carried a hunting-crop, with the long lash gathered in his fingers.

"Oah, it's you, is it, Mr. Pickerin'?" said Bolland, and Martin's quick ears caught a note of restraint, almost of hostility, in the question.

"Yes, Mr. Bolland, an' how are ye?" was the more friendly greeting. "I just dropped in to have a settlement about that beast."

"A sattlement! What soart o' sattlement?"

The visitor sat down, uninvited, and produced some papers from his pocket.

"Well, Mr. Bolland," he said quietly, "it's not more'n four months since I gave you sixty pounds for a thoroughbred shorthorn, supposed to be in calf to Bainesse Boy the Third."

"Right enough, Mr. Pickerin'. You've gotten t' certificates and t' receipt for t' stud fee."

Martin detected the latent animosity in both voices. The reiterated use of the prefix "Mr." was an exaggerated politeness that boded a dispute.

"Receipts, certificates!" cried Pickering testily. "What good are they to me? She cannot carry a calf. For all the use I can make of her, I might as well have thrown the money in the fire."

"Eh, but she's a well-bred 'un," said Bolland, with sapient head-shake.

"She might be a first-prize winner at the Royal by her shape and markings; but, as matters stand, she'll bring only fifteen pounds from a butcher. I stand to lose forty-five pounds by the bargain."

"You canna fly i' t' feace o' Providence, Mr. Pickerin'."

"Providence has little to do with it, I fancy. I can sell her to somebody else, if I like to work a swindle with her. I had my doubts at the time that she was too cheap."

John Bolland rose. His red face was dusky with anger, and it sent a pang through Martin's heart to see something of fear there, too.

"Noo, what are ye drivin' at?" he growled, speaking with ominous calmness.

"You know well enough," came the straight answer. "The poor thing has something wrong with her, and she will never hold a calf. Look here, Bolland, meet me fairly in the matter. Either give me back twenty pounds, and we'll cry 'quits,' or sell me another next spring at the same price, and I'll take my luck."

Perhaps this *via media* might have been adopted had it presented itself earlier. But the word "swindle" stuck in the farmer's throat, and he sank back into his chair.

"Nay, nay," he said. "A bargain's a bargain. You've gotten t' papers----"

It was the buyer's turn to rise.

"To the devil with you and your papers!" he shouted. "Do you think I came here without making sure of my facts? Twice has this cow been in calf in your byre, and each time she missed. You knew her failing, and sold her under false pretenses. Of course, I cannot prove it, or I would have the law of you; but I did think you would act squarely."

For some reason the elder Bolland was in a towering rage. Martin had never before seen him so angry, and the boy was perplexed by the knowledge that what Pickering said was quite true.

"I'll not be sworn at nor threatened wi' t' law in my own house," bellowed the farmer. "Get out! Look tiv' your own business an' leave me te follow mine."

Pickering, too, was in a mighty temper. He took a half stride forward and shook out the thong of the whip.

"You psalm-singing humbug!" he thundered. "If you were a younger man----"

Martin jumped between them; his right hand clenched a heavy kitchen poker.

Pickering half turned to the door with a bitter laugh.

"All right, my young cub!" he shouted. "I'm not such a fool, thank goodness, as to make bad worse. It's lucky for you, boy, that you are not of the same kidney as that old ranter there. Catch me ever having more to do with any of his breed."

"An' what affair is it of yours, Mr. Pickerin', who the boy belongs to? If all tales be true, *you* can't afford to throw stones at other folks's glass houses!"

Mrs. Bolland, stout, hooded, aproned, and fiery red in face, had come from the dairy, and now took a hand in the argument.

Pickering, annoyed at the unlooked-for presence of a woman, said sternly:

"Talk to your husband, not to me, ma'am. He wronged me by getting three times the value for a useless beast, and if you can convince him that he took an unfair advantage, I'm willing, even now----"

But Mrs. Bolland had caught the flicker of amazement in Martin's eye and was not to be mollified.

"Who are you, I'd like to know?" she shrilled, "coomin' te one's house an' scandalizin' us? A nice thing, to be sure, for a man like you to call John Bolland a wrongdoer. The cow won't calve, won't she? 'Tis a dispensation on you, George Pickerin'. You're payin' for yer own misdeeds. There's plenty i' Elmsdale whea ken your char-ak-ter, let me tell you that. What's become o' Betsy Thwaites?"

But Pickering had resigned the contest. He was striding toward the "Black Lion," where a dogcart awaited him, and he laughed to himself as the flood of vituperation swelled from the door of the farm.

"Gad!" he muttered, "how these women must cackle in the market! One old cow is hardly worth so much fuss!"

Still smiling at the storm he had raised, he gathered the reins, gave Fred, the ostler, a sixpence, and would have driven off had he not seen a pretty serving-maid gazing out through an upper window. Her face looked familiar.

"Hello!" he cried. "You and I know each other, don't we?"

"No, we doan't; an' we're not likely to," was the pert reply.

"Eh, my! What have I done now?"

"Nowt to me, but my sister is Betsy Thwaites."

"The deuce she is! Betsy isn't half as nice-looking as you."

"More shame on you that says it."

"But, my dear girl, one should tell the truth and shame the devil."

"Just listen to him!" Yet the window was raised a little higher, and the girl leaned out, for Pickering was a handsome man, with a tremendous reputation for gallantry of a somewhat pronounced type.

Fred, the stable help, struck the cob smartly with his open hand. Pickering swore, and bade him leave the mare alone and be off.

"I was sorry for Betsy," he said, when the prancing pony was quieted, "but she and I agreed to differ. I got her a place at Hereford, and hope she'll be married soon."

"You'll get me no place at Hereford, Mr. Pickerin"--this with a coquettish toss of the head.

"Of course not. When is the feast here?"

"Next Monday it starts."

"Very well. Good-by. I'll see you on Monday."

He blew her a kiss, and she laughed. As the smart turnout rattled through the village she looked after him.

"Betsy always did say he was such a man," she murmured. "I'll smack his feace, though, if he comes near me a-Monday."

And Fred, leaning sulkily over the yard gate, spat viciously on Pickering's sixpence.

"Coomin' here for t' feast, is he?" he growled. "Happen he'd better bide i' Nottonby."

CHAPTER II

STRANGERS, INDEED

Pickering left ruffled breasts behind him. The big farm in the center of the village was known as the White House, and had been owned by a Bolland since there were Bollands in the county. It was perched on a bank that rose steeply some twenty feet or more from the main road. Cartways of stiff gradient led down to the thoroughfare on either hand. A strong retaining wall, crowned with gooseberry bushes, marked the confines of the garden, which adjoined a row of cottages tenanted by laborers. Then came the White House itself, thatched, cleanly, comfortable-looking; beyond it, all fronting on the road, were stables and outbuildings.

Behind lay the remainder of the kitchen garden and an orchard, backed by a strip of meadowland that climbed rapidly toward the free moor with its whins and heather—a far-flung range of mountain given over to grouse and hardy sheep, and cleft by tiny ravines of exceeding beauty.

Across the village street stood some modern iron-roofed buildings, where Bolland kept his prize stock, and here was situated the real approach to the couple of hundred acres of rich arable land which he farmed. The house and rear pastures were his own; he rented the rest. Of late years he had ceased to grow grain, save for the limited purposes of his stock, and had gone in more and more for pedigree cattle.

Pickering's words had hurt him sorely, since they held an element of truth. The actual facts were these: One of his best cows had injured herself by jumping a fence, and a calf was born prematurely. Oddly enough, a similar accident had occurred the following year. On the third occasion, when the animal was mated with Bainesse Boy III, Bolland thought it best not to tempt fortune again, but sold her for something less than the enhanced value which the circumstances warranted. From a similar dam and the same sire he bred a yearling bull which realized PS250, or nearly the rent of his holding, so Pickering had really overstated his case, making no allowance for the lottery of stock-raising.

The third calf might have been normal and of great value. It was not. Bolland suspected the probable outcome and had acted accordingly. It was the charge of premeditated unfairness that rankled and caused him such heart-burning.

When Mrs. Bolland, turkey-red in face, and with eyes still glinting fire, came in and slammed the door, she told Martin, angrily, to be off, and not stand there with his ears cocked like a terrier's.

The boy went out. He did not follow his accustomed track. He hesitated whether or not to go rabbiting. Although far too young to attach serious import to the innuendoes he had heard, he could not help wondering what Pickering meant by that ironical congratulation on the subject of his paternity.

His mother, too, had not repelled the charge directly, but had gone out of her way to heap counter-abuse on the vilifier. It was odd, to say the least of it, and he found himself wishing heartily that either the unfortunate cow had not been sold or that his father had met Mr. Pickering's protests more reasonably.

A whistle came from the lane that led up to the moor. Perched on a gate was a white-headed urchin.

"Aren't ye coomin' te t' green?" was his cry, seeing that Martin heard him.

"Not this evening, thanks."

"Oah, coom on. They're playin' tig, an' none of 'em can ketch Jim Bates."

That settled it. Jim Bates's pride must be lowered, and ferrets were forgotten.

But Jim Bates had his revenge. If he could not run as fast as Martin, he made an excellent pawn in the hands of fortune. Had the boy gone to the rabbit warren, he would not have seen the village again until after eight o'clock, and, possibly, the current of his life might have entered a different runnel. In the event, however, he was sauntering up the village street, when he encountered a lady and a little girl, accompanied by a woman whose dress reminded him of nuns seen in pictures. The three were complete strangers, and although Martin was unusually well-mannered for one reared in a remote Yorkshire hamlet, he could not help staring at them fixedly.

The Normandy nurse alone was enough to draw the eyes of the whole village, and Martin knew well it was owing to mere chance that a crowd of children was not following her already.

The lady was tall and of stately carriage. She was dressed quietly, but in excellent taste. Her very full face looked remarkably pink, and her large blue eyes stared out of puffy sockets. Beyond these unfavorable details, she was a handsome woman, and the boy thought vaguely that she must have motored over from the castle midway between

Elmsdale and the nearest market town of Nottonby.

Yet it was on the child that his wondering gaze dwelt longest. She looked about ten years old. Her elfin face was enshrined in jet-black hair, and two big bright eyes glanced inquiringly at him from the depths of a wide-brimmed, flowered-covered hat. A broad blue sash girdled her white linen dress; the starched skirts stood out like the frills of a ballet dancer.

Her shapely legs were bare from above the knees, and her tiny feet were encased in sandals. At Trouville she would be pronounced "sweet" by enthusiastic admirers of French fashion, but in a north-country village she was absurdly out of place. Nevertheless, being a remarkably self-possessed little maiden, she returned with interest Martin's covert scrutiny.

He would have passed on, but the lady lifted a pair of mounted eyeglasses and spoke to him.

"Boy," she said in a flute-like voice, "can you tell me which is the White House?"

Martin's cap flew off.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, pointing. "That is it. I live there."

"Oh, indeed. And what is your name?"

"Martin Court Bolland, ma'am."

"What an odd name. Why were you christened Martin Court?"

"I really don't know, ma'am. I didn't bother about it at the time, and since then have never troubled to inquire."

Now, to be candid, Martin did not throw off this retort spontaneously. It was a little effusion built up through the years, the product of frequent necessity to answer the question. But the lady took it as a coruscation of rustic wit, and laughed. She turned to the nurse:

"Il m'a rendu la monnaie de ma piece, Francoise."

"J'en suis bien sur, madame, mais qu'est-ce qu'il a dit?" said the nurse.

The other translated rapidly, and the nurse grinned.

"Ah, il est naif, le petit," she commented. "Et tres gentil."

"Oh, maman," chimed in the child, "je serais heureuse si vous vouliez me permettre de jouer avec ce joli garcon."

"Attendez, ma belle. Pas si vite.... Now, Martin Court, take me to your mother."

Not knowing exactly what to do with his cap, the boy had kept it in his hand. The foregoing conversation was, of course, so much Greek in his ears. He realized that they were talking about him, and was fully alive to the girl's demure admiration. The English words came with the more surprise, seeing that they followed so quickly on some remark in an unknown tongue.

He led the way at once, hoping that his mother had regained her normal condition of busy cheerfulness.

Silence reigned in the front kitchen when he pressed the latch. The room was empty, but the clank of pattens in the yard revealed that the farmer's thrifty wife was sparing her skirts from the dirt while she crossed to the pig tub with a pailful of garbage.

"Will you take a seat, ma'am?" said Martin politely. "I'll tell mother you are here."

With a slight awkwardness he pulled three oaken chairs from the serried rank they occupied along the wall beneath the high-silled windows. Feeling all eyes fixed on him quizzically, he blushed.

"Ah, v'la le p'tit. Il rougit!" laughed the nurse.

"Don't tease him, nurse!" cried the child in English. "He is a nice boy. I like him."

Clearly this was for Martin's benefit. Already the young lady was a coquette.

Mrs. Bolland, hearing there were "ladies" to visit her, entered with trepidation. She expected to meet the vicar's aunt and one of that lady's friends. In a moment of weakness she had consented to take charge of the refreshment stall at a forthcoming bazaar in aid of certain church funds. But Bolland was told that the incumbent was adopting ritualistic

practices, so he sternly forbade his better half to render any assistance whatsoever. The Established Church was bad enough; it was a positive scandal to introduce into the service aught that savored of Rome.

Poor Mrs. Bolland therefore racked her brain for a reasonable excuse as she crossed the yard, and it is not to be wondered at if she was struck almost dumb with surprise at sight of the strangers.

"Are you Mrs. Bolland?" asked the lady, without rising, and surveying her through the eyeglasses with head tilted back.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ah. Exactly. I--er--am staying at The Elms for some few weeks, and the people there recommended you as supplying excellent dairy produce. I am--er--exceedingly particular about butter and milk, as my little girl is so delicate. Have you any objection to allowing me to inspect your dairy? I may add that I will pay you well for all that I order."

The lady's accent, no less than the even flow of her words, joined to unpreparedness for such fashionable visitors, temporarily bereft Mrs. Bolland of a quick, if limited, understanding.

"Did ye say ye wanted soom bootermilk?" she cried vacantly.

"No, mother," interrupted Martin anxiously. For the first time in his life he was aware of a hot and uncomfortable feeling that his mother was manifestly inferior to certain other people in the world. "The lady wishes to see the dairy."

"Why?"

"She wants to buy things from you, and--er--I suppose she would like to see what sort of place we keep them in."

No manner of explanation could have restored Mrs. Bolland's normal senses so speedily as the slightest hint that uncleanliness could harbor its microbes in her house.

"My goodness, ma'am," she cried, "whea's bin tellin' you that my pleace hez owt wrong w'it?"

Now it was the stranger's turn to appeal to Martin, and the boy showed his mettle by telling his mother, in exact detail, the request made by the lady and her reference to the fragile-looking child.

Mrs. Bolland's wrath subsided, and her lips widened in a smile.

"Oah, if that's all," she said, "coom on, ma'am, an' welcome. Ye canna be too careful about sike things, an' yer little lass do look pukey, te be sure."

The lady, gathering her skirts for the perilous passage of the yard, followed the farmer's wife.

Martin and the girl sat and stared at each other. She it was who began the conversation.

"Have you lived here long?" she said.

"All my life," he answered. Pretty and well-dressed as she was, he had no dread of her. He regarded girls as spiteful creatures who scratched one another like cats when angry and shrieked hysterically when they played.

"That's not very long," she cried.

"No; but it's longer than you've lived anywhere else."

"Me! I have lived everywhere--in London, Berlin, Paris, Nice, Montreux--O, je ne sais--I beg your pardon. Perhaps you don't speak French?"

"No."

"Would you like to learn?"

"Yes, very much."

"I'll teach you. It will be such fun. I know all sorts of naughty words. I learnt them in Monte Carlo, where I could hear the servants chattering when I was put to bed. Watch me wake up nurse. Francoise, mon chou! Cre nom d'un pipe, mais que vous etes triste aujourd'hui!"

The *bonne* started. She shook the child angrily.

"You wicked girl!" she cried in French. "If madame heard you, she would blame me."

The imp cuddled her bare knees in a paroxysm of glee.

"You see," she shrilled. "I told you so."

"Was all that swearing?" demanded Martin gravely.

"Some of it."

"Then you shouldn't do it. If I were your brother, I'd hammer you."

"Oh, would you, indeed! I'd like to see any boy lay a finger on me. I'd tear his hair out by the roots."

Naturally, the talk languished for a while, until Martin thought he had perhaps been rude in speaking so brusquely.

"I'm sorry if I offended you," he said.

The saucy, wide-open eyes sparkled.

"I forgive you," she said. "How old are you?"

"Fourteen. And you?"

"Twelve."

He was surprised. "I thought you were younger," he said.

"So does everybody. You see, I'm tiny, and mamma dresses me in this baby way. I don't mind. I know your name. You haven't asked me mine."

"Tell me," he said with a smile.

"Angele. Angele Saumarez."

"I'll never be able to say that," he protested.

"Oh, yes, you will. It's quite easy. It sounds Frenchy, but I am English, except in my ways, mother says. Now try. Say 'An'----"

"Ang----"

"Not so much through your nose. This way--'An-gele.'"

The next effort was better, but tuition halted abruptly when Martin discovered that Angele's mother, instead of being "Mrs. Saumarez," was "the Baroness Irma von Edelstein."

"Oh, crikey!" he blurted out. "How can that be?"

Angele laughed at his blank astonishment.

"Mamma is a German baroness," she explained. "My papa was a colonel in the British army, but mamma did not lose her courtesy title when she married. Of course, she is Mrs. Saumarez, too."

These subtleties of Burke and the Almanach de Gotha went over Martin's head.

"It sounds a bit like an entry in a stock catalogue," he said.

Angele, in turn, was befogged, but saw instantly that the village youth was not sufficiently reverent to the claims of rank.

"You can never be a gentleman unless you learn these things," she announced airily.

"You don't say," retorted Martin with a smile. He was really far more intelligent than this pert mistress, and had detected a curious expression on the stolid face of Françoise when the Baroness von Edelstein's name cropped up in a talk which she could not understand. The truth was that the canny Norman woman, though willing enough to take a German mistress's gold, thoroughly disliked the lady's nationality. Martin could only guess vaguely at something of the sort, but the mere guess sufficed.

Angele, however, wanted no more bickering just then. She was about to resume the lesson when the Baroness and Mrs. Bolland re-entered the house. Evidently the inspection of the dairy had been satisfactory, and the lady had signified her approval in words that pleased the older woman greatly.

The visitor was delighted, too, with the old-world appearance of the kitchen, the heavy rafters with their load of hams and sides of bacon, the oaken furniture, the spotless white of the well-scrubbed ash-topped table, the solemn grandfather's clock, and the rough stone floor, over which soft red sandstone had been rubbed when wet.

By this time the tact of the woman of society had accommodated her words and utterance to the limited comprehension of her hearer, and she displayed such genuine interest in the farm and its belongings that Mrs. Bolland gave her a hearty invitation to come next morning, when the light would be stronger. Then "John" would let her see his prize stock and the extensive buildings on "t' other side o' t' road.... T' kye (the cows) were fastened up for t' neet" by this time.

The baroness was puzzled, but managed to catch the speaker's drift.

"I do not rise very early," she said. "I breakfast about eleven"--she could not imagine what a sensation this statement caused in a house where breakfast was served never later than seven o'clock--"and it takes me an hour to dress; but I can call about twelve, if that will suit."

"Ay, do, ma'am," was the cheery agreement. "You'll be able te see t' farmhands havin' their dinner. It's a fair treat te watch them men an' lads puttin' away a beefsteak pie."

"And this is your little boy?" said the other, evidently inclined for gossip.

"Yes, ma'am."

"He is a splendid little fellow. What a nice name you gave him--Martin Court Bolland--so unusual. How came you to select his Christian names?"

The question caused the farmer's wife a good deal of unnoticed embarrassment. The baroness was looking idly at an old colored print of York Castle, and the boy himself was far too taken up with Angele to listen to the chat of his elders.

Mrs. Bolland laughed confusedly.

"Martin," she said. "Tak t' young leddy an' t' nurse as far as t' brig, an' show 'em t' mill."

The baroness was surprised at this order, but an explanation was soon forthcoming. In her labored speech and broad dialect, the farmer's wife revealed a startling romance. Thirteen years ago her husband's brother died suddenly while attending a show at Islington, and the funeral took John and herself to London. They found the place so vast and noisy that it overwhelmed them; but in the evening, after the ceremony at Abney Park, they strolled out from their hotel near King's Cross Station to see the sights.

Not knowing whither they were drifting, they found themselves, an hour later, gazing at St. Paul's Cathedral from the foot of Ludgate Hill. They were walking toward the stately edifice, when a terrible thing happened.

A young woman fell, or threw herself, from a fourth-floor window onto the pavement of St. Martin's Court. In her arms was an infant, a boy twelve months old. Providence saved him from the instant death met by his mother. A projecting signboard caught his clothing, tore him from the encircling arms, and held him a precarious second until the rent frock gave way.

But John Bolland's sharp eyes had noted the child's momentary escape. He sprang forward and caught the tiny body as it dropped. At that hour, nearly nine o'clock, the court was deserted, and Ludgate Hill had lost much of its daily crowd. Of course, a number of passers-by gathered; and a policeman took the names and address of the farmer and his wife, they being the only actual witnesses of the tragedy.

But what was to be done with the baby? Mrs. Bolland volunteered to take care of it for the night, and the policeman was glad enough to leave it with her when he ascertained that no one in the house from which the woman fell knew anything about her save that she was a "Mrs. Martineau," and rented a furnished room beneath the attic.

The inquest detained the Bollands another day in town. Police inquiries showed that the unfortunate young woman had committed suicide. A letter, stuck to a dressing-table with a hatpin, stated her intention, and that her name was not Martineau. Would the lady like to see the letter?

"Oh, dear, no!" said the baroness hastily. "Your story is awfully interesting, but I could not bear to read the poor creature's words."

Well, the rest was obvious. Mrs. Bolland was childless after twenty years of married life. She begged for the bairn, and her husband allowed her to adopt it. They gave the boy their own name, but christened him after the scene of his mother's death and his own miraculous escape. And there he was now, coming up the village street, leading Angele confidently by the hand--a fine, intelligent lad, and wholly different from every other boy in the village.

Not even the squire's sons equaled him in any respect, and the teacher of the village school gave him special lessons. Perhaps the lady had noticed the way he spoke. The teacher was proud of Martin's abilities, and he tried to please her by not using the Yorkshire dialect.

"Ah, I see," said the baroness quietly. "His history is quite romantic. But what will he become when he grows up--a farmer, like his adopted father?"

"John thinks te mak' him a minister," said Mrs. Bolland with genial pride.

"A minister! Do you mean a preacher, a Nonconformist person?"

"Why, yes, ma'am. John wouldn't hear of his bein' a parson."

"Grand Dieu! Quelle betise! I beg your pardon. Of course, you will do what is best for him... Well, ma belle, have you enjoyed your little walk?"

"Oh, so much, mamma. The miller has such lovely pigs, so fat, so tight that you can't pinch them. And there's a beautiful dog, with four puppy dogs. I'm so glad we came here. J'en suis bien aise."

"She's a queer little girl," said Mrs. Bolland, as Martin and she watched the party walking back to The Elms. "I couldn't tell half what she said."

"No, mother," he replied. "She goes off into French without thinking, and her mother's a German baroness, who married an English officer. The nurse doesn't speak any English. I wish I knew French and German. French, at any rate."

CHAPTER III

THE SEEDS OF MISCHIEF

Preparations for the forthcoming "Feast" were varied by gossip concerning "the baroness," her daughter, and the Normandy *bonne*. Elmsdale had never before set eyes on any human beings quite so foreign to its environment. At first, the canny Yorkshire folk were much intrigued by the lady's title. A princess or a duchess they had read of; a marchioness and a countess they had seen, because the county of broad acres finds room for a great many noble houses; and baronets' wives, each a "Lady" by perspective right, were so plentiful as to arouse no special comment.

But a "baroness" was rather un-English, while Elmsdale frankly refused to pronounce her name other than "Eedelsteen." The village was ready to allude to her as "her ladyship," but was still doubtful whether or not to grant her the prefix "Lady," when the question was settled in a wholly unexpected way by the announcement that the baroness preferred to be addressed as "Mrs. Saumarez." In fact, she was rather annoyed that Angele should have flaunted the title at all.

"I am English by marriage, and proud of my husband's name," she explained. "He was a gallant officer, who fell in the Boer War, and I have long since left the use of my German rank for purely official occasions. It is no secret, of course, but Angele should not have mentioned it."

Elmsdale liked this democratic utterance. It made these blunt Yorkshire folk far readier to address her as "your ladyship" than would have been the case otherwise, and, truth to tell, she never chided them for any lapse of the sort, though, in accordance with her wish, she became generally known as Mrs. Saumarez.

She rented a suite at The Elms, a once pretentious country mansion owned by a family named Walker. The males had died, the revenues had dwindled, and two elderly maiden ladies, after taking counsel with the vicar, had advertised their house in a society newspaper.

Mrs. Saumarez said she was an invalid. She required rest and good air. Francoise, since Angele had outgrown the attentions of a nurse, was employed mainly as her mistress's confidential servant. Francoise either could not or would not speak English; Mrs. Saumarez gave excellent references and no information as to her past, while Angele's volatile reminiscences of continental society had no meaning for Elmsdale.

But it was abundantly clear that Mrs. Saumarez was rich. She swept aside the arrangements made by the Misses Walker for her comfort, chose her own set of apartments, ordered things wholly her own way, and paid double the terms originally demanded.

The day following her visit to the White House she descended on the chief grocer, whose shop was an emporium of many articles outside his trade, but mostly of a cheap order.

"Mr. Webster," she said in her grand manner, "few of the goods you stock will meet my requirements. I prefer to deal with local tradesmen, but they must meet my wants. Now, if you are prepared to cater for me, you will not only save me the trouble of ordering supplies from London, but make some extra profit. You have proper agents, no doubt, so you must obtain everything of the best quality. You understand. I shall never grumble at the prices; but the least inferiority will lead me to withdraw my custom."

It was a sore point with Mr. Webster that "the squire" dealt with the Stores. He promised implicit obedience, and wrote such instructions to Leeds, his supply town, that the wholesale house there wondered who had come to live at Elmsdale.

The proprietress of the "Black Lion," hearing the golden tales that circulated through the village, dressed in her best one afternoon and called at The Elms in the hope of obtaining patronage for wines, bottled beer, and mineral waters. Mrs. Saumarez was resting. The elder Miss Walker conveyed Mrs. Atkinson's name and business. Some conversation took place between Mrs. Saumarez and Francoise, with the result that Mrs. Atkinson was instructed to supply Schweppe's soda water, but "no intoxicants."

So Mrs. Saumarez was a teetotaler. The secretary of the local branch of the Good Templars donned a faded black coat and a rusty tall hat and sent in a subscription list. It came out with a guinea. The vicar was at The Elms next day. Mrs. Saumarez received him graciously and gave him a five-pound note toward the funds of the bazaar which would be opened next week. Most decidedly the lady was an acquisition. When Miss Martha Walker was enjoined by her sister, Miss Emmy, to find out how long Mrs. Saumarez intended to remain at Elmsdale--on the plausible pretext that the terms would be lowered for a monthly tenancy--she was given a curt reply.

"I am a creature of moods. I may be here a day, a year. At present the place suits me. And Angele is brimming over with health. But it is fatal if I am told I must remain a precise period anywhere. That is why I never go to Carlsbad."

Miss Martha did not understand the reference to Carlsbad; but the nature of the reply stopped effectually all further curiosity as to Mrs. Saumarez's plans. It also insured unflagging service.

Hardly a day passed that the newcomer did not call at the White House. She astounded John Bolland by the accuracy of her knowledge concerning stock, and annoyed him, too, by remarking that some of his land required draining.

"Your lower pastures are too rank," she said. "So long as there is a succession of fine seasons it does not matter, but a wet spring and summer will trouble you. You will have fifty acres of water-sodden meadows, and nothing breeds disease more quickly."

"None o' my cattle hev had a day's illness, short o' bein' a trifle overfed wi' oil cake," he said testily.

"Quite so. You told me that in former years you raised wheat and oats there. I'm talking about grass."

Martin and Angele became close friends. The only children of the girl's social rank in the neighborhood were the vicar's daughter, Elsie Herbert, and the squire's two sons, Frank and Ernest Beckett-Smythe. Mr. Beckett-Smythe was a widower. He lived at the Hall, three-quarters of a mile away, and had not as yet met Mrs. Saumarez. Angele would have nothing to do with Elsie.

"I don't like her," she confided to Martin. "She doesn't care for boys, and I adore them. She's trop reglee for me."

"What is that?"

"Well, she holds her nose--so."

Angele tilted her head and cast down her eyes.

"Of course, I don't know her, but she seems to be a nice girl," said Martin.

"Why do you say, 'Of course, I don't know her'? She lives here, doesn't she?"

"Yes, but my father is a farmer. She has a governess, and goes to tea at the Hall. I've met her driving from the Castle. She's above me, you see."

Angele laughed maliciously.

"O la la! c'est pour rire! I'm sorry. She is--what do you say--a little snob."

"No, no," protested Martin. "I think she would be very nice, if I knew her. You'll like her fine when you play with her."

"Me! Play with her, so prim, so pious. I prefer Jim Bates. He winked at me yesterday."

"Did he? Next time I see him I'll make it hard for him to wink."

Angele clapped her hands and pirouetted.

"What," she cried, "you will fight him, and for me! What joy! It's just like a story book. You must kick him, so, and he will fall down, and I will kiss you."

"I will not kick him," said the indignant Martin. "Boys don't kick in England. And I don't want to be kissed."

"Don't boys kiss in England?"

"Well ... anyhow, I don't."

"Then we are not sweethearts. I shan't kiss you, and you must just leave Jim Bates alone."

Martin was humiliated. He remained silent and angry during the next minute. By a quick turn in the conversation Angele had placed him in a position of rivalry with another boy, one with whom she had not exchanged a word.

"Look here," he said, after taking thought, "if I kiss your cheek, may I lick Jim Bates?"

This magnanimous offer was received with derision.

"I forbid you to do either. If you do, I'll tell your father."

The child had discovered already the fear with which Martin regarded the stern, uncompromising Methodist yeoman--a

fear, almost a resentment, due to Bolland's injudicious attempts to guide a mere boy into the path of serious and precise religion. Never had Martin found the daily reading of Scripture such a burden as during the past few days. The preparations for the feast, the cricket-playing, running and jumping of the boys practicing for prizes--these disturbing influences interfered sadly with the record of David's declining years.

Even now, with Angele's sarcastic laughter ringing in his ears, he was compelled to leave her and hurry to the front kitchen, where the farmer was waiting with the Bible opened. At the back door he paused and looked at her. She blew him a kiss.

"Good boy!" she cried. "Mind you learn your lesson."

"And mind you keep away from those cowsheds. Your nurse ought to have been here. It's tea time."

"I don't want any tea. I'm going to smell the milk. I love the smell of a farmyard. Don't you? But, there! You have never smelt anything else. Every place has its own smell. Paris smells like smoky wood. London smells of beer. Here there is always the smell of cows...."

"Martin!" called a harsh voice from the interior, and the boy perforce brought his wandering wits to bear on the wrongdoing of David in taking a census of the people of Israel.

He read steadily through the chapter which described how a pestilence swept from Dan to Beersheba and destroyed seventy thousand men, all because David wished to know how many troops he could muster.

He could hear Angele talking to the maids and making them laugh. A caravan lumbered through the street; he caught a glimpse of carved wooden horses' heads and gilded moldings. His quick and retentive brain mastered the words of the chapter, but to-day there was no mysterious and soul-awakening glimpse of its spirit.

"What did David say to t' Lord when t' angel smote t' people?" said Bolland when the moment came to question his pupil.

"He said, 'Lo, I have sinned; but what have these sheep done?'"

"And what sin had he dean?"

"I don't know. I think the whole thing was jolly unfair."

"What!" John Bolland laid down the Bible and rested both hands on the arms of the chair to steady himself. Had he heard aright? Was the boy daring to criticize the written word?

But Martin's brain raced ahead of the farmer's slow-rising wrath. He trembled at the abyss into which he had almost fallen. What horror if he lost an hour on this Saturday, the Saturday before the Feast, of all days in the year!

"I didn't quite mean that," he said, "but it doesn't say why it was wrong for a census to be taken, and it does say that when the angel stretched his hand over Jerusalem the Lord repented of the evil."

Bolland bent again over the book. Yes, Martin was right. He was letter perfect.

"It says nowt about unfairness," growled the man slowly.

"No. That was my mistake."

"Ye mun tak' heed agean mistakes o' that sort. On Monday we begin t' Third Book o' Kings."

So, not even the Feast would be allowed to interfere with the daily lesson.

Angele had departed with the belated Françoise. Martin, running through the orchard like a hare, doubled to the main road along the lane. In two minutes he was watching the unloading of the roundabout in front of the "Black Lion." Jim Bates was there.

"Here, I want you," said Martin. "You winked at Angele Saumarez yesterday."

"Winked at whea?" demanded Jim.

"At the young lady who lives at The Elms."

"Not afore she pulled a feace at me."

"Well, if you wink at her again I'll lick you."

"Mebbe."

"There's no 'mebbe' about it. Come down to the other end of the green now, if you think I can't."

Jim Bates was no coward, but he was faced with the alternative of yielding gracefully and watching the showmen at work or risking a defeat in a needless battle. He chose the better part of valor.

"It's nean o' my business," he said. "I dean't want te wink at t' young leddy."

At the inn door Mrs. Atkinson's three little girls were standing with Kitty Thwaites, the housemaid. The eldest, a bonnie child, whose fair skin was covered with freckles, ran toward Martin.

"Where hae ye bin all t' week?" she inquired. "Are ye always wi' that Saumarez girl?"

"No."

"I heerd tell she was at your pleace all hours. What beautiful frocks she has, but I should be asheamed te show me legs like her."

"That's the way she dresses," said Martin curtly.

"How funny. Is she fond of you?"

"How do I know?" He tried to edge away.

Evelyn tossed her head.

"Oh, I don't care. Why should I?"

"There's no reason that I can tell."

"You soon forget yer friends. On'y last Whit Monday ye bowt me a packet of chocolates."

There was truth in this. Martin quitted her sheepishly. He drew near some men, one of whom was Fred, the groom, and Fred had been drinking, as a preliminary to the deeper potations of the coming week.

"Ay, there she is!" he muttered, with an angry leer at Kitty. "She thinks what's good eneuf fer t' sister is good eneuf fer her. We'll see. Oad John Bollan' sent 'im away wiv a flea i' t' lug a-Tuesday. I reckon he'll hev one i' t' other ear if 'e comes after Kitty."

One of the men grinned contemptuously.

"Gan away!" he said. "George Pickerin' 'ud chuck you ower t' top o' t' hotel if ye said 'Booh' to 'im."

But Fred, too, grinned, blinking like an owl in daylight.

"Them as lives t' longest sees t' meast," he muttered, and walked toward the stables, passing close to Kitty, who looked through him without seeing him.

Suddenly there was a stir among the loiterers. Mrs. Saumarez was walking through the village with Mr. Beckett-Smythe. Behind the pair came the squire's two sons and Angele. The great man had called on the new visitor to Elmsdale, and together they strolled forth, while he explained the festivities of the coming week, and told the lady that these "feasts" were the creation of an act of Charles II. as a protest against the Puritanism of the Commonwealth.

Martin stood at the side of the road. Mrs. Saumarez did not notice him, but Angele did. She lifted her chin and dropped her eyelids in clever burlesque of Elsie Herbert, the vicar's daughter, but ignored him otherwise. Martin was hurt, though he hardly expected to be spoken to in the presence of distinguished company. But he could not help looking after the party. Angele turned and caught his glance. She put out her tongue.

He heard a mocking laugh and knew that Evelyn Atkinson was telling her sisters of the incident, whereupon he dug his hands in his pockets and whistled.

A shooting gallery was in process of erection, and its glories soon dispelled the gloom of Angele's snub. The long tube was supported on stays, the target put in place, the gaudy front pieced together, and half a dozen rifles unpacked. The proprietor meant to earn a few honest pennies that night, and some of the men were persuaded to try their prowess.

Martin was a born sportsman. He watched the competitors so keenly that Angele returned with her youthful cavaliers without attracting his attention. Worse than that, Evelyn Atkinson, scenting the possibility of rustic intrigue, caught Martin's elbow and asked quite innocently why a bell rang if the shooter hit the bull's-eye.

Proud of his knowledge, he explained that there was a hole in the iron plate, and that no bell, but a sheet of copper, was suspended in the box at the back where the lamp was.

Both Angele and Evelyn appreciated the situation exactly. The boy alone was ignorant of their tacit rivalry.

Angele pointed out Martin to the Beckett-Smythes.

"He is such a nice boy," she said sweetly. "I see him every day. He can fight any boy in the village."

"Hum," said the heir. "How old is he?"

"Fourteen."

"I am fifteen."

Angele smiled like a seraph.

"Regardez-vous donc!" she said. "He could twiddle you round--so," and she spun one hand over the other.

"I'd like to see him try," snorted the aristocrat. The opportunity offered itself sooner than he expected, but the purring of a high-powered car coming through the village street caused the pedestrians to draw aside. The car, a new and expensive one, was driven by a chauffeur, but held no passengers.

Mr. Beckett-Smythe gazed after it reflectively.

"Well, I thought I knew every car in this district," he began.

"It is mine, I expect," announced Mrs. Saumarez. "I've ordered one, and it should arrive to-day. I need an automobile for an occasional long run. For pottering about the village lanes, I may buy a pony cart."

"What make is your car?" inquired the Squire.

"A Mercedes. I'm told it is by far the best at the price."

"It's the best German car, of course, but I can hardly admit that it equals the French, or even our own leading types."

"Oh, I don't profess to understand these things. I only know that my banker advised me to buy none other. He explained the matter simply enough. The German manufacturers want to get into the trade and are content to lose money for a year or so. You know how pushful they are."

Beckett-Smythe saw the point clearly. He was even then hesitating between a Panhard and an Austin. He decided to wait a little longer and ascertain the facts about the Mercedes. A month later he purchased one. Mrs. Saumarez's chauffeur, a smart young mechanic from Bremen, who spoke English fluently, demonstrated that the buyer was given more than his money's worth. The amiable Briton wondered how such things could be, but was content to benefit personally. He, in time, spread the story. German cars enjoyed a year's boomlet in that part of Yorkshire. With nearly every car came a smart young chauffeur mechanic. Surely, this was wisdom personified. They knew the engine, could effect nearly all road repairs, demanded less wages than English drivers, and were always civil and reliable.

"Go-ahead people, these Germans!" was the general verdict.

CHAPTER IV

THE FEAST

An Elmsdale Sunday was a day of rest for man and beast alike. There could be no manner of doubt that the horses and dogs were able to distinguish the Sabbath from the workaday week. Prince, six-year-old Cleveland bay, the strongest and tallest horse in the stable, when his headstall was taken off on Sunday morning, showed his canny Yorkshire sense by walking past the row of carts and pushing open a rickety gate that led to a tiny meadow kept expressly for odd grazing. After him, in Indian file, went five other horses; yet, on any other day in the week they would stand patiently in the big yard, waiting to be led away singly or in pairs.

Curly and Jim, the two sheep-dogs--who never failed between Monday and Saturday to yawn and stretch expectantly by the side of John Bolland's sturdy nag in the small yard near the house--on the seventh day made their way to the foreman's cottage, there attending his leisure for a scamper over the breezy moorland.

For, Sunday or weekday, sheep must be counted. If any are missing, the almost preternatural intelligence of the collie is invoked to discover the hollow in which the lost ones are reposing helplessly on their backs. They will die in a few hours if not placed on their legs again. Turn over unaided they cannot. Man or dog must help, or they choke.

Even the cocks and hens, the waddling geese and ducks, the huge shorthorns, which are the pride of the village, seemed to grasp the subtle distinction between life on a quiet day and the well-filled existence of the six days that had gone before. At least, Martin thought so; but he did not know then that the windows of the soul let in imageries that depend more on mood than on reality.

Personally he hated Sunday, or fancied he did. He had Sunday clothes, Sunday boots, Sunday food, a Sunday face, and a Sunday conscience. Things were wrong on Sunday that were right during the rest of the week. Though the sky was as bright, the grass as green, the birds as tuneful on that day as on others, he was supposed to undergo a metamorphosis throughout all the weary waking hours. His troubles often began the moment he quitted his bed. As his "best" clothes and boots were so little worn, they naturally maintained a spick-and-span appearance during many months. Hence, he was given a fresh assortment about once a year, and the outfit possessed three distinct periods of use, of which the first tortured his mind and the third his body.

He being a growing lad, the coat was made too long in the sleeves, the trousers too long in the legs, and the boots too large. At the beginning of this epoch he looked and felt ridiculous. Gradually, the effect of roast beef and suet dumplings brought about a better fit, and during four months of the year he was fairly smart in appearance. Then there came an ominous shrinkage. His wrists dangled below the coat cuffs, there was an ever-widening rim of stocking between the tops of the boots and the trousers' ends, while Mrs. Bolland began to grumble each week about the amount of darning his stockings required. Moreover, there were certain quite insurmountable difficulties in the matter of buttons, and it was with a joy tempered only by fear of the grotesque that he beheld the "best" suit given away to an urchin several sizes smaller than himself.

Happily for his peace of mind, the Feast occurred in the middle stage of the current supply of raiment, so he was as presentable as a peripatetic tailor who worked in the house a fortnight at Christmas could make him.

But this Sunday dragged terribly. The routine of chapel from 10:30 A.M. to noon, Sunday-school from 3 P.M. to 4:30 P.M., and chapel again from 6:30 P.M. to 8 P.M., was inevitable, but there were compensations in the whispered confidences of Jim Bates and Tommy Beadlam, the latter nicknamed "White Head," as to the nature of some of the shows.

The new conditions brought into his life by Angele Saumarez troubled him far more than he could measure. Her mere presence in the secluded village carried a breath of the unknown. Her talk was of London and Paris, of parks, theatres, casinos, luxurious automobiles, deck-cabins, and Pullman cars. She seemed to have lived so long and seen so much. Yet she knew very little. Her ceaseless chatter in French and English, which sounded so smart at first, would not endure examination.

She had read nothing. When Martin spoke of "Robinson Crusoe" and "Ivanhoe," of "Treasure Island" and "The Last of the Mohicans"--a literary medley devoured for incident and not for style--she had not even heard of them, but produced for inspection an astonishingly rude colored cartoon, the French comments on which she translated literally.

He was a boy aglow with dim but fervent ideals; she, a girl who had evidently been allowed to grow up almost wild in the midst of fashionable life and flippant servants, all exigencies being fulfilled when she spoke nicely and cleverly and wore her clothes with the requisite chic. The two were as opposed in essentials as an honest English apple grown in a wholesome garden and a rare orchid, the product of some poisonous equatorial swamp.

He tried to interest her in the sights and sounds of country life. She met him more than halfway by putting embarrassing questions as to the habits of animals. More than once he told her plainly that there were some things little girls ought not to know, whereat she laughed scornfully, but switched the conversation to a topic on which she could vex him, as was nearly always the case in her references to Elsie Herbert or John Bolland's Bible teaching.

Yet he was restless and irritable because he did not see her on the Sunday. Mrs. Saumarez, it is true, sped swiftly through the village about three o'clock, and again at half-past seven. On each occasion the particular chapel affected by the Bollands was resounding with a loud-voiced hymn or echoing the vibrant tones of a preacher powerful beyond question in the matter of lungs and dogmatism. The whir of the Mercedes shut off these sounds; but Martin heard the passing of the car and knew that Angele was in it.

It was a novel experience for the Misses Walker to find that their lodgers recognized no difference between Sunday and the rest of the week. Mrs. Saumarez dined at 6:30 P.M., a concession of an hour and a half to rural habits, but she scouted the suggestion that a cold meal should be served to enable the "girls" to go to church. The old ladies dared not quarrel with one who paid so well. They remained at home and cooked and served the dinner.

As Françoise, to a large extent, waited on her mistress, this development might not have been noticed had not Angele's quick eyes seen Miss Emmy Walker carrying a chicken and a dish of French beans to a small table in the hall.

She told her mother, and Mrs. Saumarez was annoyed. She had informed Miss Martha that if the servants required a "night out," the addition of another domestic to the household at her expense would give them a good deal more liberty, but this ridiculous "Sunday-evening" notion must stop forthwith.

"It gets on my nerves, this British Sabbath," she exclaimed peevishly. "In London I entertain largely on a Sunday and have never had any trouble. Do you mean to say I cannot invite guests to dinner on Sunday merely to humor a cook or a housemaid? Absurd!"

Miss Martha promised reform.

"Let her have her way," she said to Miss Emmy. "Another servant will have nothing to do, and all the girls will grow lazy; but we must keep Mrs. Saumarez as long as we can. Oh, if she would only remain a year, we'd be out of debt, with the house practically recarpeted throughout!"

Unfortunately, Mrs. Saumarez's nerves were upset. She was snappy all the evening. Françoise tried many expedients to soothe her mistress's ruffled feelings. She brought a bundle of illustrated papers, a parcel of books, the scores of a couple of operas, even a gorgeous assortment of patterns of the new autumn dress fabrics, but each and all failed to attract. For some reason the preternaturally acute Angele avoided her mother. She seemed to be afraid of her when in this mood. The Misses Walker, seeing the anxiety of the maid and the unwonted retreat of the child to bed at an early hour, were miserable at the thought that such a trivial matter should have given their wealthy tenant cause for dire offense.

So Sunday passed irksomely, and everyone was glad when the next morning dawned in bright cheerfulness.

From an early hour there was evidence in plenty that the Elmsdale Feast would be an unqualified success, though shorn of many of its ancient glories.

Time was when the village used to indulge in a week's saturnalia, but the march of progress had affected rural Yorkshire even so long ago as 1906. The younger people could visit Leeds, York, Scarborough, or Whitby by Saturday afternoon "trips"—special excursion trains run at cheap rates—while "week-ends" in London were not unknown luxuries, and these frequent opportunities for change of scene and recreation had lessened the scope of the annual revels. Still, the trading instinct kept alive the commercial side of the Feast; the splendid hospitality of the north country asserted itself; church and chapels seized the chance of reaching enlarged congregations, and a number of itinerant showmen regarded Elmsdale as a fixture in the yearly round.

So, on the Monday, every neighboring village and moorland hamlet poured in its quota. The people came on foot from the railway station, distant nearly two miles, on horseback, in every sort of conveyance. The roads were alive with cattle, sheep, and pigs. The programme mapped out bore a general resemblance on each of the four days. The morning was devoted to business, the afternoon and evening to religion or pleasure.

The proceedings opened with a horse fair. An agent of the German Government snapped up every Cleveland bay offered for sale. George Pickering, in sporting garb, and smoking a big cigar, was an early arrival. He bid vainly for a couple of mares which he needed to complete his stud. Germany wanted them more urgently.

A splendid mare, the property of John Bolland, was put up for auction. The auctioneer read her pedigree, and proved

its authenticity by reference to the Stud Book.

"Is she in foal?" asked Pickering, and a laugh went around. Bolland scowled blackly. If a look could have slain the younger man he would assuredly have fallen dead.

The bidding commenced at PS40 and rose rapidly to PS60.

Then Pickering lost his temper. The agent for Germany was too pertinacious.

"Seventy," he shouted, though the bids hitherto had mounted by single sovereigns.

"Seventy-one," said the agent.

"Eighty!" roared Pickering.

"Eighty-one!" nodded the agent.

"The reserve is off," interposed the auctioneer, and again the surrounding farmers guffawed, as the mare had already gone to twenty pounds beyond her value.

Pickering swallowed his rage with an effort. He turned to Bolland.

"That's an offset for my hard words the other day," he said.

But the farmer thrust aside the proffered olive branch.

"Once a fule, always a fule," he growled. Pickering, though anything but a fool in business, took the ungracious remark pleasantly enough.

"He ought to sing a rare hymn this afternoon," he cried. "I've put a score of extra sovereigns in his pocket, and he doesn't even say 'Thank you.' Well, it's the way of the world. Who's dry?"

This invitation caused an adjournment to the "Black Lion." The auctioneer knew his clients.

Pickering's allusion to the hymn was not made without knowledge. At three o'clock, on a part of the green farthest removed from the thronged stalls and the blare of a steam-driven organ, Bolland and a few other earnest spirits surrounded the stentorian preacher and held an open-air service. They selected tunes which everybody knew and, as a result, soon attracted a crowd of older people, some of whom brought their children. Martin, of course, was in the gathering.

Meanwhile, along the line of booths, a couple of leather-lunged men were singing old-time ballads, dealing for the most part with sporting incidents. They soon became the centers of two packed audiences, mainly young men and boys, but containing more than a sprinkling of girls. The ditties were couched in "broad Yorkshire"--sometimes too broad for modern taste. Whenever a particularly crude stanza was bawled forth a chuckle would run through the audience, and coppers in plenty were forthcoming for printed copies of the song, which, however, usually fell short of the blunt phraseology of the original. The raucous ballad singers took risks feared by the printer.

Mrs. Saumarez, leading Angele by the hand, thought she would like to hear one of these rustic melodies, and halted. Instantly the vendor changed his cue. The lady might be the wife of a magistrate. Once he got fourteen days as a rogue and a vagabond at the instance of just such another interested spectator, who put the police in action.

Quickly surfeited by the only half-understood humor of a song describing the sale of a dead horse, she wandered on, and soon came across the preacher and his lay helpers.

To her surprise she saw John Bolland standing bareheaded in the front rank, and with him Martin. She had never pictured the keen-eyed, crusty old farmer in this guise. It amused her. The minister began to offer up a prayer. The men hid their faces in their hats, the women bowed reverently, and fervent ejaculations punctuated each pause in the preacher's appeal.

"I do believe!"

"Amen! Amen!"

"Spare us, O Lord!"

Mrs. Saumarez stared at the gathering with real wonderment.

"C'est incroyable!" she murmured.

"What are they doing, mamma?" cried Angele, trying to guess why Martin had buried his eyes in his cap.

"They are praying, dearest. It reminds one of the Covenanters. It really is very touching."

"Who were the Covenanters?"

"When you are older, ma belle, you will read of them in history."

That was Mrs. Saumarez's way. She treated her daughter's education as a matter for governesses whom she did not employ and masters to whose control Angele would probably never be entrusted.

The two entered the White House. There they found Mrs. Bolland, radiant in a black silk dress, a bonnet trimmed with huge roses, and a velvet dolman, the wings of which were thrown back over her portly shoulders to permit her the better to press all comers to partake of her hospitality.

Several women and one or two men were seated at the big table, while people were coming and going constantly.

It flustered and gratified Mrs. Bolland not a little to receive such a distinguished visitor.

"Eh, my leddy," she cried, "I'm glad to see ye. Will ye tek a chair? And t' young leddy, too? Will ye hev a glass o' wine?"

This was the recognized formula. There was a decanter of port wine on the sideboard, but most of the visitors partook of tea or beer. One of the men drew himself a foaming tankard from a barrel in the corner.

Mrs. Saumarez smiled wistfully.

"No wine, thank you," she said; "but that beer looks very nice. I'll have some, if I may."

Not until that moment did Mrs. Bolland remember that her guest was a reputed teetotaler. So, then, Mrs. Atkinson, proprietress of the "Black Lion," was mistaken.

"That ye may, an' welcome," she said in her hearty way.

Angele murmured something in French, but her mother gave a curt answer, and the child subsided, being, perhaps, interested by the evident amazement and admiration she evoked among the country people. To-day, Angele was dressed in a painted muslin, with hat and sash of the same material, long black silk stockings, and patent-leather shoes. She looked elegantly old-fashioned, and might have walked bodily out of one of Caran d'Ache's sketches of French society.

Suddenly she bounced up like an india-rubber ball.

"Tra la!" she cried. "V'la mon cher Martin!"

The prayer meeting had ended, and Martin was speeding home, well knowing who had arrived there.

Angele ran to meet him.

"She's a rare fairy," whispered Mrs. Summersgill, mistress of the Dale End Farm. "She's rigged out like a pet doll."

"Ay," agreed her neighbor. "D'ye ken wheer they coom frae?"

"Frae Lunnon, I reckon. They're staying wi' t' Miss Walkers. That's t' muther, a Mrs. Saumarez, they call her, but they say she's a Jarman baroness."

"Well, bless her heart, she hez a rare swallow for a gill o' ale."

This was perfectly true. The lady had emptied her glass with real gusto.

"I was so hot and tired," she said, with an apologetic smile at her hostess. "Now, I can admire your wonderful store of good things to eat," and she focussed the display through gold-rimmed eyeglasses.

Truly, the broad kitchen table presented a spectacle that would kill a dyspeptic. A cold sirloin, a portly ham, two pairs of chickens, three brace of grouse--these solids were mere garnishings to dishes piled with currant cakes, currant loaves and plain bread cut and buttered, jam turnovers, open tarts of many varieties, "fat rascals," Queen cakes, sponge cakes--battalions and army corps of all the sweet and toothsome articles known to the culinary skill of the North.

"I'm feared, my leddy, they won't suit your taste," began Mrs. Bolland, but the other broke in eagerly:

"Oh, don't say that! They look so good, so wholesome, so different from the French cooking we weary of in town. If I were not afraid of spoiling my dinner and earning a scolding from Françoise I would certainly ask for some of that cold beef and a slice of bread and butter."

"Tek my advice, ma'am, an' eat while ye're in t' humor," cried Mrs. Bolland, instantly helping her guest to the eatables named.

Mrs. Saumarez laughed delightedly and peeled off a pair of white kid gloves. She ate a little of the meat and crumbled a slice of bread. Mrs. Bolland refilled the glass with beer.

Then the lady made herself generally popular by asking questions. Did they use lard or butter in the pastry? How was the sponge cake made so light? What a curious custom it was to put currants into plain dough; she had never seen it done before. Were the servants able to do these things, or had they to be taught by the mistress of the house? She amused the women by telling of the airs and graces of London domestics, and evoked a feeling akin to horror by relating the items of the weekly bills in her town house.

"Seven pund o' beacan for breakfast i' t' kitchen!" exclaimed Mrs. Summersgill. "Whea ivver heerd tell o' sike waste?"

"Eh, ma'am," cried another, "but ye mun addle yer money aisy t' let 'em carry on that gait."

Martin, who found Angele in her most charming mood--unconsciously pleased, too, that her costume was not so *outré* as to run any risk of caustic comment by strangers--came in and asked if he might take her along the row of stalls. Mrs. Bolland had given him a shilling that morning, and he resolved magnanimously to let the shooting gallery wait; Angele should be treated to a shilling's worth of aught she fancied.

But Mrs. Saumarez rose.

"Your mother will kill me with kindness, Martin, if I remain longer," she said. "Take me, too, and we'll see if the fair contains any toys."

She emptied the second glass of ale, drew on her gloves, bade the company farewell with as much courtesy as if they were so many countesses, and walked away with the youngsters.

At one stall she bought Martin a pneumatic gun, a powerful toy which the dealer never expected to sell in that locality. At another she would have purchased a doll for Angele, but the child shrugged her shoulders and declared that she would greatly prefer to ride on the roundabouts with Martin. Mrs. Saumarez agreed instantly, and the pair mounted the hobby-horses.

Among the children who watched them enviously were Jim Bates and Evelyn Atkinson. When the steam organ was in full blast and the horses were flying round at a merry pace, Mrs. Saumarez bent over Jim Bates and placed half a sovereign in his hand.

"Go to the 'Black Lion,'" she said, "and bring me a bottle of the best brandy. See that it is wrapped in paper. I do not care to go myself to a place where there are so many men."

Jim darted off. The roundabout slackened speed and stopped, but Mrs. Saumarez ordered another ride. The whirl had begun again when Bates returned with a parcel.

"It was four shillin's, ma'am," he said.

"Thank you, very much. Keep the change."

Even Evelyn Atkinson was so awed by the magnitude of the tip that she forgot for a moment to glue her eyes on Angele and Martin.

But Angele, wildly elated though she was with the sensation of flight, and seated astride like a boy, until the tops of her stockings were exposed to view, did not fail to notice the conclusion of Jim Bates's errand.

"Mamma will be ill to-night," she screamed in Martin's ear. "Françoise will be busy waiting on her. I'll come out again at eight o'clock."

"You must not," shouted the boy. "It will be very rough here then."

"C'la va--I mean, I know that quite well. It'll be all the more jolly. Meet me at the gate. I'll bring plenty of money."

"I can't," protested Martin.

"You must!"

"But I'm supposed to be home myself at eight o'clock."

"If you don't come, I'll find some other boy. Frank Beckett-Smythe said he would try and turn up every evening, in case I got a chance to sneak out."

"All right. I'll be there."

Martin intended to hurry her through the fair and take her home again. If he received a "hiding" for being late, he would put up with it. In any case, the squire's eldest son could not be allowed to steal his wilful playmate without a struggle. Probably Adam reasoned along similar lines when Eve first offered him an apple. Be that as it may, it never occurred to Martin that the third chapter of Genesis could have the remotest bearing on the night's frolic.

CHAPTER V

"IT IS THE FIRST STEP THAT COUNTS"

Mrs. Saumarez and Angele returned to The Elms, but Martin had to forego accompanying them. He knew that--with Bible opened at the Third Book of Kings--John Bolland was waiting in a bedroom, every downstairs apartment being crowded.

He ran all the way along the village street and darted upstairs, striving desperately to avoid even the semblance of undue haste. Bolland was thumbing the book impatiently. He frowned over his spectacles.

"Why are ye late?" he demanded.

"Mrs. Saumarez asked me to walk with her through the village," answered Martin truthfully.

"Ay. T' wife telt me she was here."

The explanation served, and Martin breathed more freely. The reading commenced:

"Now king David was old and stricken in years; and they covered him with clothes, but he gat no heat.

"Wherefore his servants said unto him, Let there be sought for my lord the king a young virgin: and let her stand before the king, and let her cherish him, and let her lie in thy bosom, that my lord the king may get heat."

Martin, with his mind in a tumult on account of the threatened escapade, did not care a pin what method was adopted to restore the feeble circulation of the withered King so long as the lesson passed off satisfactorily.

With rare self-control, he bent over the, to him, unmeaning page, and acquitted himself so well in the parrot repetition which he knew would be pleasing that he ventured to say:

"May I stay out a little later to-night, sir?"

"What for? You're better i' bed than gapin' at shows an' listenin' te drunken men."

"I only ask because--because I'm told that Mrs. Saumarez's little girl means to see the fair by night, and she--er--would like me to be with her."

John Bolland laughed dryly.

"Mrs. Saumarez'll soon hev more'n eneof on't," he said. "Ay, lad, ye can stay wi' her, if that's all."

Martin never, under any circumstances, told a downright lie, but he feared that this was sailing rather too near the wind to be honest. The nature of Angele's statement was so nebulous. He could hardly explain outright that Mrs. Saumarez was not coming--that Angele alone would be the sightseer. So he flushed, and felt that he was obtaining the required permission by false pretense. He could have pulled Angele's pretty ears for placing him in such a dilemma, but with a man so utterly unsympathetic as Bolland it was impossible to be quite candid.

He had clear ideas of right and wrong. He knew it was wrong for Angele to come out unattended and mix in the scene of rowdyism which the village would present until midnight. If she really could succeed in leaving The Elms unnoticed, the most effectual way to stop her was to go now to her mother or to one of the Misses Walker and report her intention. But this, according to the boy's code of honor, was to play the sneak, than which there is no worse crime in the calendar. No. He would look after her himself. There was a spice of adventure, too, in acting as the chosen squire of this sprightly damsel. Strong-minded as he was, and resolute beyond his years, Angele's wilfulness, her quick tongue, the diablerie of her glance, the witchery of her elegant little person, captivated heart and brain, and benumbed the inchoate murmurings of conscience.

Oddly enough, he often found himself comparing her with Elsie Herbert, a girl with whom he had never exchanged a word, and Angele Saumarez invariably figured badly in the comparison. The boy did not know then that he must become a man, perhaps soured of life, bitter with experience, before he would understand the difference between respect and fascination.

With housewife prudence, Mrs. Bolland hailed him as he was passing through the back kitchen.

"Noo, then, Martin, don't ye go racketin' about too much in your best clothes. And mind your straw hat isn't blown off if ye go on one o' them whirligigs."

"All right, mother," he said cheerfully, and was gone in a flash.

Two hours must elapse before Angele could appear. Jim Bates, who bore no malice, stood treat in gingerbread and lemonade out of the largesse bestowed by Mrs. Saumarez. Martin, carried away by sight of a champion boxer who offered a sovereign to any local man under twelve stone who stood up to him for three two-minute rounds, spent sixpence in securing seats for himself and Jim when the gage of combat was thrown down by his gamekeeper friend.

There was a furious fight with four-ounce gloves. The showman discovered quickly that Velvetens "knew a bit." Repeated attempts to "out" him with "the right" on the "point" resulted in heavy "counters" on the ribs, and a terrific uppercut failed because of the keeper's quick sight.

The proprietor of the booth, who acted as timekeeper, gave every favor to his henchman, but at the end of the third round the professional was more blown than the amateur. The sovereign was handed over with apparent good will, both showmen realizing that it might be money well spent. And it was, as the black eyes and swollen lips among the would-be pugilists of Elmsdale testified for many days thereafter.

Martin, who had never before seen a real boxing match, was entranced. With a troop of boys he accompanied the two combatants to the door of the "Black Lion," where a fair proportion of the sovereign was soon converted into beer.

George Pickering had witnessed the contest. Generous to a fault, he started a purse to be fought for in rounds inside the booth. Wanting a pencil and paper, he ran upstairs to his room—he had resolved to stay at the inn for a couple of nights—and encountered Kitty Thwaites on the stairs.

She carried a laden tray, so he slipped an arm around her waist, and she was powerless to prevent him from kissing her unless she dropped the tray or risked upsetting its contents. She had no intention of doing either of these things.

"Oh, go on, do!" she cried, not averting her face too much.

He whispered something.

"Not me!" she giggled. "Besides, I won't have a minnit to spare till closin' time."

Pickering hugged her again. She descended the stairs, laughing and very red.

The boys heard something of the details of the proposed Elmsdale championship boxing competition. Entries were pouring in, there being no fee. George Pickering was appointed referee, and the professional named as judge. The first round would be fought at 3 P.M. next day.

The time passed more quickly than Martin expected; as for his money, it simply melted. Tenpence out of the shilling had vanished before he realized how precious little remained wherewith to entertain Angele. She said she would have "plenty of money," but he imagined that a walk through the fair and a ride on the roundabout would satisfy her. Not even at fourteen does the male understand the female of twelve.

A few minutes before eight he escaped from his companions and strolled toward The Elms. The house was not like the suburban villa which stands in the center of a row and proudly styles itself Oakdene. It was hidden in a cluster of lordly elms, and already the day was so far spent that the entrance gate was invisible save at a few yards' distance.

The nearest railway station was situated two miles along this very road. A number of slow-moving country people were sauntering to the station, where the north train was due at 9:05 P.M. Another train, that from the south, arrived at 9:20, and would be the last that night. A full moon was rising, but her glories were hidden by the distant hills. There was no wind; the weather was fine and settled. The Elmsdale Feast was lucky in its dates.

Martin waited near the gate and heard the church clock chime the hour. Two boys on bicycles came flying toward the village. They were the Beckett-Smythes. They slackened pace as they neared The Elms.

"Wonder if she'll get out to-night?" said Ernest, the younger.

"There's no use waiting here. She said she'd dodge out one evening for certain. If she's not in the village, we'd better skip back before we're missed," said the heir.

"Oh, that's all right. Pater thinks we're in the grounds, and there won't be any bother if we show up at nine."

They rode on. The quarter-hour chimed, and Martin became impatient.

"She was humbugging me, as usual," he reflected. "Well, this time I'm pleased."

An eager voice whispered:

"Hold the gate! It'll rattle when I climb over. They've not heard me. I crept here on the grass."

Angele had changed her dress to a dark-blue serge and sailor hat. This was decidedly thoughtful. In her day attire she must have attracted a great deal of notice. Now, in the dark, neither the excellence of her clothing nor the elegance of her carriage would differentiate her too markedly from the village girls.

She was breathless with haste, but her tongue rattled on rapidly.

"Mamma *is* ill. I knew she would be. I told Françoise I had a headache, and went to bed. Then I crept downstairs again. Miss Walker nearly caught me, but she's so upset that she never saw me. As for Fritz, if I meet him--poof!"

"What's the matter with Mrs. Saumarez?" asked Martin.

"Trop de cognac, mon cheri."

"What's that?"

"It means a 'bit wobbly, my dear.'"

"Is her head bad?"

"Yes. It will be for a week. But never mind mamma. She'll be all right, with Françoise to look after her. Here! You pay for everything. There's ten shillings in silver. I have a sovereign in my stocking, if we want it."

They were hurrying toward the distant medley of sound. Flaring naphtha lamps gave the village street a Rembrandt effect. Love-making couples, with arms entwined, were coming away from the glare of the booths. Their forms cast long shadows on the white road.

"Ten shillings!" gasped Martin. "Whatever do we want with ten shillings?"

"To enjoy ourselves, you silly. You can't have any fun without money. Why, when mamma dines at the Savoy and takes a party to the theater afterwards, it costs her as many pounds. I know, because I've seen the checks."

"That has nothing to do with it. We can't spend ten shillings here."

"Oh, can't we? You leave that to me. Mais, voyez-vous, imbecile, are you going to be nasty?" She halted and stamped an angry foot.

"No, I'm not; but----"

"Then come on, stupid. I'm late as it is."

"The stalls remain open until eleven."

"Magnifique! What a row there'll be if I have to knock to get in!"

Martin held his tongue. He resolved privately that Angele should be home at nine, at latest, if he dragged her thither by main force. The affair promised difficulties. She was so intractable that a serious quarrel would result. Well, he could not help it. Better a lasting break than the wild hubbub that would spring up if they both remained out till the heinous hour she contemplated.

In the village they encountered Jim Bates and Evelyn Atkinson, surrounded by seven or eight boys and girls, for Jim was disposing rapidly of his six shillings, and Evelyn bestowed favor on him for the nonce.

"Hello! here's Martin," whooped Bates. "I thowt ye'd gone yam (home). Where hev ye----"

Jim's eloquence died away abruptly. He caught sight of Angele and was abashed. Not so Evelyn.

"Martin's been to fetch his sweetheart," she said maliciously.

Angele simpered sufficiently to annoy Evelyn. Then she laughed agreement.

"Yes. And won't we have a time! Come on! Everybody have a ride."

She sprang toward the horses. Martin alone followed.

"Come on!" she screamed. "Martin will pay for the lot. He has heaps of money."

No second invitation was needed. Several times the whole party swung round with lively yelling. From the roundabouts they went to the swings; from the swings to the cocoanut shies. Here they were joined by the Beckett-Smythes, who endeavored promptly to assume the leadership.

Martin's blood was fired by the contest. He was essentially a boy foredoomed to dominate his fellows, whether for good or evil. He pitched restraint to the winds. He could throw better than either of the young aristocrats; he could shoot straighter at the galleries; he could describe the heroic combat between the boxer and Velveteens; he would swing Angele higher than any, until they looked over the crossbar after each giddy swirl.

The Beckett-Smythes kept pace with him only in expenditure, Jim Bates being quickly drained, and even they wondered how long the village lad could last.

The ten shillings were soon dissipated.

"I want that sovereign," he shouted, when Angele and he were riding together again on the hobby-horses.

"I told you so," she screamed. She turned up her dress to extricate the money from a fold of her stocking. The light flashed on her white skin, and Frank Beckett-Smythe, who rode behind with one of the Atkinson girls, wondered what she was doing.

She bent over Martin and whispered:

"There are *two*! Keep the fun going!"

The young spark in the rear thought that she was kissing Martin; he was wild with jealousy. At the next show--that of a woman grossly fat, who allowed the gapers to pinch her leg at a penny a pinch--he paid with his last half-crown. When they went to refresh themselves on ginger-beer, Martin produced a sovereign. The woman who owned the stall bit it, surveyed him suspiciously, and tried to swindle him in the change. She failed badly.

"Eleven bottles at twopence and eleven cakes at a penny make two-and-nine. I want two more shillings, please," he said coolly.

"Be aff wid ye! I gev ye seventeen and thruppence. If ye thry anny uv yer tricks an me I'll be afther askin' where ye got the pound."

"Give me two more shillings, or I'll call the police."

Mrs. Maguire was beaten; she paid up.

The crowd left her, with cries of "Irish Molly!" "Where's Mick?" and even coarser expressions. Angele screamed at her:

"Why don't you stick to ginger-beer? You're muzzy."

The taunt stung, and the old Irishwoman cursed her tormentor as a black-eyed little witch.

Angele, seeing that Martin carried all before him, began straightway to flirt with the heir. At first the defection was not noted, but when she elected to sit by Frank while they watched the acrobats the new swain took heart once more and squeezed her arm.

Evelyn Atkinson, who was in a smiling temper, felt that a crisis might be brought about now. There was not much time. It was nearly ten o'clock, and soon her mother would be storming at her for not having taken herself and her sisters to bed, though, in justice be it said, the girls could not possibly sleep until the house was cleared.

Ernest Beckett-Smythe was her cavalier at the moment.

"We've seen all there is te see," she whispered. "Let's go and have a dance in our yard. Jim Bates can play a mouth-organ."

Ernest was a slow-witted youth.

"Where's the good?" he said. "There's more fun here."

"You try it, an' see," she murmured coyly.

The suggestion caught on. It was discussed while Martin and Jim Bates were driving a weight up a pole by striking a lever with a heavy hammer. Anything in the shape of an athletic feat always attracted Martin.

Angele was delighted. She scented a row. These village urchins were imps after her own heart.

"Oh, let's," she agreed. "It'll be a change. I'll show you the American two-step."

Frank had his arm around her waist now.

"Right-o!" he cried. "Evelyn, you and Ernest lead the way."

The girl, flattered by being bracketed publicly with one of the squire's sons, enjoined caution.

"Once we're past t' stables it's all right," she said. "I don't suppose Fred'll hear us, anyhow."

Fred was at the front of the hotel watching the road, watching Kitty Thwaites as she flitted upstairs and down, watching George Pickering through the bar window, and grinning like a fiend when he saw that somewhat ardent wooer, hilarious now, but sober enough according to his standard, glancing occasionally at his watch.

There was a gate on each side of the hotel. That on the left led to the yard, with its row of stables and cart-sheds, and thence to a spacious area occupied by hay-stacks, piles of firewood, hen-houses, and all the miscellaneous lumber of an establishment half inn, half farm. The gate on the right opened into a bowling-green and skittle-alley. Behind these lay the kitchen garden and orchard. A hedge separated one section from the other, and entrance could be obtained to either from the back door of the hotel.

The radiance of a full moon now decked the earth in silver and black; in the shade the darkness was intense by contrast. The church clock struck ten.

Half a dozen youngsters crept silently into the stable yard. Angele kicked up a dainty foot in a preliminary *pas seul*, but Evelyn stopped her unceremoniously. The village girl's sharp ears had caught footsteps on the garden path beyond the hedge.

It was George Pickering, with his arm around Kitty's shoulders. He was talking in a low tone, and she was giggling nervously.

"They're sweetheartin'," whispered a girl.

"So are we," declared Frank Beckett-Smythe. "Aren't we, Angele?"

"Sapristi! I should think so. Where's Martin?"

"Never mind. We don't want him."

"Oh, he will be furious. Let's hide. There will be such a row when he goes home, and he daren't go till he finds me."

Master Beckett-Smythe experienced a second's twinge at thought of the greeting he and his brother would receive at the Hall. But here was Angele pretending timidity and cowering in his arms. He would not leave her now were he to be flayed alive.

The footsteps of Pickering and Kitty died away. They had gone into the orchard.

Evelyn Atkinson breathed freely again.

"Even if Kitty sees us now, I don't care," she said. "She daren't tell mother, when she knows that we saw her and Mr. Pickerin'. He ought to have married her sister."

"Poof!" tittered Angele. "Who heeds a domestic?"

Someone came at a fast run into the yard, running in desperate haste, and making a fearful din. Two boys appeared. The leader shouted:

"Angele! Angele! Are you there?"

Martin had missed her. Jim Bates, who knew the chosen rendezvous of the Atkinson girls, suggested that they and their friends had probably gone to the haggarth.

"Shut up, you fool!" hissed Frank. "Do you want the whole village to know where we are?"

Martin ignored him. He darted forward and caught Angele by the shoulder. He distinguished her readily by her outline, though she and the rest were hidden in the somber shadows of the outbuildings.

"Why did you leave me?" he demanded angrily. "You must come home at once. It is past ten o'clock."

"Don't be angry, Martin," she pouted. "I am just a little tired of the noise. I want to show you and the rest a new dance."

The minx was playing her part well. She had read Evelyn Atkinson's soul. She felt every throb of young Beckett-Smythe's foolish heart. She was quite certain that Martin would find her and cause a scene. There was deeper intrigue afoot now than the mere folly of unlicensed frolic in the fair. Her vanity, too, was gratified by the leading role she filled among them all. The puppets bore themselves according to their temperaments. Evelyn bit her lip with rage and nearly yielded to a wild impulse to spring at Angele and scratch her face. Martin was white with determination. As for Master Frank, he boiled over instantly.

"You just leave her alone, young Bolland," he said thickly. "She came here to please herself, and can stay here, if she likes. I'll see to that."

Martin did not answer.

"Angele," he said quietly, "come away."

Seeing that he had lived in the village nearly all his life, it was passing strange that this boy should have dissociated himself so completely from its ways. But the early hours he kept, his love of horses, dogs, and books, his preference for the society of grooms and gamekeepers--above all, a keen, if unrecognized, love of nature in all her varying moods, an almost pagan worship of mountain, moor, and stream--had kept him aloof from village life. A boy of fourteen does not indulge in introspection. It simply came as a fearful shock to find the daughter of a lady like Mrs. Saumarez so ready to forget her social standing. Surely, she could not know what she was doing. He was undeceived, promptly and thoroughly.

Angele snatched her shoulder from his grasp.

"Don't you dare hold me," she snapped. "I'm not coming. I won't come with you, anyhow. Ma foi, Frank is far nicer."

"Then I'll drag you home," said Martin.

"Oh, will you, indeed? I'll see to that."

Beckett-Smythe deemed Angele a girl worth fighting for. In any case, this clodhopper who spent money like a lord must be taught manners.

Martin smiled. In his bemused brain the idea was gaining ground that Angele would be flattered if he "licked" the squire's son for her sake.

"Very well," he said, stepping back into the moonlight. "We'll settle it that way. If *you* beat *me*, Angele remains. If *I* beat *you*, she goes home. Here, Jim. Hold my coat and hat. And, no matter what happens, mind you don't play for any dancing."

Martin stated terms and issued orders like an emperor. In the hour of stress he felt himself immeasurably superior to this gang of urchins, whether their manners smacked of Elmsdale or of Eton.

Angele's acquaintance with popular fiction told her that at this stage of the game the heroine should cling in tears to the one she loved, and implore him to desist, to be calm for her sake. But the riot in her veins brought a new sensation. There were possibilities hitherto unsuspected in the darkness, the secrecy, the candid brutality of the fight. She almost feared lest Beckett-Smythe should be defeated.

And how the other girls must envy her, to be fought for by the two boys pre-eminent among them, to be the acknowledged princess of this village carnival!

So she clapped her hands.

"O la la!" she cried. "Going to fight about poor little me! Well, I can't stop you, can I?"

"Yes, you can," said one.

"She won't, anyhow," scoffed the other. "Are you ready?"

"Quite!"

"Then 'go.'"

And the battle began.



CHAPTER VI

WHEREIN THE RED BLOOD FLOWS

They fought like a couple of young bulls. Frank intended to demolish his rival at the outset. He was a year older and slightly heavier, but Martin was more active, more sure-footed, sharper of vision. Above all, he had laid to heart the three-pennyworth of tuition obtained in the boxing booth a few hours earlier.

He had noted then that a boxer dodged as many blows with his head as he warded with his arms. He grasped the necessity to keep moving, and thus disconcert an adversary's sudden rush. Again, he had seen the excellence of a forward spring without changing the relative positions of the feet. Assuming you were sparring with the left hand and foot advanced, a quick jump of eighteen inches enabled you to get the right home with all your force. You must keep the head well back and the eye fixed unflinchingly on your opponent's. Above all, meet offense with offense. Hit hard and quickly and as often as might be.

These were sound principles, and he proceeded to put them into execution, to the growing distress and singular annoyance of Master Beckett-Smythe.

Ernest acted as referee--in the language of the village, he "saw fair play"--but was wise enough to call "time" early in the first round, when his brother drew off after a fierce set-to. The forcing tactics had failed, but honors were divided. The taller boy's reach had told in his favor, while Martin's newly acquired science redressed the balance.

Martin's lip was cut and there was a lump on his left cheek, but Frank felt an eye closing and had received a staggerer in the ribs. He was aware of an uneasy feeling that if Martin survived the next round he (Frank) would be beaten, so there was nothing for it but to summon all his reserves and deliver a Napoleonic attack. The enemy must be crushed by sheer force.

He was a plucky lad and was stung to frenzy by seeing Angele offer Martin the use of a lace handkerchief for the bleeding lip, a delicate tenderness quietly repulsed.

So, when the rush came, Martin had to fight desperately to avoid annihilation. He was compelled to give way, and backed toward the hedge. Behind lay an unseen stackpole. At the instant when Beckett-Smythe lowered his head and endeavored to butt Martin violently in the stomach, the latter felt the obstruction with his heel. Had he lost his nerve then or flickered an eyelid, he would have taken a nasty fall and a severe shaking. As it was, he met the charge more than halfway, and delivered the same swinging upper stroke which had nearly proved fatal to his gamekeeper friend.

It was wholly disastrous to Beckett-Smythe. It caught him fairly on the nose, and, as the blow was in accord with the correct theory of dynamics as applied to forces in motion, it knocked him silly. His head flew up, his knees bent, and he dropped to the ground with a horrible feeling that the sky had fallen and that stars were sparkling among the rough paving-stones.

"That's a finisher. He's whopped!" exulted Jim Bates.

"No, he's not. It was a chance blow," cried Ernest, who was strongly inclined to challenge the victor on his own account. "Get up, Frank. Have another go at him!"

But Frank, who could neither see nor hear distinctly, was too groggy to rise, and the village girls drew together in an alarmed group. Such violent treatment of the squire's son savored of sacrilege. They were sure that Martin would receive some condign punishment by the law for pummeling a superior being so unmercifully.

Angele, somewhat frightened herself, tried to console her discomfited champion.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "It was all my fault."

"Oh, go away!" he protested. "Ernest, where's there a pump?"

Assisted by his brother, he struggled to his feet. His nose was bleeding freely and his face was ghastly in the moonlight. But he was a spirited youngster. He held out a hand to Martin.

"I've had enough just now," he said, with an attempt at a smile. "Some other day, when my eye is all right, I'd like to----"

A woman's scream of terror, a man's cry of agony, startled the silent night and nearly scared the children out of their wits.

Someone came running up the garden path. It was Kitty Thwaites. She swayed unsteadily as she ran; her arms were

lifted in frantic supplication.

"Oh, Betsy, Betsy, you've killed him!" she wailed. "Murder! Murder! Come, someone! For God's sake, come!"

She stumbled and fell, shrieking frenziedly for help. Another woman—a woman whose extended right hand clutched a long, thin knife such as is used to carve game—appeared from the gloom of the orchard. Her wan face was raised to the sky, and a baleful light shone in her eyes.

"Ay, I'll swing for him," she cried in a voice shrill with hysteria. "May the Lord deal wi' him as he dealt wi' me! And my own sister, too! Out on ye, ye strumpet! 'Twould sarve ye right if I stuck ye wi' t' same knife."

With a clatter of ironshod boots, most of the frightened children stampeded out of the stable yard. Martin, to whom Angele clung in speechless fear, and the two Beckett-Smythes alone were left.

The din of steam organ and drums, the ceaseless turmoil of the fair, the constant fusillade at the shooting gallery, and the bawling of men in charge of the various sideshows, had kept the women's shrieks from other ears thus far. But Kitty Thwaites, though almost shocked out of her senses, gained strength from the imminence of peril. Springing up from the path just in time to avoid the vengeful oncoming of her sister, she staggered toward the hotel and created instant alarm by her cries of "Murder! Help! George Pickering has been stabbed!"

A crowd of men poured out from bar and smoking-room. One, who took thought, rushed through the front door and snatched a naphtha lamp from a stall. Meanwhile, the three boys and the girl on the other side of the hedge, seeing and hearing everything, but unseen and unheard themselves, took counsel in some sort.

"I say," Ernest Beckett-Smythe urged his brother, "let's get out of this. Father will thrash us to death if we're mixed up in this business."

The advice was good. Frank forgot his dizziness for the moment, and the two raced to secure their bicycles from a stall-holder's care. They rode away to the Hall unnoticed.

Martin remained curiously quiet. All the excitement had left him. If Elmsdale were rent by an earthquake just then, he would have watched the toppling houses with equanimity.

"I suppose you don't wish to stop here now?" he said to Angele.

The girl was sobbing bitterly. Her small body shook as though each gulp were a racking cough. She could not answer. He placed his arm around her and led her to the gate. While they were crossing the yard the people from the hotel crowded into the garden. The man with the lamp had reached the back of the house across the bowling green, and a stalwart farmer had caught Betsy Thwaites by the wrist. The blood-stained knife fell from her fingers. She moaned helplessly in disjointed phrases.

"It's all overed now. God help me! Why was I born?"

Already a crowd was surging into the hotel through the front door. Martin guided his trembling companion to the right; in a few strides they were clear of the fair, only to run into Mrs. Saumarez's German chauffeur.

He was not in uniform; in a well-fitting blue serge suit and straw hat, he looked more like a young officer in mufti than a mechanic. He was the first to recognize Angele, and was so frankly astonished that he bowed to her without lifting his hat.

"*You, mees?*" he cried, seemingly at a loss for other words.

Angele recovered her wits at once. She said something which Martin could not understand, though he was sure it was not in French, as the girl's frequent use of that language was familiarizing his ears with its sounds. As a matter of fact, she spoke German, telling the chauffeur to mind his own business, and she would mind hers; but if any talking were done her tongue might wag more than his.

At any rate, the man did then raise his hat politely and walk on. The remainder of the road between Elmsdale and The Elms was deserted. Martin hardly realized the pace at which he was literally dragging his companion homeward until she protested.

"Martin, you're hurting my arm! What's the hurry?... Did she really kill him?"

"She said so. I don't know," he replied.

"Who was she?"

"Kitty Thwaites's sister, I suppose. I never saw her before. They were not bred in this village."

"And why did she kill him?"

"How can I tell?"

"She had a knife in her hand."

"Yes."

"Perhaps she killed him because she was jealous."

"Perhaps."

"Martin, don't be angry with me. I didn't mean any harm. I was only having a lark. I did it just to tease you--and Evelyn Atkinson."

"That's all very fine. What will your mother say?"

The quietude, the sound of her own voice, were giving the girl courage. She tossed her head with something of contempt.

"She can say nothing. You leave her to me. You saw how I shut Fritz's mouth. What was the name of the man who was killed?"

"George Pickering."

"Ah. He walked down the garden with Kitty Thwaites."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. When I get in I can tell Miss Walker and Françoise all about it. They will be so excited. There will be no fuss about me being out. *Vla la bonne fortune!*"

"Speak English, please."

"Well, it is good luck I was there. I can make up such a story."

"Good luck that a poor fellow should be stabbed!"

"That wasn't my fault, was it? Good-night, Martin. You fought beautifully. Kiss me!"

"I won't kiss you. Run in, now. I'll wait till the door opens."

"Then *I'll* kiss *you*. There! I like you better than all the world--just now."

She opened the gate, careless whether it clanged or not. Martin heard her quick footsteps on the gravel of the short drive. She rattled loudly on the door.

"Good-night, Martin--dear!" she cried.

He did not answer. There was some delay. Evidently she had not been missed.

"Are you there?" She was impatient of his continued coldness.

"Yes."

"Then why don't you speak, silly?"

The door opened with the clanking of a chain. There was a woman's startled cry as the inner light fell on Angele. Then he turned.

Not until he reached the "Black Lion" and its well-lighted area did he realize that he was coatless and hatless. Jim Bates had vanished with both of these necessary articles. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound! There would be a fearful row, and the thrashing would be the same in any case.

He avoided the crowd, keeping to the darker side of the street. A policeman had just come out of the inn and was telling the people to go away. All the village seemed to have gathered during the few minutes which had elapsed since the tragedy took place. He felt strangely sorry for Betsy Thwaites. Would she be locked up, handcuffed, with chains on her ankles? What would they do with the knife? Why should she want to kill Mr. Pickering? Wouldn't he marry her?

Even so, that was no reason he should be stabbed. Where did she stick him? Did he quiver like Absalom when Joab thrust the darts into his heart?

At last he ran up the slight incline leading to the White House; there was a light in the front kitchen. For one awful moment he paused, with a finger on the sneck; then he pressed the latch and entered.

John Bolland, grim as a stone gargoyle, wearing his Sunday coat and old-fashioned tall hat, was leaning against the massive chimneypiece. Mrs. Bolland, with bonnet awry, was seated. She had been crying. A frightened kitchenmaid peeped through the passage leading to the back of the house when the door opened to admit the truant. Then she vanished.

There was a period of chill silence while Martin closed the door. He turned and faced the elderly couple, and John Bolland spoke:

"So ye've coomyam, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"An' at a nice time, too. Afther half-past ten! An hour sen yer muther an' me searched high and low for ye. Where hev ye bin? Tell t' truth, ye young scamp. Every lie'll mean more skin off your back."

Mrs. Bolland, drying her eyes, now that Martin had returned, noticed his disheveled condition. His face was white as his shirt, and both were smeared with blood. A wave of new alarm paled her florid cheeks. She ran to him.

"For mercy's sake, boy, what hev ye bin doin'? Are ye hurt?"

"No, mother, not hurt. I fought Frank Beckett-Smythe. That is all."

"T' squire's son. Why on earth----"

"Go to bed, Martha," said John, picking up a riding whip. But Mrs. Bolland's sympathies discerned a deeper reason for Martin's escapade than a mere boyish frolic which deserved a thrashing. He was unnaturally calm. Something out of the common had happened. He did not flinch at the sight of the whip.

"John," she said sternly, "ye shan't touch him t'-night."

"Stand aside, Martha. If all my good teachin' is of no avail----"

"Mebbe t' lad's fair sick o' yer good teachin'. You lay a hand on him at yer peril. If ye do, I don't bide i' t' house this night!"

Never before, during thirty years of married life, had Martha Bolland defied her husband. He glowered with anger and amazement.

"Would ye revile the Word te shield that spawn o' Satan?" he roared. "Get away, woman, lest I do thee an injury."

But his wife's temper was fierce as his own when roused. She was a Meynell, and there have been Meynells in Yorkshire as long as any Bollands.

"Tak' yer threats te those who heed 'em," she retorted bitterly. "D'ye think folk will stand by an' let ye raise yer hand te me?... David, William, Mary, coom here an' hold yer master. He's like te have a fit wi' passion."

There was a shuffling in the passage. The men servants, such as happened to be in the house, came awkwardly at their mistress's cry. The farmer stood spellbound. What devil possessed the household that his authority should be set at naught thus openly?

It was a thrilling moment, but Martin solved the difficulty. He wrenched himself free of Mrs. Bolland's protecting arms.

"Father, mother!" he cried. "Don't quarrel on my account. If I must be beaten, I don't care. I'll take all I get. But it's only fair that I should say why I was not home earlier."

Now, John Bolland, notwithstanding his dealing in the matter of the pedigree cow, prided himself on his sense of justice. Indeed, the man who does the gravest injury to his fellows is often cursed with a narrow-minded certainty of his own righteousness. Moreover, this matter had gone beyond instant adjustment by the unsparing use of a whip. His wife, his servants, were arrayed against him. By the Lord, they should rue it!

"Aye," he said grimly. "Tell your muther why you've been actin' t' blackguard. Mebbe she'll understand."

Mrs. Bolland had the sense to pass this taunt unheeded. Her heart was quailing already at her temerity.

"Angele Saumarez came out without her mother," said Martin. "Mrs. Saumarez is ill. I thought it best to remain with her and take her home again. Frank Beckett-Smythe joined us, and he--he--insulted her, in a way. So I fought him, and beat him, too. And then George Pickering was murdered----"

"What?"

Bolland dropped the whip on the table. His wife sank into a chair with a cry of alarm. The plowmen and maids ventured farther into the room. Even the farmer's relentless jaw fell at this terrific announcement.

"Yes, it is quite true. Frank and I fought in the yard of the 'Black Lion.' George Pickering and Kitty Thwaites went down the garden--at least, so I was told. I didn't see them. But, suddenly, Kitty came screaming along the path, and after her a woman waving a long knife in the air. Kitty called her 'Betsy,' and said she had killed George Pickering. She said so herself. I heard her. Then some men came with a light and caught hold of Betsy. She was going to stab Kitty, too, I think; and Jim Bates ran away with my coat and hat, which he was holding."

The effect of such a narration on a gathering of villagers, law-abiding folk who lived in a quiet nook like Elmsdale, was absolutely paralyzing. John Bolland was the first to recover himself. A man of few ideas, he could not adjust his mental balance with sufficient nicety to see that the tragedy itself in no wise condoned Martin's offense.

"Are ye sure of what ye're sayin', lad?" he demanded, though indeed he felt it was absurd to imagine that such a tale would be invented as a mere excuse.

"Quite sure, sir. If you walk down to the 'Black Lion,' you'll see all the people standing round the hotel and the police keeping them back."

"Well, well, I'll gan this minit. George Pickerin' was no friend o' mine, but I'm grieved te hear o' sike deeds as these in oor village. I was maist angered wi' you on yer muther's account. She was grievin' so when we failed te find ye. She thowt sure you were runned over or drowneded i' t' beck."

This was meant as a graceful apology to his wife, and was taken in that spirit. Never before had he made such a concession.

"Here's yer stick, John," she said. "Hurry and find out what's happened. Poor George! I wish my tongue hadn't run so fast t' last time I seed him."

Bolland and the other men hastened away, and Martin was called on to recount the sensational episode, with every detail known to him, for the benefit of the household. No one paid heed to the boy's own adventures. All ears were for the vengeance taken by Betsy Thwaites on the man who jilted her. Even to minds blunted almost to callousness, the *crime passionel* had a vivid, an entrancing interest. The women were quick to see its motive, a passive endurance stung to sudden frenzy by the knowledge that the faithless lover was pursuing the younger sister. But how did Betsy Thwaites, who lived in far-off Hereford, learn that George Pickering was "making up" to Kitty? The affair was of recent growth. Indeed, none of those present was aware that Pickering and the pretty maid at the "Black Lion" were so much as acquainted with each other. And where did Betsy spring from? She could not have been staying in the village, or someone aware of her history must have seen her. Did Kitty know she was there? If so, how foolish of the younger woman to be out gallivanting in the moonlight with Pickering.

The whole story was fraught with deepest mystery. Martin could not answer one-tenth of the questions put to him. Boy-like, he felt himself somewhat of a hero, until he remembered Angele's glee at the "good luck" of the occurrence--how she would save herself from blame by telling Miss Walker and Francoise "all about it."

He flushed deeply. He wished now that Bolland had given him a hiding before he blurted out his news.

"Bless the lad, he's fair tired te death!" said Mrs. Bolland. "Here, Martin, drink a glass o' port an' off te bed wi' ye."

He sipped the wine, wondering dimly what Frank Beckett-Smythe was enduring and how he would explain that black eye. He was about to go upstairs, when hasty steps sounded without, and Bolland entered with a policeman.

This was the village constable, and, of course, well known to all. During the feast other policemen came from neighboring villages, but the local officer was best fitted to conduct inquiries into a case requiring measures beyond a mere arrest. His appearance at this late hour created a fresh sensation.

"Martin," said the farmer gravely, "did ye surely hear Kitty Thwaites say that Betsy had killed Mr. Pickering?"

"Yes, sir; I did."

"And ye heerd Betsy admit it?"

"Oh, yes--that is, if Betsy is the woman with the knife."

"There!" said Bolland, turning to the policeman. "I telt ye so. T' lad has his faults, but he's nae leear; I'll say that for him."

The man took off his helmet and wiped his forehead, for the night was close and warm.

"Well," he said, "I'll just leave it for the 'Super' te saddle. Mr. Pickerin' sweers that Betsy never struck him. She ran up tiv him wi' t' knife, an' they quarrelled desperately. That he don't deny. She threatened him, too, an' te get away frev her he was climin' inte t' stackyard when he slipped, an' a fork lyin' again' t' fence ran intiv his ribs."

"Isn't he dead, then?" exclaimed Mrs. Bolland shrilly.

"Not he, ma'am, and not likely te be. He kem to as soon as he swallowed some brandy, an' his first words was, 'Where's Betsy?' He was fair wild when they telt him she was arrested. He said it was all the fault of that flighty lass, Kitty, an' that a lot of fuss was bein' made about nowt. I didn't know what te dea. Beath women were fair ravin', and said all soarts o' things, but t' upshot is that Betsy is nussin' Mr. Pickerin' now until t' doctor comes frae Nottonby."

He still mopped his head, and his glance wandered to the goodly cask in the corner.

"Will ye hev a pint?" inquired Bolland.

"Ay, that I will, Mr. Bolland, an' welcome."

"An' a bite o' bread an' meat?" added Mrs. Bolland.

"I doan't min' if I do, ma'am."

A glance at a maid produced eatables with lightning speed. Mary feared lest she should miss a syllable of the night's marvels.

The policeman had many "bites," and talked while he ate. Gradually the story became lucid and consecutive.

Fred, the groom, was jealous of Pickering's admiration for Kitty. Having overheard the arrangement for a meeting on Monday, he wrote to Betsy, sending her the information in the hope that she would come from Hereford and cause a commotion at the hotel.

He expected her by an earlier train, but she did not arrive until 9:20 P.M., and there was a walk of over two miles from the station.

Meanwhile, he had seen Kitty and Pickering steal off into the garden. He knew that any interference on his part would earn him a prompt beating, so, when Betsy put in a belated appearance, he met her in the passage and told her where she would find the couple.

Instantly she ran through the kitchen, snatching a knife as she went. Before the drink-sodden meddler could realize the extent of the mischief he had wrought, Kitty was shrieking that Pickering was dead. All this he blurted out to the police before the injured man gave another version of the affair.

"Martin bears out one side o' t' thing," commented the constable oracularly, "but t' chief witness says that summat else happened. There was blood on t' knife when it was picked up; but there, again, there's a doubt, as Betsy had cut her own arm wi't. Anyhow, Betsy an' Kitty were cryin' their hearts out when they kem out of Mr. Pickerin's room for towels; and he's bleedin' dreadful."

This final gory touch provided an artistic curtain. The constable readjusted his belt and took his departure.

After another half-hour's eager gossip among the elders, in which Fred suffered much damage to his character, Martin was hurried off to bed. Mrs. Bolland washed his bruised face and helped him to undress. She was folding his trousers, when a shower of money rattled to the floor.

"Marcy on us!" she cried in real bewilderment, "here's a sovereign, a half-sovereign, an' silver, an' copper! Martin, my boy, whatever..."

"Angele gave it to me, mother. She gave me two pounds ten to spend."

"Two pund ten!"

"Yes. I suppose it was very wrong. I'll give back all that is left to Mrs. Saumarez in the morning."

Martha Bolland was very serious now. She crept to the door of the bedroom and listened.

"I do hope yer father kens nowt o' this," she whispered anxiously.

Then she counted the money.

"You've spent sixteen shillin's and fowerpence, not reckonin' t' shillin' I gev ye this mornin'. Seventeen an' fowerpence! Martin, Martin, whatever on?"

Such extravagance was appalling. Her frugal mind could not assimilate it readily. This sum would maintain a large family for a week.

"We stooed treat to a lot of other boys and girls. But don't be vexed to-night, mother, dear. I'm so tired."

"Vexed, indeed. What'll Mrs. Saumarez say? There'll be a bonny row i' t' mornin'. You tak' it back t' first thing. An', here. If she sez owt about t' balance, come an' tell me an' I'll make it up. You fond lad; if John knew this, he'd never forgive ye. There, honey, go te sleep."

There were tears in her eyes as she bent and kissed him. But he was incapable of further emotion. He was half asleep ere she descended the stairs, and his last sentient thought was one of keen enjoyment, for his knuckles were sore when he closed his right hand, and he remembered the smashing force of that uppercut as it met the aristocratic nose of Master Beckett-Smythe.

CHAPTER VII

GEORGE PICKERING PLAYS THE MAN

Martin was awakened by the rays of a bright autumn sun. He sprang out of bed in a jiffy, lest he should be late for breakfast, a heinous offense at the farm; but the sight of William feeding the pigs in the yard beneath told him that it was only half-past six.

The first puzzle that presented itself was one of costume. Should he wear his commonplace corduroys, or don all that was left of his gray tweeds? During the Feast he was supposed to dress in his best each day; he decided to obey orders as far as was possible.

He missed the money from his trousers pocket and knew that his mother had taken it. Also, he found that she had selected a clean shirt and collar from the drawer and placed them ready for use. By degrees his active brain recalled the startling events of the previous evening in their proper sequence, and he found himself speculating more on the reception Mrs. Saumarez might accord than on the attitude John Bolland would certainly adopt when the overnight proceedings arranged themselves in a slow-moving mind.

He was downstairs long before seven. The farmer was out. Mrs. Bolland, immersed in the early cares of the household, showed no traces of the excitement of eight hours earlier.

"Martin," she cried as soon as she caught sight of him, "I heerd a hen cluckin' a bit sen at t' bottom o' t' garth. Just look i' t' hedge an' see if she's nestin'?"

This was a daily undertaking in a house where poultry were plentiful as sparrows in Piccadilly.

Martin hailed the mission as a sign that normal times were come again. A gate led into the meadow from the garden, but to go that way meant walking twenty yards or more, so the boy took a running jump, caught a stout limb of a pear tree, swung himself onto a ten-foot pile of wood, and dropped over into the field beyond.

Mrs. Bolland witnessed the feat with some degree of alarm. In the course of a few hours she had come to see her adopted son passing from childhood into vigorous adolescence.

"Drat that lad!" she cried irately. "Does he want to break his neck?"

"He larnt that trick t' other day, missus," commented William, standing all lopsided to balance a huge pail of pig's food. "He'll mek a rare chap, will your Martin."

"He's larin' a lot o' tricks that I ken nowt about," cried Mistress Martha. "Nice doin's there was last night. How comes it none o' you men saw him carryin' on i' t' fair wi' that little French la-di-dah?"

"I dunno, ma'am."

William grinned, though, for some of the men had noted the children's antics, and none would "split" to the farmer.

"But I did hear as how Martin gev t' Squire's son a fair weltin'," he went on. "One o' t' grooms passed here an oor sen, exercisin' a young hoss, an' he said that beath young gentlemen kem yam at half-past ten. Master Frank had an eye bunged up, an' a nose like a bad apple. He was that banged about that t' Squire let him off a bastin' an' gev t' other a double allowance."

Mrs. Bolland smiled.

"Gan on wi' yer wark," she said. "Here's it's seven o'clock, half t' day gone, an' nothin' done."

Martin, searching for stray eggs, suddenly heard a familiar whistle. He looked around and saw Jim Bates's head over the top of the lane hedge.

Jim held up a bundle.

"Here's yer coat an' hat," he said. "I dursent bring 'em last neet."

"Why did you run away?" inquired Martin, approaching to take his property.

"I was skeert. Yon woman's yellin' was awful. I went straight off yam."

"Did you catch it for being out late?"

"Noa; but feyther gev me a clout this mornin' for not tellin' him about t' murder. He'd gone te bed."

"Nobody was murdered," said Martin.

"That wasn't Betsy's fault. It's all my eye about Mr. Pickerin' stickin' a fork into hisself. There was noa fork there."

"How do you know?"

"Coss I was pullin' carrots all Saturday mornin' for Mrs. Atkinson, an' if there'd bin any fork I should ha' seen it."

"Martin," cried a shrill voice from the garth, "is that lookin' fer eggs?"

Jim Bates's head and shoulders shot out of sight instantaneously.

"All right, mother, I'm only getting back my lost clothes," explained Martin. He began a painstaking survey of the hedge bottom and was rewarded by the discovery of a nest of six hidden away by a hen anxious to undertake the cares of maternity.

At breakfast John Bolland was silent and severe. He passed but one remark to Martin:

"Happen you'll be wanted some time this mornin'. Stop within hail until Mr. Benson calls."

Mr. Benson was the village constable.

"What will he want wi' t' lad?" inquired Mrs. Bolland tartly.

"Martin is t' main witness i' this case o' Pickerin's. Kitty Thwaites isn't likely te tell t' truth. Women are main leears when there's a man i' t' business."

"More fools they."

"Well, let be. I'm fair vexed that Martin's neam should be mixed up i' this affair. Fancy the tale that'll be i' t' *Messenger*--John Bolland's son fightin' t' young squire at ten o'clock o' t' neet in t' 'Black Lion' yard--fightin' ower a lass. What ailed him I cannot tell. He must ha' gone clean daft."

The farmer pushed back his chair angrily, and Mrs. Bolland wondered what he would say did he know of Martin's wild extravagance. Mother and son were glad when John picked up a riding-whip and lumbered out to mount Sam, the pony, for an hour's ride over the moor.

Evidently, he had encountered Benson before breakfast, as that worthy officer arrived at half-past ten and asked Martin to accompany him.

The two walked solemnly through the fair, in which there was already some stir. A crowd hanging around the precincts of the inn made way as they approached, and Martin saw, near the door, two saddled horses in charge of a policeman.

He was escorted to an inner room, receiving a tremulous, but gracious, smile from Evelyn as he passed. To his very genuine astonishment and alarm, he was confronted not only by the district superintendent of police but also by Mr. Frank Reginald de Courcy Beckett-Smythe, the magnate of the Hall.

"This is the boy, your wuship," said Benson.

"Ah. What is his name?"

"Martin Court Bolland, sir."

"One of John Bolland's sons, eh?"

"No, sir. Mr. Bolland has no son. He adopted this lad some thirteen years ago."

Had a bolt from the blue struck Martin at that moment he could not have been more dumbfounded. Both John and Martha had thought fit to keep the secret of his parentage from his knowledge until he was older, as the fact might tend to weaken their authority during his boyhood. The adults in Elmsdale, of course, knew the circumstances thoroughly, and respected Mr. and Mrs. Bolland's wishes, while the children with whom he grew up regarded him as village-born like themselves.

It took a good deal to bring tears to Martin's eyes, but they were perilously near at that instant. Though the words almost choked him, he faltered:

"Is that true, Mr. Benson?"

"True? It's true eneuf, lad. Didn't ye know?"

"No, they never told me."

A mist obscured his sight. The presence of the magistrate and superintendent ceased to have any awe-inspiring effect. What disgrace was this so suddenly blurted out by this stolid policeman? Whose child was he, then, if not theirs? Could he ever hold up his head again in face of the youthful host over which he lorded it by reason of his advanced intelligence and greater strength? There was comfort in the thought that no one had ever taunted him in this relation. The veiled hint in Pickering's words to the farmer was the only reference he could recall.

Benson seemed to regard the facts as to his birth as matters of common knowledge. Perhaps there was some explanation which would lift him from the sea of ignominy into which he had been pitched so unexpectedly.

He was aroused by Mr. Beckett-Smythe saying:

"Now, my lad, was it you who fought my son last night?"

"Yes--sir," stammered Martin.

The question sharpened his wits to some purpose. A spice of dread helped the process. Was he going to be tried on some dire charge of malicious assault?

"Hum," muttered the squire, surveying him with a smile. "A proper trouncing you gave him, too. I shall certainly thrash him now for permitting it. What was the cause of the quarrel?"

"About a girl, sir."

"You young rascals! A girl! What girl?"

"Perhaps it was all my fault, sir."

"That is not answering my question."

"I would rather not tell, sir."

Then Mr. Beckett-Smythe leaned back in his chair and laughed heartily.

"Pon my honor," he said to the superintendent, "these young sparks are progressive. They don't care what happens, so long as the honor of the lady is safeguarded. My son refused point-blank to say even why he fought. Well, well, Martin, I see you did not come out of the fray scatheless; but you are not brought here because you decorated Frank's ingenuous countenance. I want you to tell me exactly what took place in the garden when Mr. Pickering was wounded."

Somewhat reassured, Martin told all he knew, which was not a great deal. The magistrate, who, of course, was only assisting the police inquiry, was perplexed.

"There were others present?" he commented.

"Yes, sir. Master Frank and Master Ernest----"

"Master Frank could not see much at the moment, eh?"

Martin blushed.

"But Ernest--surely, he might have noted something that you missed?"

"I think not, sir. He was--er--looking after his brother."

"And the other children?"

"Several boys and girls of the village, but they were frightened by the screaming, sir, and ran away."

"Including the young lady who caused the combat?"

No answer. Martin thought it best to leave the point open. Again Mr. Beckett-Smythe laughed.

"I suppose this village belle is one of Mrs. Atkinson's daughters. Gad! I never heard tell of such a thing. All right, Martin, you can go now, but let me give you a parting word of advice. Never again fight for a woman, unless to protect her from a blackguard, which, I presume, was hardly the cause of the dispute with Frank."

"I don't think he was to blame at all, sir."

"Thank you. Good-day, Martin. Here's a half-crown to plaster that damaged lip of yours."

Left to themselves, the magistrate and superintendent discussed the advisability of taking proceedings against Betsy Thwaites.

"I'm sure Pickering made up his story in order to screen the woman," said the police officer. "A rusty fork was found in the stackyard, but it was thirty feet away from the nearest point of the track made by the drops of blood, and separated from the garden by a stout hedge. Moreover, Pickering and Kitty were undoubtedly standing in the orchard, many yards farther on. Then, again, the girl was collared by Thomas Metcalfe, of the Leas Farm, and the knife, one of Mrs. Atkinson's, fell from her hand; while a dozen people will swear they heard her sister calling out that she had murdered George Pickering."

Beckett-Smythe shook his head doubtfully.

"It is a queer affair, looked at in any light. Do you think I ought to see Pickering himself? You can arrest Betsy Thwaites without a warrant, I believe, and, in any event, I'll not sit on the bench if the case comes before the court."

The superintendent was only too glad to have the squire's counsel in dealing with a knotty problem. The social position of the wounded man required some degree of caution before proceedings were commenced, in view of his emphatic declaration that his wound was self-inflicted. If his state became dangerous, there was only one course open to the representatives of the law; but the doctor's verdict was that penetration of the lung had been averted by a hair's breadth, and Pickering would recover. Indeed, he might be taken home in a carriage at the end of the week. Meanwhile, the hayfork and the blood-stained knife were impounded.

The two men went upstairs and were shown to the room occupied by the injured gallant. Kitty Thwaites, pale as a ghost, was flitting about attending to her work, the hotel being crowded with stock-breeders and graziers. Her unfortunate sister, even more woebegone in appearance, was nursing the invalid, at his special request. It was a puzzling situation, and Mr. Beckett-Smythe, who knew Pickering intimately, was inclined to act with the utmost leniency that the law allowed.

Betsy Thwaites, who was sitting at the side of the bed, rose when they entered. Her white face became suffused with color, and she looked at the police officer with frightened eyes.

The magistrate saw this, and he said quite kindly:

"If Mr. Pickering is able to speak with us for a little while, you may leave us with him."

"No, no," interrupted the invalid in an astonishingly strong and hearty voice. "There's nothing to be said that Betsy needn't hear. Is there, lass?"

She began to tremble, and lifted a corner of her apron. Notwithstanding her faithless swain's statement to her sister, she was quite as good-looking as Kitty, and sorrow had given her face a pathetic dignity that in no wise diminished its charm.

She knew not whether to stay or go. The superintendent took the hint given by the squire.

"It would be best, under the circumstances, if we were left alone while we talk over last night's affair, Mr. Pickering."

"Not a bit of it. Don't go, Betsy. What is there to talk over? I made a fool of myself--not for the first time where a woman was concerned--and Betsy here, brought from Hereford by a meddlesome scamp, lost her temper. No wonder! Poor girl, she had traveled all day in a hot train, without eatin' a bite, and found me squeezing her sister at the bottom of the garden. There's no denying that she meant to do me a mischief, and serve me right, too. I'll admit I was scared, and in running away I got into worse trouble, as, of course, I could easily have mastered her. Kitty, too, what between fear and shame, lost her senses, and poor Betsy cut her own arm. You see, a plain tale stops all the nonsense that has been talked since ten o'clock last night."

"Not quite, George." Mr. Beckett-Smythe was serious and magisterial. "You forget, or perhaps do not know, that there were witnesses."

Pickering looked alarmed.

"Witnesses!" he cried. "What d'you mean?"

"Well, no outsider saw the blow, or accident, whichever it was; but a number of children saw and heard incidents which, putting it mildly, tend to discredit your story."

Betsy began to sob.

"I told you you had better leave the room," went on the squire in a low tone.

Pickering endeavored to raise himself in the bed, but sank back with a groan. The unfortunate girl forgot her own troubles at the sound, and rushed to arrange the pillow beneath his head.

"It comes to this, then," he said huskily; "you want to arrest, on a charge of attempting to murder me, a woman whom I intend to marry long before she can be brought to trial!"

Betsy broke down now in real earnest. Beckett-Smythe and the superintendent gazed at Pickering with blank incredulity. This development was wholly unlooked for. They both thought the man was light-headed. He smiled dryly.

"Yes, I mean it," he continued, placing his hand on the brown hair of the girl, whose face was buried in the bedclothes. "I--I didn't sleep much last night, and I commenced to see things in a different light to that which presented itself before. I treated Betsy shamefully--not in a monied sense, but in every other way. She's not one of the general run of girls. I promised to marry her once, and now I'm going to keep my promise. That's all."

He was desperately in earnest. Of that there could be no manner of doubt. The superintendent stroked his chin reflectively, and the magistrate could only murmur:

"Gad, that changes the venue, as the lawyers say."

One thought dominated the minds of both men; Pickering was behaving foolishly. He was a wealthy man, owner of a freehold farm of hundreds of acres; he might aspire to marry a woman of some position in the county and end his days in all the glory of J. P.-dom and County Aldermanship. Yet, here he was deliberately throwing himself away on a dairymaid who, not many hours since, had striven to kill him during a burst of jealous fury. The thing was absurd. Probably when he recovered he would see this for himself; but for the time it was best to humor him and give official sanction to his version of the overnight quarrel.

"Don't keep us in suspense, squire," cried the wounded man, angered by his friend's silence. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing, George; nothing, I think. I only hope your accident with the pitchfork will not have serious results--in any shape."

The policeman nodded a farewell. As they quitted the room they heard Pickering say faintly:

"Now, Betsy, my dear, no more crying. I can't stand it. Damn it all, one doesn't get engaged to be married and yelp over it!"

On the landing they saw Kitty, a white shadow, anxious, but afraid to speak.

"Cheer up," said Beckett-Smythe pleasantly. "This affair looks like ending in smoke."

Gaining courage from the magistrate's affability, the girl said brokenly:

"Mr. Pickering and--my--sister--are quite friendly. You saw that for yourself, sir."

"Gad, yes. They're going to be--well--er--I was going to say we have quite decided that an accident took place and there is no call for police interference--so long as Mr. Pickering shows progress toward recovery, you understand. There, there! You women always begin to cry, whether pleased or vexed. Bless my heart, let's get away, Mr. Superintendent."

CHAPTER VIII

SHOWING HOW MARTIN'S HORIZON WIDENS

The sufferings of the young are strenuous as their joys. When Martin passed into the heart of the bustling fair its glamour had vanished. The notes of the organ were harsh, the gay canvas of the booths tawdry, the cleanly village itself awry. The policeman's surprise at his lack of knowledge on the subject of his parentage was disastrously convincing. The man treated the statement as indisputable. There was no question of hearsay; it was just so, a recognized fact, known to all the grown-up people in Elmsdale.

Tommy Beadlam, he of the white head, ran after him to ask why the "bobby" brought him to the "Black Lion," but Martin averted eyes laden with misery, and motioned his little friend away.

Tommy, who had seen the fight, and knew of the squire's presence this morning, drew his own conclusions.

"Martin's goin' to be locked up," he told a knot of awe-stricken youngsters, and they thrilled with sympathy, for their champion's victory over the "young swell frae t' Hall" was highly popular.

The front door of the White House stood hospitably open. Already a goodly number of visitors had gathered, and every man and woman talked of nothing but the dramatic events of the previous night. When Martin arrived, fresh from a private conversation with the squire and the chief of police, they were on the tip-toe of expectancy. Perhaps he might add to the store of gossip. Even Mrs. Bolland felt a certain pride that the boy should be the center of interest in this *cause celebre*.

But his glum face created alarm in her motherly breast.

"Why, Martin," she cried, "what's gone wrong? Ye look as if ye'd seen a ghost wi' two heads!"

The all-absorbing topic to Martin just then was his own history and not the half-comprehended tragedy of the rural lovers. If his mother's friends knew that which was hidden from him, why should he compel his tongue to wag falsely? Somehow, the air seemed thick with deception just now, but his heart would have burst had he attempted to restrain the words that welled forth.

"Mother," he said, and his lips quivered at the remembrance that the affectionate title was itself a lie, "Mr. Benson told the squire I was not your boy--that father and you adopted me thirteen years ago."

Mrs. Bolland's face glowed with quick indignation. No one spoke. Martin's impetuous repudiation of his name was the last thing they looked for.

"It is true, I suppose," he went on despairingly. "If I am not your son, then whose son am I?"

Martha lifted her eyes to the ceiling.

"Well, of all the deceitful scoundrels!" she gasped. "Te think of me fillin' his blue coat wi' meat an' beer last neet, an' all t' return he maks is te worry this poor lad's brains wi' that owd tale!"

"Oh, he's sly, is Benson," chimed in stout Mrs. Summersgill. "A fortnight sen last Tuesday I caught him i' my dairy wi' one o' t' maids, lappin' up cream like a great tomcat."

A laugh went round. None paid heed to Martin's agony. A dullness fell on his soul. Even the woman he called mother was angered more by the constable's blurting out of a household secret than by the destruction of an ideal. Such, in confused riot, was the thought that chilled him.

But he was mistaken. Martha Bolland's denunciations of the policeman only covered the pain, sharp as the cut of a knife, caused by the boy's cry of mingled passion and sorrow. She was merely biding her time. When chance served, she called him into the larder, the nearest quiet place in the house, and closed the door.

"Martin, my lad," she said, while big tears shone in her honest eyes, "ye are dear to me as my own. I trust I may be spared to be muther te ye until ye're a man. John an' me meant no unkindness te ye in not tellin' ye we found ye i' Lunnun streets, a poor, deserted little mite, wi' nather feyther nor muther, an' none te own ye. What matter was it that ye should know sooner? Hev we not done well by ye? When ye come to think over 't, ye're angered about nowt. Kiss me, honey, an' if anyone says owt cross te ye, tell 'em ye hev both a feyther an' a muther, which is more'n some of 'em can say."

This display of feeling applied balm to Martin's wounds. Certainly Mrs. Bolland's was the common sense view to take

of the situation. He forbore to question her further just then, and hugged her contentedly. The very smell of her lavender-scented clothes was grateful, and this embrace seemed to restore her to him.

His brightened countenance, the vanishing of that unwonted expression of resentful humiliation, was even more comforting to Martha herself.

"Here," she said, thrusting a small paper package into his hand, "I mayn't hev anuther chance. Ye'll find two pun ten i' that paper. Gie it te Mrs. Saumarez an' tell her I'll be rale pleased if there's no more talk about t' money. An' mebbe, later i' t' day, I'll find a shillin' fer yersen. But, fer goodness' sake, come an' tell t' folk all that t' squire said te ye. They're fair crazed te hear ye."

"Mother, dear!" he cried eagerly, "I was so--so mixed up at first that I forgot to tell you. Mr. Beckett-Smythe gave me half a crown."

"Ye doan't say! Well, I can't abide half a tale. Let's hae t' lot i' t' front kitchen."

It was noon, and dinner-time, before Martin could satisfy the cackling dames as to all within his cognizance concerning Betsy Thwaites's escapade. Be it noted, they unanimously condemned Fred, the groom; commiserated with Betsy, and extolled George Pickering as a true gentleman.

P. C. Benson, all unconscious of the rod in pickle for his broad back, strolled in about the eating hour. Mrs. Bolland, brindling with repressed fury, could scarce find words wherewith to scold him.

"Well, of all the brazen-faced men I've ever met--" she began.

"So you've heerd t' news?" he interrupted.

"Heerd? I should think so, indeed! Martin kem yam----"

"Martin! Did he know?"

"Know!" she shrilled. "Wasn't it ye as said it?"

"No, ma'am," he replied stolidly. "Mrs. Atkinson told me, and she said that Mr. Pickerin' had ta'en his solemn oath te do't in t' presence of t' super and t' squire!"

"Do what?" was the chorus.

"Why, marry Betsy, to be sure, as soon as he can be led te t' church. What else is there?"

This stupendous addition to the flood of excitement carried away even Martha Bolland for the moment. In her surprise she set a plate for Benson with the others, and, after that, the paramount rite of hospitality prevented her from "having it out wi' him" until hunger was sated. Then, however, she let him "feel the edge of her tongue"; he was so flustered that John had to restore his mental poise with another pint of ale.

Meanwhile, Martin managed to steal out unobserved, and made the best of his way to The Elms. Although in happier mood, he was not wholly pleased with his errand. He was not afraid of Mrs. Saumarez--far from it, but he did not know how to fulfill his mission and at the same time exonerate Angele. His chivalrous nature shrank from blaming her, yet his unaided wits were not equal to the task of restoring so much money to her mother without answering truthfully the resultant deluge of questions.

He was battling with this problem when, near The Elms, he encountered the Rev. Charles Herbert, M.A., vicar of Elmsdale, and his daughter Elsie.

Martin doffed his straw hat readily, and would have passed, but the vicar hailed him.

"Martin, is it correct that you were in the stableyard of the 'Black Lion' last night and saw something of this sad affair of Mr. Pickering's?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir."

Martin blushed. The girl's blue eyes were fixed on his with the innocent curiosity of a fawn. She knew him well by sight, but they had never exchanged a word. He found himself wondering what her voice was like. Would she chatter with the excited volubility of Angele? Being better educated than he, would she pour forth a jargon of foreign words and slang? Angele was quiet as a mouse under her mother's eye. Was Elsie aping this demure demeanor because her father was present? Certainly, she looked a very different girl. Every curve of her pretty face, each line in her graceful contour, suggested modesty and nice manners. Why, he couldn't tell, but he knew instinctively that Elsie Herbert would have

drawn back horrified from the mad romp overnight, and he was humbled in spirit before her.

The worthy vicar never dreamed that the farmer's sturdy son was capable of deep emotion. He interpreted Martin's quick coloring to knowledge of a discreditable episode. He said to the girl:

"I'll follow you home in a few minutes, my dear."

Martin thought that an expression of disappointment swept across the clear eyes, but Elsie quitted them instantly. The boy had endured too much to be thus humiliated before one of his own age.

"I would have said nothing to offend the young lady," he cried hotly.

Very much taken aback, Mr. Herbert's eyebrows arched themselves above his spectacles.

"My good boy," he said, "I did not choose that my daughter should hear the--er--offensive details of this--er--stabbing affray, or worse, that took place at the inn."

"But you didn't mind slighting me in her presence, sir," was the unexpected retort.

"I am not slighting you. Had I met Mr. Beckett-Smythe and sought information as to this matter, I would still have asked her to go on to the Vicarage."

This was a novel point of view for Martin. He reddened again.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "Everything has gone wrong with me to-day. I didn't mean to be rude."

The vicar deemed him a strange youth, but tacitly accepted the apology, and drew from Martin the story of the night's doings.

It shocked him to hear that Martin and Frank Beckett-Smythe were fighting in the yard of the "Black Lion" at such an hour.

"How came you to be there?" he said gently. "You do not attend my church, Martin, but I have always regarded Mr. Bolland as a God-fearing man, and your teacher has told me that you are gifted with intelligence and qualities beyond your years or station in life."

"I was there quite by accident, sir, and I couldn't avoid the fight."

"What caused it?"

"We fought to settle that question, sir, and it's finished now."

The vicar laughed.

"Which means you will not tell me. Well, I am no disbeliever in a manly display of fisticuffs. It breaks no bones and saves many a boy from the growth of worse qualities. I suppose you are going to the fair this afternoon?"

"No, sir. I'm not."

"Would you mind telling me how you will pass the time between now and supper?"

"I am taking a message from my mother to Mrs. Saumarez, and then I'll go straight to the Black Plantation"--a dense clump of firs situate at the head of the ghylls, or small valleys, leading from the cultivated land up to the moor.

"Dear me! And what will you do there?"

The boy smiled, somewhat sheepishly.

"I have a nest in a tree there, sir, where I often sit and read."

"What do you read?"

"Just now, sir, I am reading Scott's poems."

"Indeed. What books do you favor, as a rule?"

Delighted to have a sympathetic listener, Martin forgot his troubles in pouring forth a catalogue of his favorite authors. The more Mr. Herbert questioned him the more eager and voluble he became. The boy had the rare faculty of absorbing the joys and sorrows, the noble sentiments, the very words of the heroes of romance, and in this scholarly gentleman he found an auditor who appreciated all that was hitherto dumb thought.

Several people passing along the road wondered what "t' passon an' oad John Bolland's son were makkin' sike deed about," and the conversation must have lasted fifteen or twenty minutes, when the vicar heard the chimes of the church clock.

He laughed genially. Although, on his part, there was an underlying motive in the conversation, Martin had fairly carried it far afield.

"You have had your revenge on me for sending my daughter away," he cried. "My lunch will be cold. Now, will you do me a favor?"

"Of course, sir; anything you ask."

"Nay, Martin, make that promise to no man. But this lies within your scope. About four o'clock leave your crow's nest and drop over to Thor ghyll. I may be there."

Overjoyed at the prospect of a renewed chat on topics dear to his heart, the boy ran off, light-heartedly, to The Elms. His task seemed easier now. The wholesome breeze of intercourse with a cultivated mind had momentarily swept into the background a host of unpleasing things.

He found he could not see Mrs. Saumarez, so he asked for Miss Walker. The lady came. She was prim and severe. Instantly he detected a note of hostility which her first words put beyond doubt.

"My mother sent me to return some money to Mrs. Saumarez," he explained.

"Mrs. Saumarez is ill. Mrs. Bolland must wait until she recovers. As for you, you bad boy, I wonder you dare show your face here."

Martin never flinched from a difficulty.

"Why?" he demanded. "What have I done?"

"Can you ask? To drag that poor little mite of a girl into such horrible scenes as those which took place in the village? Be off! You just wait until Mrs. Saumarez is better, and you will hear more of it."

With that, she slammed the door on him.

So Angele had posed as a simpleton, and he was the villain. This phase of the medley amused him. He was retreating down the drive, when he heard his name called. He turned. A window on the ground floor opened, and Mrs. Saumarez appeared, leaning unsteadily on the sill.

"Come here!" she cried imperiously.

Somehow she puzzled, indeed flustered, him. For one thing, her attire was bizarre. Usually dressed with unexceptionable taste, to-day she wore a boudoir wrap--a costly robe, but adjusted without care, and all untidy about neck and breast. Her hair was coiled loosely, and stray wisps hung out in slovenly fashion. Her face, deathly white, save for dull red patches on the cheeks, served as a fit setting for unnaturally brilliant eyes which protruded from their sockets in a manner quite startling, while the veins on her forehead stood out like whipcord.

Martin was utterly dismayed. He stood stock-still.

"Come!" she said again, glaring at him with a curious fixity. "I want you. Françoise is not here, and I wish you to run an errand."

Save for a strange thickness in her speech, she had never before reminded him so strongly of Angele. She had completely lost her customary air of repose. She spoke and acted like a peevish child.

Anyhow, she had summoned him, and he could now discharge his trust. In such conditions, Martin seldom lacked words.

"I asked for you at the door, ma'am," he explained, drawing nearer, "but Miss Walker said you were ill. My mother sent me to give you this."

He produced the little parcel of money and essayed to hand it to her. She surveyed it with lackluster eyes.

"What is it?" she said. "I do not understand. Here is plenty of money. I want you to go to the village, to the 'Black Lion,' and bring me a sovereign's worth of brandy."

She held out a coin. They stood thus, proffering each other gold.

"But this is yours, ma'am. I came to return it. I--er--borrowed some money from Ang--from Miss Saumarez--and mother said----"

"Cease, boy. I do not understand, I tell you. Keep the money and bring me what I ask."

In her eagerness she leaned so far out of the window that she nearly overbalanced. The sovereign fell among some flowers. With an effort she recovered an unsteady poise. Martin stooped to find the money. A door opened inside the house. A hot whisper reached him.

"Tell no one. I'll watch for you in half an hour--remember--a sovereign's worth."

The boy, not visible from the far side of the room, heard the voice of Françoise. The window closed with a bang. He discovered the coin and straightened himself. The maid was seating her mistress in a chair and apparently remonstrating with her. She picked up from the floor a wicker-covered Eau de Cologne bottle and turned it upside down with an angry gesture. It was empty.

Martin, whose experience of intoxicated people was confined to the infrequent sight of a village toper, heavy with beer, lurching homeward in maudlin glee or fury, imagined that Mrs. Saumarez must be in some sort of fever. Obviously, those in attendance on her should be consulted before he brought her brandy secretly.

Back he marched to the front door and rang the bell. Lest Miss Walker should shut him out again, he was inside the hall before anyone could answer his summons, for the doors of country houses remain unlocked all day. The elder sister reappeared, very starchy at this unheard-of impertinence.

"I was forced to return, ma'am," he said civilly. "Mrs. Saumarez saw me in the drive and asked me to buy her some brandy. She gave me a sovereign. She looked very ill, so I thought it best to come and tell you."

The lady was thoroughly nonplussed by this plain statement.

"Oh," she stammered, so confused that he did not know what to make of her agitation, "this is very nice of you. She must not have brandy. It is--quite unsuitable--for her illness. It is really very good of you to tell me. I--er--I'm sorry I spoke so harshly just now, but--er----"

"That's all right, ma'am. It was all a mistake. Will you kindly take charge of this sovereign, and also of the two pounds ten which Miss Angele lent me?"

"Which Miss Angele lent you! Two pounds ten! I thought you said your mother----"

"It is mine, please," said a voice from the broad landing above their heads. Angele skipped lightly down the stairs and held out her hand. Martin gave her the money.

"I don't understand this, at all," said the mystified Miss Walker. "Does Mrs. Saumarez know----"

"Mrs. Saumarez knows nothing. Neither does Martin."

With wasp-like suddenness, the girl turned and faced a woman old enough to be her grandmother. Their eyes clashed. The child's look said plainly:

"Dare to utter another word and I'll disgrace your house throughout the village."

The woman yielded. She waved a protesting hand. "It is no business of mine. Thank you, Martin, for coming back."

Angele lashed out at him next.

"Allez, donc! I'll never speak to you again."

She ran up the stairs. He stood irresolute.

"Anyhow, not now," she added. "I may be out in an hour's time."

Miss Walker was holding the door open. He hurried away, and Françoise saw him, wondering why he had called.

And for hours thereafter, until night fell, a white-faced woman paced restlessly to and fro in the sitting-room, ever and anon raising the window, and watching for Martin's return with a fierce intensity that rendered her almost maniacal in appearance.

Happily, the boy was unaware of the pitiful tragedy in the life of the rich and highly placed Mrs. Saumarez. While she waited, with a rage steadily dwindling into a wearied despair, he was passing, all unconsciously, into the next great

phase of his career.

He took one forward step into the unknown before leaving the tree-lined drive. He met Fritz, the chauffeur, who was so absorbed in the study of a folding road-map that he did not see Martin until the latter hailed him.

"Hello!" was the boy's cheery greeting. "That affair is ended. Please don't say anything to Mrs. Saumarez."

The German closed the map.

"Whad iss ented?" he inquired, surveying Martin with a cool hauteur rare in chauffeurs.

"Why, last night's upset in the village."

"Ah, yez. Id iss nod my beeznez."

"I didn't quite mean that. But there's no use in getting Miss Angele into a row, is there?"

"Dat iss zo. Vere do you leeve?"

"At the White House Farm."

"Vere de brize caddle are?"

Martin smiled. He had never before heard English spoken with a strong German accent. Somehow he associated these resonant syllables with a certain indefinite stress which Mrs. Saumarez laid on a few words.

"Yes," he said. "My father's herd is well known."

Fritz's manner became genial.

"Zome tay you vill show me, yez?" he inquired.

"I'll be very pleased. And will you explain your car to me--the engine, I mean?"

"Komm now."

"Sorry, but I have an engagement."

There was plenty of time at Martin's disposal, but he did not want to loiter about The Elms that afternoon. This man was a paid servant who could hardly refuse to carry out any reasonable order, and it would have been awkward for Martin if Mrs. Saumarez asked him to give Fritz the sovereign she had intrusted to his keeping.

"All aright," agreed the chauffeur, whose strong, intellectual face was now altogether amiable; in fact, a white scar on his left cheek creased so curiously when he grinned that his aspect was almost comical. "We vill meed when all dis noise sdops, yez?" and he waved a hand toward the distant drone of the fair.

Thus began for Martin another strange friendship--a friendship destined to end so fantastically that if the manner of its close were foretold then and there by any prophet, the mere telling might have brought the seer to the madhouse.



CHAPTER IX

THE WILDCAT

It was nearly three o'clock when Martin re-entered the village. Outside the boxing booth a huge placard announced, in sprawling characters, that the first round of the boxing competition would start punctually at 3 P.M. "Owing to the illness of Mr. George Pickering, deeply regretted," another referee would be appointed.

It cost the boy a pang to stride on. He would have dearly liked to watch the display of pugilism. He might have gone inside the tent for an hour and still kept his tryst with Mr. Herbert, but John Bolland's dour teaching had scored grooves in his consciousness not readily effaced. The folly of last night must be atoned in some way, and he punished himself deliberately now by going straight home.

The house was only a little less thronged than the "Black Lion," so he made his way unobserved to the great pile of dry bracken in which he hid books borrowed from the school library. Ten minutes later he was seated in the fork of a tree full thirty feet from the ground and consoling himself for loss of the reality by reading of a fight far more picturesque in detail--the Homeric combat between FitzJames and Roderick Dhu.

From his perch he could see the church clock. Shortly before the appointed hour he climbed down and surmounted the ridge which divided the Black Plantation from Thor ghyll. It was a rough passage, naught save gray rock and flowering ling, or heather, growing so wild and bushy that in parts it overtopped his height. But Martin was sure-footed as a goat. Across the plateau and down the tree-clad slope on the other side he sped, until he reached a point whence he could obtain a comprehensive view of the winding glen.

On a stretch of turf by the side of the silvery beck that rushed so frantically from the moorland to the river, he spied a small garden tent. In front was a table spread with china and cakes, while a copper kettle, burnished so brightly that it shone like gold in the sunlight, was suspended over a spirit lamp. Mr. Herbert was there, and an elderly lady, his aunt, who acted as his housekeeper--also Elsie and her governess and two young gentlemen who "read" with the vicar during the long vacation. Evidently a country picnic was toward; Martin was at a loss to know why he had been invited.

Perhaps they wished him to guide them over the moor to some distant glen or to the early British camp two miles away. Sometimes a tourist wandering through Elmsdale called at the farm for information, and Martin would be dispatched with the inquirer to show the way.

It was a pity that Mr. Herbert had not mentioned his desire, as the daily reading of the Bible was due in an hour, and most certainly, to-day of all days, Martin must be punctual.

If his brain were busy, his eye was clear. He sprang from rock to rock like a chamois. Once he swung himself down a small precipice by the tough root of a whin. He knew the root was there, and had already tested its capabilities, but the gathering beneath watched him with dismay, for the feat looked hazardous in the extreme. In a couple of minutes he had descended two hundred feet of exceedingly rough going. He stopped at the beck to wash his hands and dry them on his handkerchief. Then he approached the group.

"Do you always descend the ghyll in that fashion, Martin?" cried the vicar.

"Yes, sir. It is the nearest way."

"A man might say that who fell out of a balloon."

"But I have been up and down there twenty times, sir."

"Well, well; my imaginary balloonist could make no such answer. Sit down and have some tea. Elsie, this is young Martin Bolland, of whom I have been telling you."

The girl smiled in a very friendly way and brought Martin a cup of tea and a plate of cakes. So he was a guest, and introduced by the vicar to his daughter! How kind this was of Mr. Herbert! How delighted Mrs. Bolland would be when she heard of it, for, however strict her Nonconformity, the vicar was still a social power in the village, and second only to the Beckett-Smythes in the estimation of the parish.

At first poor Martin was tongue-tied. He answered in monosyllables when the vicar or Mrs. Johnson, the old lady, spoke to him; but to Elsie he said not a word. She, too, was at a loss how to interest him, until she noticed a book in his pocket. When told that it was Scott's poems she said pleasantly that a month ago she went with her father to a place

called Greta Bridge and visited many of the scenes described in "Rokeby."

Unhappily, Martin had not read "Rokeby." He resolved to devour it at the first opportunity, but for the nonce it offered no conversational handle. He remained dumb, yet all the while he was comparing Elsie with Angele, and deciding privately that girls brought up as ladies in England were much nicer than those reared in the places which Angele named so glibly.

But his star was propitious that day. One of the young men happened to notice a spot where a large patch of heather had been sliced off the face of the moor.

He asked Mr. Herbert what use the farmers made of it.

"Nothing that I can recall," said the vicar, a man who, living in the country, knew little of its ways; "perhaps Martin can tell you."

"We make besoms of it, sir," was the ready reply, "but that space has been cleared by the keepers so that the young grouse may have fresh green shoots to feed on."

Here was a topic on which he was crammed with information. His face grew animated, his eyes sparkled, the words came fast and were well chosen. As he spoke, the purple moor, the black firs, the meadows, the corn land red with poppies, became peopled with fur and feather. On the hilltops the glorious black cock, in the woods the dandy pheasant and swift pigeon, among the meadows and crops the whirring partridge, became actualities, present, but unseen. There were plenty of hares on the arable land and the rising ground; as for rabbits, they swarmed everywhere.

"This ghyll will be alive with them in little more than an hour," said Martin confidently. "I shouldn't be surprised, if we had a dog and put him among those whins, but half-a-dozen rabbits would bolt out in all directions."

"Please, can I be a little bow-wow?" cried Elsie. She sprang to her feet and ran toward the clump of gorse and bracken he had pointed out, imitating a dog's bark as she went.

"Take care of the thorns," shouted Martin, making after her more leisurely.

She paused on the verge of the tangled mass of vegetation and said, "Shoo!"

"That's no good," he laughed. "You must walk through and kick the thick clumps of grass--this way."

He plunged into the midst of the gorse. She followed. Not a rabbit budged.

"That's odd," he said, rustling the undergrowth vigorously. "There ought to be a lot here."

"You know Angele Saumarez?" said the girl suddenly.

"Yes."

He ceased beating the bushes and looked at her fixedly, the question was so unexpected. Yet Angele had asked him the selfsame question concerning Elsie Herbert. One girl resembled another as two peas in a pod.

"Do you like her?"

"I think I do, sometimes."

"Do you think she is pretty?"

"Yes, often."

"What do you mean by 'sometimes,' 'often?' How can a girl be pretty--'often?'"

"Well, you see, I think she is nice in many ways, and that if--she knew you--and copied your manner--your voice, and style, and behavior--she would improve very greatly."

Martin had recovered his wits. Elsie tittered and blushed slightly.

"Really!" she said, and recommenced the kicking process with ardor.

Suddenly, with a fierce snarl, an animal of some sort flew at her. She had a momentary vision of a pair of blazing eyes, bared teeth, and extended claws. She screamed and turned her head. In that instant a wildcat landed on her back and a vicious claw reached for her face. But Martin was at her side. Without a second's hesitation he seized the growling brute in both hands and tore it from off her shoulders. His right hand was around its neck, but he strove in vain to grasp the small of its back in the left. It wriggled and scratched with the ferocity of an undersized tiger. Martin's coat

sleeves and shirt were slashed to shreds, his waistcoat was rent, and deep gashes were cut in his arms, but he held on gamely.

Mr. Herbert and the others ran up, but came unarmed. They had not even a stick. The vicar, with some presence of mind, rushed back and wrenched a leg from the camp table, but by the time he returned the cat was moving its limbs in its final spasms, for Martin had choked it to death.

The vicar danced about with his improvised weapon, imploring the boy to "throw it down and let me whack the life out of it," but Martin was enraged with the pain and the damage to his clothing. In his anger he felt that he could wrench the wretched beast limb from limb, and he might have endeavored to do that very thing were it not for the presence of Elsie Herbert. As it was, when the cat fell to the ground its struggles had ended, but Mr. Herbert gave it a couple of hearty blows to make sure.

It was a tremendous brute, double the size of its domestic progenitors. At one period in its career it had been caught in a rabbit trap, for one of its forelegs was removed at the joint, and the calloused stump was hard as a bit of stone.

A chorus of praise for Martin's promptitude and courage was cut short when he took the table leg and went back to the clump of gorse.

"I thought it was curious that there were no rabbits here," he said. "Now I know why. This cat has a litter of kittens hidden among the whins."

"Are you gug-gug-going to kuk-kuk-kill them?" sobbed Elsie.

He paused in his murderous search.

"It makes no matter now," he said, laughing. "I'll tell the keeper. Wildcats eat up an awful lot of game."

His coolness, his absolute disregard of the really serious cuts he had received, were astounding to the town-bred men. The vicar was the first to recover some degree of composure.

"Martin," he cried, "come this instant and have your wounds washed and bound up. You are losing a great deal of blood, and that brute's claws may have been venomous."

The boy obeyed at once. He presented a sorry spectacle. His arms and hands were bathed in blood and his clothes were splashed with it.

Elsie Herbert's eyes filled with tears.

"This is nothing," he said to cheer her. "They're only scratches, but they look bad."

As a matter of fact, he did not realize until long afterwards that were it not for the fortunate accident which deprived the cat of her off foreleg, some of the tendons of his right wrist might have been severed. From the manner in which he held her she could not get the effective claws to bear crosswise.

The vicar looked grave when a first dip in the brook revealed the extent of the boy's injuries.

"You are plucky enough to bear the application of a little brine, Martin?" he said.

Suiting the action to the word, he emptied the contents of a paper of salt into a teacup and dissolved it in hot water. Then he washed the wounds again in the brook and bound them with handkerchiefs soaked in the mixture. It was a rough-and-ready cauterization, and the pain made Martin white, but later on it earned the commendation of the doctor. Mr. Herbert was pallid himself when Elsie handed him the last handkerchief they could muster, while Mrs. Johnson was already tearing the tablecloth into strips.

"It is bad enough to have your wrists scored in this way, my lad," he murmured, "but it will be some consolation for you to know that otherwise these cuts would have been in my little girl's face, perhaps her eyes--great Heaven!--her eyes!"

The vicar could have chosen no better words. Martin's heart throbbed with pride. At last the bandages were secured and the tattered sleeve turned down. All this consumed nearly half an hour, and then Martin remembered a forgotten duty.

"What time is it?" he said anxiously.

"A quarter past five."

"Oh, bother!" he murmured. "I'll get into another row. I have missed my Bible lesson."

"Your Bible lesson?"

"Yes, sir. My father makes me read a portion of Scripture every day."

The vicar passed unnoticed the boy's unconsciously resentful tone. He sighed, but straightway resumed his wonted cheeriness.

"There will be no row to-day, Martin," he promised. "We shall escort you home in triumphal procession. We leave the things here for my man, who will bring a pony and cart in a few minutes. Now, you two, tie the hind legs of that beast with a piece of string and carry it on the stick. The cat is Martin's *spolia opima*. Here, Elsie, guide your warrior's faltering footsteps down the glen."

They all laughed, but by the time they reached the White House the boy was ready to drop, for he had lost a quantity of blood, and the torment of the saline solution was becoming intolerable.

John Bolland, after waiting with growing impatience long after the appointed time, closed the Bible with a bang and went downstairs.

"What's wrang wi' ye now?" inquired his spouse as he dropped morosely into a chair and answered but sourly a hearty greeting from a visitor.

"Where's that lad?" he growled.

"Martin. Hasn't he come yam?"

She trembled for her adopted son's remissness on this, the first day after the great rebellion.

"Yam!"--with intense bitterness--"he's not likely te hearken te t' Word when he's encouraged in guile."

"Eh, but there's some good cause this time," cried the old lady, more flustered than she cared to show. "Happen he's bin asked to see t' squire again."

"T' squire left Elmsdale afore noon," was the gruff reply.

Then the vicar entered, and Elsie, leading Martin, and the two pupils carrying the gigantic cat. Mrs. Johnson and the governess-companion had remained with the tent and would drive home in the dogcart.

Mr. Herbert's glowing account of Martin's conduct, combined with a judicious reference to his anxiety when he discovered that the hour for his lesson had passed, placed even Bolland in a good humor. Once again the boy filled the mouths of the multitude, since nothing would serve the farmhands but they must carry off the cat to the fair for exhibition before they skinned it.

The doctor came, waylaid on his return from the "Black Lion." He removed the salt-soaked bandages, washed the wounds in tepid water, examined them carefully, and applied some antiseptic dressing, of which he had a supply in his dogcart for the benefit of George Pickering.

"An' how is Mr. Pickerin' te-night?" inquired Mrs. Bolland, who was horrified at first by the sight of Martin's damages, but reassured when the doctor said the boy would be all right in a day or two.

"Not so well, Mrs. Bolland," was the answer.

"Oh, ye don't say so. Poor chap! Is it wuss than ye feared for?"

"No; the wound is progressing favorably, but he is feverish. I don't like that. Fever is weakening."

No more would the doctor say, and Mrs. Bolland soon forgot the sufferings of another in her distress at Martin's condition. She particularly lamented that he should be laid up during the Feast.

At that the patient laughed.

"Surely I can go out, doctor!" he cried.

"Go out, you imp! Of course, you can. But, remember, no larking about and causing these cuts to reopen. Better stay in the house until I see you in the morning."

So Martin, fearless of consequences, hunted up "Rokeby," and read it with an interest hardly lessened by the fact that that particular poem is the least exciting of the magician's verse. At last the light failed and the table was laid for supper,

so the boy's reading was disturbed. More than once he fancied he had heard at the back of the house a long, shrill whistle which sounded familiar. Curiosity led him to the meadow. He waited a little while, and again the whistle came from the lane.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Me. Is that you, Martin?"

"Me" was Tommy Beadlam, but his white top did not shine in the dark.

"What's up?"

"Come nearer. I mustn't shout."

Wondering what mystery was afoot, Martin approached the hedge.

"Yon lass," whispered Tommy--"I can't say her name, but ye ken fine whea 'tis--she's i' t' fair agean."

"What! Angele?"

"That's her. She gemme sixpence te cooman' tell yer. I've bin whistlin' till me lips is sore."

"You tell her from me she is a bad girl and ought to go home at once."

"Not me! She'd smack my feace."

"Well, I can't get out. I've had an accident and must go to bed soon."

"There's a rare yarn about you an' a cat. I seed it. Honest truth--did you really kill it wi' your hands?"

"Yes; but it gave me something first. Can you see? My arms and left hand are all bound up."

"An' it jumped fust on Elsie Herbert?"

"Yes."

"An' yer grabbed it offen her?"

"Yes."

"Gosh! Yon lass is fair wild te hear all about it. She grieved when Evelyn Atkinson telt her yer were nearly dead, but yan o' t' farmhands kem along an' we axed him, an' he said ye were nowt worse."

Martin's heart softened when he heard of Angele's tears, but he was sorry she should have stolen out a second time to mix with the rabble of the village.

"I can't come out to-night," he said firmly.

"Happen ye'd be able to see her if I browt her here?"

The white head evidently held brains, but Martin had sufficient strength of character to ask himself what his new friends, the Herbert family, would think if they knew he was only too willing to dance to any tune the temptress played.

"No, no," he cried, retreating a pace or two. "You must not bring her. I'm going to supper and straight to bed. And, look here, Tommy. Try and persuade her to go home. If you and Jim Bates and the others take her round the fair to-night you'll all get into trouble. You ought to have heard the parson to-day, and Miss Walker, too. I wouldn't be in your shoes for more than sixpence."

This was crafty counsel. Beadlam, after consulting Jim Bates, communicated it to Angele. She stared with wide-open eyes at the doubting pair.

"Misericorde!" she cried. "Were there ever such idiots! Because he cannot come himself, he doesn't want me to be with you."

There was something in this. Their judgment wavered, and--and--Angele had lots of money.

But she laughed them to scorn.

"Do you think I want you!" she screamed. "Bah! I spit at you. Evelyn, ma cherie, walk with me to The Elms. I want to hear all about the man who was stabbed and the woman who stabbed him."

Thereupon, Evelyn and one of her sisters went off with a girl whom they hated. But she was clever, in their estimation, and pretty, and well dressed, and, oh, so rich! Above all, she was not "stuck up" like Elsie Herbert, but laughed at their simple wit, and was ready to sink to their level.

Martin, taking thought before he slept, wondered why Angele had not come openly to the farm. It did not occur to him that Angele dared not face John Bolland. The child feared the dour old farmer. She dreaded a single look from the shrewd eyes which seemed to search her very soul.

CHAPTER X

DEEPENING SHADOWS

The doctor came late next morning. He did not reach Elmsdale until after eleven o'clock. He called first at the White House and handed Mrs. Bolland a small package.

"These are the handkerchiefs I took away yesterday," he said. "I suppose they belong to Mr. Herbert's household. My servant has washed them. Will you see that they are returned?"

"Mercy o' me!" cried Martha. "I nivver knew ye took 'em. What did ye want 'em for, docthor?"

"There might have been some malignant substance--some poisonous matter--in the cat's claws, and as the county analyst was engaged at my place on some other business I--Oh, come now, Mrs. Bolland, there's no need to be alarmed. Martin's wounds were cleansed, and the salt applied to the raw edges so promptly, that any danger which might have existed was stopped effectually."

Yet the doctor's cheery face was grave that morning and his brow was wrinkled as he unfastened the bandages. Beyond a slight stiffness of certain sinews and the natural soreness of the cut flesh, Martin had never felt better in his life. After a disturbed slumber, when he dreamed that he was choking a wildcat--a cat with Angele's face which changed suddenly in death to Elsie Herbert's smiling features--he lay awake for some hours. Then the pain in his wrists abated gradually, he fell sound asleep, and Mrs. Bolland took care that he was left alone until he awoke of his own accord at half-past eight, an unprecedented hour.

So the boy laughed at his mother's fears. Her lips quivered, and she tried to choke back a sob. The doctor turned on her angrily.

"Stop that!" he growled. "I suppose you think I'm hoodwinking you. It is not so. I am very much worried about another matter altogether, so please accept my assurance that Martin is all right. He can run about all day, if he likes. The only consequence of disturbing these cuts will be that they cannot heal rapidly. Otherwise, they will be closed completely by the end of the week."

While he talked he worked. The dressings were changed and fresh lint applied. He handed Mrs. Bolland a store of materials.

"There," he said, "I need not come again, but I'll call on Monday, just to satisfy you. Apply the lotion morning and night. Good-by, Martin. You did a brave thing, I hear. Good-by, Mrs. Bolland."

He closed his bag hurriedly and rushed away. Mrs. Bolland, drying her eyes, and quite satisfied now, went to the door and gazed after him.

"He's fair rattled w' summat," she told another portly dame who labored up the incline at the moment. "He a'most snapped my head off. Did he think a body wouldn't be scared w' his talk about malignant p'ison i' t' lad's bluid, I wonder?"

The doctor did not pull up outside the "Black Lion." He drove to the Vicarage--a circumstance which would most certainly have given Mrs. Bolland renewed cause for alarm, were she aware of it--and asked Mr. Herbert to walk in the garden with him for a few minutes.

The two conversed earnestly, and the vicar seemed to be greatly shocked at the outcome of their talk. At last they arrived at a decision. The doctor hastened back to the "Black Lion." He did not remain long in the sick room, but scribbled a note downstairs and gave it to his man.

"Take that to Mr. Herbert," he said. "I'll make a few calls on foot and meet you at the bridge in a quarter of an hour."

The note read:

"There is no hope. Things are exactly as I feared."

The vicar, looking most woebegone, murmured that there was no answer. He procured his hat and walked slowly to the inn, which was crowded, inside and out. Nearly every man knew him and spoke to him, and many noted that "t' passon looked varra down i' t' mooth this mornin'."

He went upstairs. The conjecture flew around at once that Pickering was worse. Someone remembered that Kitty Thwaites said the patient had experienced a touch of fever overnight. Surely, his wound had not developed serious

symptoms. The chief herd of his Nottonby estate had seen him during the preceding afternoon and found his master looking wonderfully well. Indeed, Pickering spoke of attending to some business matter in person on Saturday, or on Monday for certain. Why, then, the vicar's visit? What did it portend? People gathered in small groups and their voices softened. By contrast, the blare of lively music and the whistle of the roundabout were intolerably loud.

In the quiet room at the back of the hotel, with its scent of iodoform mingling with the sweet breath of the garden wafted in through an open window, Pickering moved restlessly in bed. His face was flushed, his eyes singularly bright, with a glistening sheen that was abnormal.

By his side sat the pallid Betsy, reading a newspaper aloud. She followed the printed text with difficulty. Her mind was troubled. The fatigue of nursing was nothing to one of her healthy frame, but her thoughts were terrifying. She lived in a waking nightmare. Had she dared to weep, she might have felt relief, but this sure solace of womankind was denied her.

The vicar's entrance caused a sensation. Betsy, in a quick access of fear, dropped the paper, and Pickering's face blanched. Some secret doubt, some inner monitor, brought a premonition of what was to come. He flinched from the knowledge, but only for a moment.

Mr. Herbert essayed most gallantly to adopt his customary cheerful mien.

"Dr. MacGregor asked me to call and see you, George," he said. "I hope you are not suffering greatly."

"Not at all, thanks, vicar. Just a trifle restless with fever, perhaps, but the wound is nothing, a mere cut. I've had as bad a scratch and much more painful when thrusting through a thorn hedge after hounds."

"Ah. That is well."

The reverend gentleman seemed to be strangely at a loss for words. He glanced at Betsy.

"Would you mind leaving me alone with Mr. Pickering for a little while?" he said.

The wounded man laughed, and there was a note in his voice that showed how greatly the tension had relaxed.

"If that's what you're after, Mr. Herbert," he said promptly, "you may rest assured that the moment I'm able to stir we'll be married. I told Mr. Beckett-Smythe so yesterday."

"Indeed; I am glad to hear it. Nevertheless, I want to talk with you alone."

The vicar's insistence was a different thing to the wish expressed by a magistrate and a police superintendent. Betsy went out at once.

For an appreciable time after the door had closed no word was spoken by either of the men. The vicar's eyes were fixed mournfully on the valley, through which a train was winding its way. The engine left in its track white wraiths of steam which vanished under the lusty rays of the sun. The drone of the showman's organ playing "Tommy Atkins" reached the hardly conscious listeners as through a telephone. From a distant cornfield came the busy rattle of a reaping machine. The harvest had commenced a fortnight earlier than usual. Once again was the bounteous earth giving to man a hundredfold what he had sown. "As ye sow, so shall ye reap." Out there in the field were garnered the wages of honest endeavor; here in the room, with its hospital perfume, were being awarded the wages of sin, for George Pickering was condemned to death, and it was the vicar's most doleful mission to warn him of his doom.

"Now, Mr. Herbert, pitch into me as much as you like," said the patient, breaking an uneasy silence. "I've been a bad lot, but I'll try to make amends. Betsy's case is a hard one. You're a man of the world and you know what the majority of these village lasses are like; but Betsy----"

The vicar could bear the suspense no longer. He must perform his task, no matter what the cost.

"George," he broke in tremulously, "my presence here to-day is due to a very sad and irrevocable fact. Dr. MacGregor tells me that your condition is serious, most serious. Indeed--indeed--there is no hope of your recovery."

Pickering, who had raised himself on an elbow, gazed at the speaker for an instant with fiery eyes. Then, as though he grasped the purport of the words but gradually, he sank back on the pillow in the manner of one pressed down by overwhelming force. The vicar moved his chair nearer and grasped his friend's right hand.

"George," he murmured, "bear up, and try to prepare your soul for that which is inevitable. What are you losing? A few years of joys and sorrows, to which the end must come. And the end is eternity, compared with which this life is but a passing shadow."

Pickering did not answer immediately. He raised his body again. He moved his limbs freely. He looked at a square bony wrist and stretched out the free hand until he caught an iron rail, which he clenched fiercely. In his veins ran the blood of a race of yeomen. His hardy ancestors had exchanged blow for blow with Scottish raiders who sought to steal their cattle. They had cracked the iron rind of many a marauder, broken many a border skull in defense of their lives and property. Never had they feared death by flood or field, and their descendant scoffed at the grim vision now.

"What nonsense is this MacGregor has been talking?" he shouted. "Die! A man like me! By gad, vicar, I'd laugh, if I wasn't too vexed!"

"Be patient, George, and hear me. Things are worse than you can guess. Your wound alone is a small matter, but, unfortunately, the knife----"

"There was no knife! It was a pitchfork!"

"Bear with me, I pray you. You will need to conserve your energy, and your protest only makes my duty the harder. The knife has been submitted to analysis, as well as corpuscles of your blood. Alas, that it should fall to me to tell it! Alas, for the poor girl whom you have declared your intention to marry! The knife had been used to carve grouse, and some putrid matter from a shot wound had dried on the blade. This was communicated to your system. The wound was cleansed too late. Your blood was poisoned before the doctor saw you, and--and--there is no hope now."

The vicar bowed his head. He dared not look in the eyes of the man to whom he was conveying this dire sentence. He felt Pickering subsiding gently to the pillow and straightening his limbs.

"How long?"

The words were uttered in a singularly calm voice--so calm that the pastor ventured to raise his sorrow-laden face.

"Soon. Perhaps three days. Perhaps a week. But you will be delirious. You have little time in which to prepare."

Again a silence. A faint shriek reached them from afar, the whistle of the train entering Nottonby, the pleasant little town which Pickering would never more see.

"What a finish!" he muttered. "I'd have liked it better in the saddle. I wouldn't have cared a damn if I broke my neck after hounds."

Another pause, and the vicar said gently:

"Have you made your will?"

"No."

"Then it must be attended to at once."

"Yes, of course. Then, there's Betsy. Oh, God, I've treated her badly. Now, help me, won't you? There's a hundred pounds in notes and some twenty-odd in gold in that drawer. Telegraph first to Stockwell, my lawyer in Nottonby. Bring him here. Then, spare no money in getting a license for my marriage. I can't die unless that is put right. Don't delay, there's a good chap. You have to apply to the Archbishop, don't you? You'll do everything, I know. Will you be a trustee under my will?"

"Yes, if you wish it."

"It'll please me more than anything. Of course, I'll make it worth your while. I insist, I tell you. Go, now! Don't lose a moment. Send Betsy. And, vicar, for Heaven's sake, not a word to her until we are married. I'll tell her the fever is serious; just that, and no more."

"One other matter, George. Mr. Beckett-Smythe will come here to-day or to-morrow to take your sworn deposition. You must not die with a lie on your conscience, however good the motive."

"I'll jump that fence when I reach it, Mr. Herbert. Meanwhile, the lawyer and the license. They're all-important."

The vicar left it at that. He deemed it best to take the urgent measures of the hour off the man's mind before endeavoring to turn his thoughts toward a fitting preparation for the future state. With a reassuring handclasp, he left him.

The two sisters waylaid him in the passage.

"Ye had but ill news, I fear, sir," said Betsy despairingly, catching Mr. Herbert by the arm.

The worried man stooped to deception.

"Now, why should you jump to conclusions?" he cried. "Dr. MacGregor asked me to look up his patient. Am I a harbinger of disaster, like Mother Carey's chickens?"

"Oh, parson," she wailed, "I read it i' yer face, an' in t' doctor's. Don't tell me all is well. I know better. Pray God I may die----"

"Hush, my poor girl, you know not what you say. Go to Mr. Pickering. He wants you."

He knew the appeal would be successful. She darted off. Before Kitty, in turn, could question him, he escaped.

It was easier to run the gantlet of friendly inquirers outside. He telegraphed to the solicitor and sent a telegraphic remittance of the heavy fees demanded for the special license. Within two hours he had the satisfaction of knowing that the precious document was in the post and would reach him next morning.

Mr. Stockwell's protests against Pickering's testamentary designs were cut short by his client.

"Look here, Stockwell," was the irritated comment, "you are an old friend of mine and I'd like this matter to remain in your hands, but if you say another word I'll be forced to send for someone else."

"If you put it that way----" began the lawyer.

"I do, most emphatically. Now, what is it to be? Yes or no?"

For answer the legal man squared some foolscap sheets on a small table and produced a stylographic pen.

"Let me understand clearly," he said. "You intend to marry this--er--lady, and mean to settle four hundred a year on her for life?"

"Yes."

"Suppose she marries again?"

"God in heaven, man, do you think I want to play dog-in-the-manger in my grave?"

"Then it had better take the form of a marriage settlement. It is the strongest instrument known in the law and avoids the death duties."

Pickering winced, but the lawyer went on remorselessly. He regarded the marriage as a wholly quixotic notion, and knew only too well that Betsy Thwaites would be tried for murder if Pickering died.

"Have you no relatives?" he said. "I seem to recollect----"

"My cousin Stanhope? He's quite well off, an M.P., and likely to be made a baronet."

"He will not object to the chance of dropping in for PS1,500 a year."

"Do you think the estate will yield so much?"

"More, I imagine. Did you ever know what you spent?"

"No."

"Well, is it to be this Mr. Stanhope?"

"No. He never gave me a thought. Why should I endow him and his whelps? Let the lot go to the County Council in aid of the county orphanage. By Jove, that's a good idea! I like that."

"Anything else?" demanded the lawyer.

"Yes. You and Mr. Herbert are to be the trustees."

"The deuce we are. Who said so?"

"I say so. You are to receive PS50 a year each from the estate for administering it."

"Ah. That gilds the pill. Next?"

"I have nearly a thousand in the bank. Keep half as working capital, give a hundred to my company in the Territorials,

and divide the balance, according to salary, among all my servants who have more than five years' service. And--Betsy is to have the use of the house and furniture, if she wishes it."

"Anything else?"

Pickering was exhausted, but continued to laugh weakly.

"Yes; I had almost forgotten. I bequeath to John Bolland the shorthorn cow he sold me, and to that lad of his--you must find out his proper name--my pair of hammerless guns and my sword. He frames to be a sportsman, and I think he'll make a soldier. He picked up a poker like a shot the other day when I quarreled with old John."

"What was the quarrel about?"

"When you send back the cow, you'll be told."

Mr. Stockwell scanned his notes rapidly.

"I'll put my clerks to work at this to-night," he said. "As I am a trustee, my partner will attend to-morrow to get your signature. Of course, you know you must be married before you make your will, or it will be invalid? Before I go, George, are you sure it is all over with you?"

"MacGregor says so. I suppose he knows."

"Yes, he knows, if any man does. Yet I can't believe it. It seems monstrous, incredible."

They gazed fixedly at each other. Of the two, the man of law was the more affected. Before either could speak again they heard Betsy's agonized cry:

"Oh, for God's sake, miss, don't tell me I may not be with him always! I've done my best; I have, indeed. I'll give neither him nor you any trouble. Don't keep me away from him now, or I'll go mad!"

The lawyer, wondering what new frenzy possessed the woman who had struck down his friend, opened the door. He was confronted by a hospital nurse sent by Dr. MacGregor. She looked like a strong-minded person and was probably a stickler for the etiquette of the sick room. He took in the situation at a glance.

"There need be no difficulty, nurse, where Miss Thwaites is concerned," he said. "She is to be married to Mr. Pickering to-morrow, and as he has only a few days to live they should see as much of each other as possible. Any other arrangement would irritate your patient greatly, and be quite contrary to Dr. MacGregor's wishes, I am sure."

The nurse bowed, and Betsy sobbed as the secret that was no secret to her was revealed. None of the three realized that several men standing in the hall beneath, whose talk had been silenced by Betsy's frenzied exclamation, must have heard every word the lawyer uttered.



CHAPTER XI

FOR ONE, THE NIGHT; FOR ANOTHER, THE DAWN

So Elmsdale was given another thrill, and a lasting one. The Feast was ruined. Not a man or a woman had heart for enjoyment. If a child sought a penny, it was chided sharply and asked what it meant by gadding about "when poor George Pickerin' an' that lass of his were in such trouble."

Martin heard the news while standing outside the boxing booth, waiting for the sparring competition to commence. He went in, it is true, and saw some hard hitting, but the tent was nearly empty. When he and Jim Bates came out an hour later, Elmsdale was a place of mourning.

A series of exciting events, each crowding on its predecessor's heels as though some diabolical agency had resolved to disturb the community, had roused the hamlet from its torpor.

Five slow-moving years had passed since the village had been stirred so deeply. Then it endured a fortnight's epidemic of suicide. A traveling tinker began the uncanny cycle. On a fine summer's day he was repairing his kettles on a corner of the green, when he was observed to leave his little handcart and to go into a neighboring wood. He did not return. Search next day discovered him swaying from a branch of a tall tree, looking like some forlorn scarecrow suspended there by a practical joker.

The following morning a soldier on furlough, one of the very men who helped to cut down the tinker's body, went into a cow-house at the back of his mother's cottage and suspended himself from a rafter. An odd feature of this man's exit was that the rope had yielded so much that his feet rested on the ground. Before the hanging he had actually cut letters out of his red-cloth tunic and formed the word, "Farewell" in a semicircle on the stable floor. A girl soon afterwards selected the mill-dam for a consoling plunge; and, to crown all, the vicar, Mr. Herbert's forerunner, having received a telegram announcing the failure of a company in which he had invested some money, opened his jugular vein with a sharp scissors. That these tragedies should happen within a fortnight in a community of less than three hundred people was enough to give a life-insurance actuary an attack of hysteria.

But each lacked the dramatic flavor attached to the ill-governed passion of Betsy Thwaites and her fickle swain. Kitty was known to all in Elmsdale, Betsy to few, but George Pickering was a popular man throughout the whole countryside. It was sensation enough that one of his many amours should result in an episode more typical of Paris than of an English Sleepy Hollow. But the sequel--the marriage of this wealthy gentleman-farmer to a mere dairymaid, followed by his death from a wound inflicted by the bride-to-be--this was undiluted melodrama drawn from the repertoire of the Petit Guignol.

That night the story spread over England. A reporter from the *Messenger* came to Elmsdale to glean the exact facts as to Mr. Pickering's "accident." Owing to the peculiar circumstances, he, perforce, showed much discretion in compiling the story telegraphed to the Press Association. Not even the use of that magic word "alleged" would enable him to charge Betsy Thwaites with attempted murder, after the police had apparently withdrawn the accusation. But he contrived to retail the legend by throwing utter discredit on it, and the rest was plain sailing. Moreover, he was a smart young man. He pondered deeply after dispatching the message. He was employed on the staff of a local weekly newspaper, so his traveling allowance was limited to a third-class return ticket and a shilling for "tea." Yet he decided to remain in Elmsdale at his own expense. The departure of the German Government agent for another horse-fair left a vacant bedroom at the "Black Lion." This he secured. He foresaw a golden harvest.

Luck favored him. Conversing with a village Solon in the bar, he caught a remark that "John Bolland's lad" would be an important witness at the inquest. Of course, he made inquiries and was favored with a full and accurate account of the wanderings of the farmer and his wife in London thirteen years earlier, together with their adoption of the baby which had literally fallen from the skies. To the country journalist, Fleet Street is the Mecca of his earthly pilgrimage, and St. Martin's Court, Ludgate Hill, was near enough to newspaperdom to be sacred ground. The very name of the boy smacked of "copy."

John Bolland, lumbering out of the stockyard at tea-time, encountered Dr. MacGregor. The farmer had been thinking hard while striding through his diminished cornfields, and crumbling ears of wheat, oats, and barley in his strong hands to ascertain the exact date when they would be ripe. Already some of his neighbors were busy, but John was more anxious about the condition of the straw than the forwardness of the grain; moreover, men and women did not work so well during feast-time. Next week he would obtain full measure for his money.

"I reckon Martin'll soon be fit?" he said.

The doctor nodded.

"He's a bright lad, yon?" went on the farmer.

"Yes. What are you going to make of him?"

Dr. MacGregor knew the ways of Elmsdale folk. They required leading up to a subject by judicious questioning. Rarely would they unburden their minds by direct statements.

"That's what's worryin' me," said John slowly. "What d'ye think yersen, docthor?"

"It is hard to say. It all hinges on what you intend doing for him, Bolland. He is not your son. If he has to depend on his own resources when he's a man, teach him a useful trade. No matter how able he may be, that will never come amiss."

The farmer gazed around. As men counted in that locality, he was rich, not in hard cash, but in lands, stock, and tenements. His expenses did not grow proportionately with his earnings. He ate and dressed and economized now as on the day when Martha and he faced the world together, with the White House and its small meadows their only belongings. In a few years the produce of his shorthorn herd alone would bring in hundreds annually, and his Cleveland bays were noted throughout the county.

He took the doctor's hint.

"I've nayther chick nor child but Martin," he said. "When Martha an' me are gone te t' Lord, all that we hev'll be Martin's. That's settled lang syne. I med me will four years ago last Easter."

There was something behind this, and MacGregor probed again.

"Isn't he cut out for a farmer?"

"I hae me doots," was the cautious answer.

The doctor waited, so John continued.

"I was sair set on t' lad being a minister. But I judge it's not t' Lord's will. He's of a rovin' stock, I fancy. When he's a man, Elmsdale won't be big eneuf te hold him. He cooms frae Lunnon, an' te Lunnon he'll gang. It's in his feace. Lunnon's a bad place for a youngster whea kens nowt but t' ways o' moor folk, docthor."

Then the other laughed.

"In a word, Bolland, you have made up your mind, and want me to agree with you. Of course, if Martin succeeds you, and you have read his character aright, there is but one line open. Send him to a good school, leave the choice of a profession to his more cultivated mind, and tie up your property so that it cannot be sold and wasted in a young man's folly. When he is forty he may be glad to come back to Elmsdale and give thanks for your foresight on his bended knees. In any event, a little extra book lore will make him none the worse stock-raiser. Eh, is that what you think?"

"You're a sound man, docthor. There's times I wunner hoo it happens ye cling te sike nonsense as that mad Dutchman--"

MacGregor laughed again, and nudged his groom's arm as a signal to drive on. He favored neither church nor chapel, but claimed a devoted adherence to the doctrines of Emanuel Swedenborg, thus forming a sect unto himself. There was not a Swedenborgian temple within a hundred miles. Mayhap the doctor's theological views had a geographical foundation.

The farmer lumbered across the street and took a corner of the crowded tea-table. Mrs. Summersgill was entertaining the company with a description of George Pickering's estate.

"It's a meracle, that's what it is!" she exclaimed. "Te think of Betsy Thwaites livin' i' style in yon fine hoos! There's a revenue o' trees quarther of a mile long, an' my husband sez t' high-lyin' land grows t' best wuts (oats) i' t' county. An' she's got it by a prod wi' a carving-knife, while a poor body like me hez te scrat sae hard for a livin' that me fingers are worn te t' bone!"

Mrs. Summersgill weighed sixteen stone, but she was heedless of satire. Her eye fell on Martin, eating silently, but well.

"Some folks git their bread easy, I'm sure," she went on. "Ivver sen I was a bit lass I've tewed and wrowt an' mead sike deed ower spendin' hawpenny, whiles uthers hev a silver spoon thrust i' their gob frae t' time they're born!"

"T' Lord gives, an' t' Lord taks away. Ye munnot fly i' t' feace o' t' Lord," said Bolland.

"I'm not built for flyin' anywhere," cried the old lady. "I wish I was. 'Tis flighty 'uns as wins nowadays. Look at Betsy Thwaites! Look at Mrs. Saumarez! She mun hae gotten her money varra simple te fling it about as she does. My man telt me that her little gal, t' other neet----"

"Yer cup's empty, Mrs. Summersgill," put in Martha quickly. "Bless my heart, ye talk an' eat nowt. Speakin' o' Mrs. Saumarez, hez anyone heerd if she's better? One o' Miss Walker's maids said she was poorly."

Martin caught his mother's eye, and rose. He went upstairs; the farmer followed him. The two sat near the window; on the broad ledge reposed the Bible; but Bolland did not open the book. He laid his hand on it reverently and looked at the boy.

"Martin," he began, "yer muther tells me that Benson med yer mind sair by grabbin' te t' squire aboot yer bringin' up. Nay, lad, ye needn't say owt. 'Tis no secret. We on'y kept it frae ye for yer good. Anyhow, 'tis kent noo, an' there's nae need te chew on 't. What troubled me maist was yer muther's defiance when I was minded te punish ye for bein' out late."

"It won't occur again, sir," said Martin quietly.

"Mebbe. T' spirit is willin', but t' flesh is wake. Noo, I want a straight answer te a straight question. Are these Bible lessons te yer likin'?"

It was so rare for the farmer to speak in this downright fashion that the boy was alarmed. He knew not what lay behind; but he had not earned his reputation for honesty on insufficient grounds.

"No, they're not," he said.

Bolland groaned. "T' minister said so. Why not?"

"I can hardly explain. For one thing, I don't understand what I read. And often I would like to be out in the fields or on the moor when I'm forced to be here. All the same, I do try hard, and if I thought it would please you and mother, I'd do much more than give up half an hour a day."

"Ay, ay. 'Tis compulsion, not love. I telt t' minister that Paul urged insistence in season an' out o' season, but he held that the teachin' applied te doctrine, an' not te Bible lessons for t' young. Well, Martin, I've weighed this thing, an' not without prayer. I've seen many a field spoiled by bad farmin', an', when yer muther calls my own hired men te help her agean me; when a lad like you goes fightin' young gentlemen aboot a lass; when yon Frenchified ninny eggs ye on te spend money like watter, an' yer muther gies ye t' brass next day te pay Mrs. Saumarez, lest it should reach my ears-- why, I've coom te believe that my teachin' is mistakken."

Martin was petrified at hearing his delinquencies laid bare in this manner. He had not realized that the extravagant display of Monday must evoke comment in a small village, and that Bolland could not fail to interpret correctly his wife's anxiety to hush up all reference to it. He blushed and held his tongue, for the farmer was speaking again.

"T' upshot of all this is that I've sought counsel. Ye're an honest lad, I will say that fer ye, but ye're a lad differin' frae those of yer age i' Elmsdale. If all goes well wi' me, ye'll nivver want food nor lodgin', but an idle man is a wicked man, nine times out o' ten, an' I'd like te see ye saddled i' summat afore I go te my rest. You're not cut out fer t' ministry, ye're none for farmin', an' I'd sooner see ye dead than dancin' around t' countryside after women, like poor George Pickerin'. Soa ye mun gang te college an' sharpen yer wits, an' happen fower or five years o' delvin' i' books'll shape yer life i' different gait te owt I can see at this minnit. What think you on't?"

"Oh, I should like it better than anything else in the world."

The boy's eyes sparkled at this most unlooked-for announcement. Never before had his heart so gone out to the rugged old man whose stern glance was now searching him through the horn-rimmed spectacles.

What magician had transformed John Bolland? Was it possible that beneath the patriarchial inflexibility of the rugged farmer's character there lay a spring of human tenderness, a clear fountain hidden by half a century of toil and narrow religion, but now unearthed forcibly by circumstances stronger than the man himself? The boy could not put these questions into words. He was too young to understand even the meaning of psychological analysis. He could only sit there mute, stunned by the glory of the unexpected promise.

Of course, if a thinker like Dr. MacGregor were aware of all the facts, he would have seen that the rebellion of Martha had been a lightning stroke. The few winged words she shot at her husband on that memorable night had penetrated

deeper than she thought. It chanced, too, that the revivalist preacher whom Bolland took into his confidence was a man of sound common sense, and much more acute in private life than anyone could imagine who witnessed his methods of hammering the Gospel into the dullards of the village. He it was who advised a timely diminution of devotional exercises which were likely to become distasteful to a spirited lad. He recommended the farmer to educate Martin beyond the common run, while the choice of a profession might be left to maturer consideration. Among the many influences conspiring in that hour to mold the boy's future life, none was more wholesome than that of the tub-thumping preacher.

Bolland seemed to be gratified by Martin's tongue-tied enthusiasm.

"Well," he said, rising. "Noo my hand's te t' plow I'll keep it there. Remember, Martin, when ye tak te study t' Word o' yer own accord, ye can start at t' second chapter o' t' Third Book o' Kings. I'll be throng wi' t' harvest until t' middle o' September, but I'll ax Mr. Herbert te recommend a good school. He's a fair man, if he does lean ower much te t' Romans. Soa, fer t' next few days, run wild an' enjoy yersen. Happen ye'll never hae as happy a time again."

He patted the boy's head, a rare sign of sentiment, and walked heavily out of the room. Martin saw him cross the road and clout a stable-boy's ears because the yard was not swept clean. Then he called to his foreman, and the two went off to the low-lying meadows. Bolland had been turning over in his mind Mrs. Saumarez's remarks about draining; they were worthy of consideration and, perhaps, of experiment.

Martin remained standing at the window. So he was to leave Elmsdale, go out into the wide world beyond the hills, mix with people who spoke and acted and moved like the great ones of whom he had read in books. He was glad of it; oh, so glad! He would learn Greek and Latin, French and German. No longer would the queer-looking words trouble his eyes. Their meaning would be made clear to his understanding. He would soon acquire that nameless manner of which the squire, the vicar, Mrs. Saumarez, the young university students he met yesterday, possessed the secret. Elsie Herbert had it, and Angele was veneered with it, though in her case he knew quite well that the polish was only skin deep.

It was what he had longed for with all his heart, yet now that the longing was to be appeased he had never felt more drawn to his parents; his only by adoption, it was true; but nevertheless father and mother by every tie known to him.

By the way, whose child was he? No one had told him the literal manner in which he fell into the hands of the Bollands. Probably his real progenitors were dead long since. Were it not for the kindness of the farmer and his wife he might have been reared in that awful place, the "Union," of which the poverty-stricken old people in the parish spoke with such dread. His own folk must have been poor. Those who were well off were fond of their children and loth to part from them. Well, he must be a real son to John and Martha Bolland. They should have reason to be proud of him. He would do nothing to disgrace their honored name.

What was it his father said just now? When he studied the Bible of his own accord he might begin at the second chapter of the Second Book of Kings.

It would please the old man to know that he gave the first moment of liberty to reading the Word which was held so precious. He opened the book at the page where the long, narrow strip of black silk marked the close of the last lesson. For the first time in his life the boy brought to bear on the task an unaided and sympathetic intelligence, and this is what he read:

"Now the days of David drew nigh that he should die; and he charged Solomon his son, saying,

"I go the way of all the earth: be thou strong therefore, and shew thyself a man;

"And keep the charge of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest, and whithersoever thou turnest thyself:

"That the Lord may continue his word which he spake concerning me, saying, If thy children take heed to their way, to walk before me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail thee (said he) a man on the throne of Israel."

Not even a boy of fourteen could peruse these words unmoved, coming, as they did, after the memorable interview with Bolland. The black letters seemed to Martin to have fiery edges. They burnt themselves into his brain. In years to come they were fated to stand out unbidden before the eyes of his soul many a time and oft.

He read on, but soon experienced the old puzzled feeling when he encountered the legacy of revenge which David bequeathed to his son after delivering that inspired message. It reminded Martin of the farmer's dignified and quite

noble-hearted renunciation of his own dreams in order to follow what he thought was the better way, to be succeeded by his passage to the farm buildings across the road in order to box the ears of a lazy hind.

Ere he closed the book, Martin went over the opening verses of the chapter. He promised himself to obey the injunctions therein contained, and it was with a host of unformed ideals churning in his brain that he descended the stairs.

Mrs. Bolland was gazing through the front door.

"Mercy on us," she cried, "if there isn't Mrs. Saumarez coomin' doon t' road wi' t' nuss an' her little gell. An' don't she look ill, poor thing! I'll lay owt she hez eaten summat as disagreed wi' her, an' it gev her a bilious attack."

"Dod, ay," said Mrs. Summersgill. "Some things are easy te swallow, but hard te digest. Ye could hev knocked me down wi' a feather when our Tommy bolted a glass ally last June twelve months."



CHAPTER XII

A FRIENDLY ARGUMENT

Mrs. Saumarez did indeed look unwell. It was not that her pallor was marked or her gait feeble; obviously, she had applied cosmetics to her face, and her carriage was as imposing and self-possessed as ever. But her cheeks were swollen, her eyes bloodshot, her eyelids puffy and discolored. To a certain extent, too, she simulated the appearance of illness by wearing a veil of heliotrope tint, for it was part of her intent to-day to persuade Elmsdale that her complete seclusion from its society during the past forty-eight hours was due to a cause beyond her own control.

In very truth this was so; she suffered from a malady far worse than any case of dyspepsia ever diagnosed by doctor. The unfortunate woman was an erratic dipsomaniac. She would exist for weeks without being troubled by a craving for drink; then, without the slightest warning or contributory error on her part, the demon of intoxication would possess her, and she yielded so utterly as to become a terror to her immediate associates.

The Normandy nurse, Françoise, exercised a firmer control over her than any other maid she had ever employed; hence, Françoise's services were retained long after other servants had left their mistress in disgust or fright. This distressing form of lunacy seemed also to account for the roving life led by Mrs. Saumarez. She was proud, with the inbred arrogance of the Junker class from which she sprang. She would not endure the scorn, or, mayhap, the sympathy of her friends or dependants. Whenever she succumbed to her malady she usually left that place on the first day she was able to travel.

But the Elmsdale attack, thanks to a limited supply of brandy and Eau de Cologne, was of brief duration. Françoise knew exactly what to do. Every drop of alcoholic liquor—even the methylated spirit used for heating curling-irons—must be kept out of her mistress's way during the ensuing twenty-four hours, and a deaf ear turned to frantic pleadings for the smallest quantity of any intoxicant. Threats, tears, pitiable requests, physical violence at times, must be disregarded callously; then would come reaction, followed by extreme exhaustion. Françoise, despising her German mistress, nevertheless had the avaricious soul of a French peasant, and was amassing a small fortune by attending to her.

The Misses Walker were so eager to retain their wealthy guest that they pretended absolute ignorance of her condition. They succeeded so well—their own dyspeptic symptoms were described with such ingenuous zeal—that the lady believed her secret was unknown to the household at The Elms.

Oddly enough, certain faculties remained clear during these attacks. She took care that the chauffeur should not see her, and remembered also that young Martin Bolland had conversed with her while she was in the worst paroxysm of drink-craving. He was a quick boy, observant beyond his age. What did he know? What wondrous tale had he spread through the village? A visit to his mother, a meeting with the gossip-loving women sure to be gathered beneath the farmer's hospitable roof, would tell her all. She nerved herself for the ordeal, and approached slowly, fearfully, but outwardly dignified as ever.

Mrs. Bolland's hearty greeting was reassuring.

"Eh, my lady, but ye do look poorly, te be sure. I've bin worritin' te think ye've mebbe bin upset by all this racket i' t' place, when ye kem here for rest an' quiet."

Mrs. Saumarez smiled.

"Oh, no, thank you, Mrs. Bolland," she said. "I cannot blame Elmsdale, except, perhaps, that your wonderful air braced up my appetite too greatly, and I had to pay the penalty for so many good things to eat."

"Ay, I said so," chimed in Mrs. Summersgill, in the accents of deep conviction. "Ower much grub an' nowt te do is bad for man or beast."

Mrs. Saumarez laughed frankly at that.

"In which category do you place me, Mrs. Summersgill?" she inquired. Meanwhile, her eyes wandered to where Martin stood. She was asking herself why the boy should gaze so fixedly at Angele.

The stout party did not know what a category was. She thought it was some species of malady.

"Well, ma'am," she cried, "if I was you, I'd try rabbit meat for a few days. Eat plenty o' green stuff an' shun t' teapot. It's slow p'ison."

She stretched out a huge arm and poured out a cup of tea. There was a general laugh at this forgetfulness. Mrs.

Summersgill waved aside criticism.

"Ay, ay!" she went on, "it's easier te preach than te practice, as t' man said when he fell off a haystack efter another man shooted tiv him te ho'd fast."

Mrs. Saumarez took a seat. Thus far, matters had gone well. But why did Martin avoid her?

"Martin, my little friend," she said, "why did you not come in and see me yesterday when you called at The Elms?"

"Miss Walker did not wish it," was the candid answer. "I suppose she thought I might be in the way when you were so ill."

"There nivver was sike a bairn," protested Martha Bolland. "He's close as wax sometimes. Not a wud did he say, whether ye were ill or well, Mrs. Saumarez."

The lady's glance rested more graciously on the boy. She noticed his bandaged arms and hands.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Have you been scalding yourself?"

Martin reddened. It was Angele who answered quickly:

"You were too indisposed last night to hear the story, chere maman. It was all over the village. Il y a tout le monde qui sait. Martin saved Elsie Herbert from a wildcat. It almost tore him into little pieces."

And so the conversation glided safely away from the delicate topic of Mrs. Saumarez's sudden ailment. She praised Martin's bravery in her polished way. She expressed proper horror when the wildcat's skin was brought in for her edification, and became so lively, so animated, that she actually asked Mrs. Bolland for some tea, notwithstanding Mrs. Summersgill's earnest warnings.

She made a hearty meal. Francoise, too, joined in the feast, her homely Norman face perceptibly relaxing its grim vigilance. Her mistress was safe now, for a month, two months, perchance six. The desire for food was the ultimate sign of complete recovery--for the time. Had Mrs. Saumarez dared ask for a glass of beer from the majestic cask in the corner, Francoise would have prevented her from taking it, using force if necessary. The sturdy peasant from Tinchebrai was of stronger moral fiber than the born aristocrat, and her mistress knew it.

Martin stood somewhat shyly near the broad ingle. Angele approached. She caressed his lint-wrapped arms, saying sweetly:

"Do they pain you a great deal?"

"Of course not. They're just a bit sore to the touch--that's all."

His manner was politely repellant. He wished she would not pat him with her nervous fingers. She pawed him like a playful cat. To-day she wore the beautiful muslin frock he had admired so greatly on the first day of the fair. The deep brim of her hat concealed her eyes from all but his.

"I am quite jealous of Elsie," she murmured. "It must be simply lovely to be rescued in that way. Poor little me! At home nursing mamma, while you were fighting for another girl!"

"The thing was not worth so much talk. I did nothing that any other boy would not have done."

"My wud," cried Mrs. Summersgill suddenly, "it'd do your little lass a power o' good te git some o' that fat beacan intiv her, Mrs. Saumarez."

From the smoke-blackened rafters over the spacious fireplace were hanging a dozen sides of home-cured bacon, huge toothsome slabs suggesting mounds of luscious rashers. The sturdy boy beneath gave proof that there was good nutriment in such ample store, but the girl was so fragile, so fairy-like in her gossamer wings, that she might have been reared on the scent of flowers.

The attention thus drawn to the two caused Martin to flush again, but Angele wheeled round.

"Do all pigs grow fat when they are old?" she asked.

"Nay, lass, that they don't. We feed 'em te mak' 'em fat while they're young, but some pigs are skinny 'uns always."

Mrs. Saumarez smiled indulgently at this passage between two such sharp-tongued combatants. Angele's eyes blazed. Francoise, eating steadily, wondered what had been said to make the women laugh, the child angry.

Angele caught the astonished expression on the nurse's face. Quickly her mood changed. Françoise sat near. She bent over and whispered:

"Tiens, nanna! Voici une vieille truie qui parle comme nous autres!"

Françoise nearly choked under a combination of protest and bread crumbs. Before she could recover her breath at hearing Mrs. Summersgill described "an old sow who talks like one of us!" Angele cried airily to Martin:

"Take me to the stables. I haven't seen the pony and the dogs for days and days."

He was glad to escape. He dreaded Mrs. Summersgill's mordant humor if a war of wits broke out between her and the girl.

"All right," he said. "I'll whistle for Curly and Jim at the back and join you at the gate."

But Angele skipped lightly toward her hostess.

"Please, Mrs. Bolland," she said coaxingly, "may I not go through the back kitchen, too?"

"Sure-ly, honey," cried Martha. "One way's as good as another. Martin, tak t' young leddy anywheres she wants te go, an' dinnat be so gawky. She won't bite ye."

The two passed into the farmyard.

"You see, Martin," explained Angele coolly, "I must find out how Jim Bates and Tommy Beadlam always get hold of you without other people being the wiser. Show me the lane and the paddock they tell me of."

"I don't see why it should interest you," was the ungracious reply.

"You dear boy! Are you angry yet because I wouldn't let you kiss me the other night?"

He was compelled to laugh at the outrageous untruth.

"I'm afraid I spoke very crossly then," he admitted, thinking it best to avoid argument.

"Oh, yes. I wept for hours. My poor little eyes were sore yesterday. Look and see if they are red now."

They were standing behind the woodpile. She thrust her face temptingly near. Her beautiful eyes, clear and limpid in their dark depths, blinked saucily. Her parted lips revealed two rows of white, even teeth, and her sweet breath mingled with the fragrance that always clung to her garments. He experienced a new timidity now; he was afraid of her in this mood, though secretly flattered by the homage she was paying.

"Martin," she whispered, "I like you better than any of the other boys, oh, a great deal better, even though Evelyn Atkinson does say you are a milksop."

What a hateful word to apply to one whose flesh was scarred by the claws of an infuriated wildcat conquered in fair fight. Milksop, indeed! He knew Angele's ways well enough by this time to give convincing proof that he was no milksop.

He placed his bandaged right arm around her waist, boldly drew her toward him, and kissed her three times--on the lips.

"That is more than I ever did to Evelyn Atkinson," he said.

She returned the embrace with ardor.

"Oh, Martin, I do love you," she sighed. "And you fought for me as well as for Elsie, didn't you?"

If the thought were grateful to Angele, it stung the boy's conscience. Under what different circumstances had he defended the two girls! He grew scarlet with confusion and sought to unclasp those twining arms.

"Someone may see us," he protested.

"I don't care," she cooed. "Tommy Beadlam is watching us now over the hedge. Tell him to go away."

He wrenched himself free. True enough, "White Head" was gazing at them, eyes and mouth wide open.

"Hello, Tommy!" shouted Martin.

"By gum!" gasped Tommy.

But the spell was broken, and the three joined company to make a tour of the farm. Angele was quite unembarrassed and promptly rescued both boys from sheepishness. She knew that the observant "White Head" would harrow Evelyn Atkinson's soul with a full description of the tender episode behind the big pile of wood. This pleased her more than Martin's gruff "spooning."

Inside the farmhouse conversation progressed vigorously. Mrs. Saumarez joined in the talk with zest. The quaint gossip of the women interested her. She learnt, seemingly with surprise, that these, her humble sisters, were swayed by emotions near akin to her own. Some quiet chronicle of a mother's loss by the death of a soldier son in far-off South Africa touched a dormant chord in her heart.

"My husband was killed in that foolish war," she said. "I never think of it without a shudder."

"I reckon he'd be an officer, ma'am," said Martha.

"Yes; he was shot while leading his regiment in a cavalry charge at the Modder River."

"It's a dreadful thing, is war," observed the bereaved mother. "My lad wouldn't hurt a fly, yet his capt'in wrote such a nice letter, sayin' as how Willie had killed four Boers afore he was struck down. T' capt'in meant it kindly, no doot, but it gev me small consolation."

"It is the wives and mothers who suffer most. Men like the army. I suppose if my child were a boy he would enter the service."

"Thank the Lord, Martin won't be a sojer!" cried Martha fervently.

"You're going to make him a minister, are you not?"

"Noa," said John Bolland's deep voice from the door. "He's goin' to college. I've settled it to-day."

None present appreciated the force of this statement like Martha, and she resented such a momentous decision being arrived at without her knowledge. Her head bent, and twitching fingers sought the ends of her apron. John strode ponderously forward and placed a huge hand on her shoulder.

"Dinnat be vexed, Martha," he said gently. "I hadn't a chance te speak wi' ye sen Dr. MacGregor an' me had a bit crack about t' lad. I didn't need te coom te you for counsel. Who knew better'n me that yer heart was set on Martin bein' browt up a gentleman?"

This recognition of motherly rights somewhat mollified his wife.

"Eh, but I'm main pleased, John," she said. "Yet I'll be sorry to lose him."

"Ye'll wear yer knuckles te t' bone makkin' him fine shirts an' fallals, all t' same," laughed her husband.

Mrs. Saumarez had seen the glint of tears in Mrs. Bolland's eyes, and came to the rescue with a request for a second cup of tea.

"England is fortunate in being an island," she said. "Now, in my native land every man has to serve in the army. It cannot be avoided, you know. Germany has France on the one hand and Russia on the other, each ready to spring if she relaxes her vigilance for a moment."

"Is that so?" inquired Bolland. "I wunner why?"

The lady smiled.

"That is a wide political question," she replied. "To give one reason out of many, look at our--at Germany's thousand miles of open frontier."

"Right enough, ma'am. But why is Jarmany buildin' such a big fleet?"

Mrs. Saumarez raised her lorgnette. She had not expected so apt a retort.

"She is gathering colonies, and already owns a huge mercantile marine. Surely, these interests call for adequate protection?"

"Nobody's threatenin' 'em, so far as I can see," persisted Bolland.

"Not at present. But a wise government looks ahead of the hour. Germany's aim is to educate the world by her culture. She is doing it already, as any of your own well-informed leading men will tell you; but the time may come when, in her

zeal for advancement, she may tread on somebody's toes, so she must be prepared, both on land and sea. Fortunately, this is the one country she will never attack."

John shook his head.

"I'm none so sure," he said slowly. "I hev'n't much time fer readin', but I did happen t' other day on a speech by Lord Roberts which med me scrat me head. Beg pardon, ma'am. I mean it med me think."

"Lord Roberts!" began the lady scornfully. Then she sipped her tea, and the pause gave time to collect her wits. "You must remember that he is a professional soldier, and his views are tainted by militarism."

"Isn't that the trouble i' Jarmany?"

Mrs. Saumarez drank more tea.

"Circumstances alter cases," she said. "The broad fact remains that Germany harbors no evil designs against Great Britain. She believes the world holds plenty of room for both powers. And, when all is said and done, why should the two nations quarrel? They are kith and kin. They look at life from the same viewpoints. Even their languages are alike. Hardly a word in your quaint Yorkshire dialect puzzles me now, because I recognize its source in the older German and in the current speech of our Baltic provinces. Germany and England should be friends, not enemies. It will be a happy day for England when she ceases worrying about German measures of self-defense, but tries, rather, to imitate her wonderful achievements in every field of science. Any woman who uses fabrics need not be told how Germany has taught the whole world how to make aniline dyes, while her chemists are now modernizing the old-time theories of agriculture. You, Mr. Bolland, as a practical farmer, can surely bear out that contention?"

"Steady on, ma'am," said Bolland, leaning forward, with hands on knees, and with eyes fixed on the speaker in an almost disconcerting intensity. "T' Jarmans hev med all t' wold *buy* their dyes, but there hezn't been much *teachin'*, as I've heerd tell of. As for farmin', they coom here year after year an' snap up our best stock i' horses an' cattle te improve their own breeds. *I* can't grummel at that. They compete wi' t' Argentine an' t' United States, an' up go my prices. Still, I do think our government is te blame for lettin' our finest stallions an' brood mares leave t' country. They differ frae cattle. They're bowt for use i' t' army, an' we're bein' drained dhry. That's bad for us. An' why are they doin' it?"

Mrs. Saumarez pushed away her cup and saucer. She laughed nervously, with the air of one who had gone a little further than was intended.

"There, there!" she cried pleasantly. "I am only trying to show you Germany's open aims, but some Englishmen persist in attributing a hostile motive to her every act. You see, I know Germany, and few people here trouble either to learn the language or visit the country."

"Likely not, ma'am," was the ironical answer. "Mr. Pickerin' went te some pleace--Bremen, I think they call it--two year sen this July, te see a man who'd buy every Cleveland bay he could offer. George had just been med an officer i' t' Territorials--which meant a week's swankin' about i' uniform at a camp, an' givin' his men free beer an' pork pies te attend a few drills--an' he was fule enough te carry a valise wi' his rank an' regiment painted on it. Why, they watched him like a cat watchin' a mouse. He couldn't eat a bite or tak a pint o' their light beer that a 'tec wasn't sittin' at t' next table. They fairly chased him away. Even his friend, the hoss-buyer, got skeered at last, an' advised him te quit te avoid arrest."

"That must have been a wholly exceptional case," said Mrs. Saumarez, speaking in a tone of utter indifference. "Had *I* known him, for instance, and given him a letter of introduction, he would have been welcomed, not suspected. By the way, how is he? I hear----"

The conversation was steered into a safer channel. They were discussing the wounded man's condition when Mrs. Saumarez's car passed. The door stood open, so they all noted that the vehicle was white with dust, but the chauffeur was the sole occupant.

"Her ladyship" was pleased to explain.

"It is a new car, so Fritz took it for a long spin to-day," she said. "You will understand, Mr. Bolland, that the engine has to find itself, as the phrase goes."

"Expensive work, ma'am," smiled John, rising. "An' now, good folk," he continued, "whea's coomin' te t' love feast?"

There was a general movement. The assembly dear to old-time Methodism appealed to the majority of the company. Mrs. Saumarez raised her lorgnette once more.

"What is a love feast?" she asked.

"It's a gathering o' members o' our communion, ma'am," was Bolland's ready answer.

"May I come, too?"

Instantly a rustle of surprise swept through her hearers. Even John Bolland was so taken aback that he hesitated to reply. But the lady seemed to be in earnest.

"I really mean it," she went on. "I have a spare hour, and, as I don't care for dinner to-night, I'll be most pleased to attend--that is, if I may?"

The farmer came nearer. He looked at the bulbous eyelids, the too-evenly tinted skin, the turgid veins in the brilliant eyes, and perhaps saw more than Mrs. Saumarez dreamed.

"Happen it'll be an hour well spent, ma'am," he said quietly. "Admission is by membership ticket, but t' minister gev' me a few 'permits' for outside friends, an' I'll fill yan in for ye wi' pleasure."

He produced some slips of paper bearing the written words, "Admit Brother" or "Sister ----," and signed, "Eli Todd." With a stubby pencil he scrawled "Saumarez" in a blank space. The lady thanked him, and gave some instructions in French to Francoise. Five minutes later "Sister Saumarez," escorted by "Brother" and "Sister" Bolland, entered the village meetinghouse.

The appearance of a fashionable dame in their midst created a mild sensation among the small congregation already collected. They were mostly old or middle-aged people; youngsters were conspicuous by their absence. There was a dance that night in a tent erected in a field close to the chapel; in the boxing booth the semi-final round would be fought for the Elmsdale championship. Against these rival attractions the Gospel was not a "draw."

Gradually the spacious but bare room--so unlike all that Mrs. Saumarez knew of churches--became fairly well filled. As the church clock chimed the half-hour after six the Rev. Eli Todd came in from a neighboring classroom. This was the preacher with the powerful voice, but his bell-like tones were subdued and reverent enough in the opening prayer. He uttered a few earnest sentences and quickly evoked responses from the people. The first time John Bolland cried "Amen!" Mrs. Saumarez started. She thought her friend had made a mistake, and her nerves were on edge. But the next period produced a hearty "Hallelujah!" and others joined in with "Glory be!" "Thy will, O Lord!" and kindred ejaculations.

One incident absolutely amazed her. The minister was reciting the Lord's Prayer.

"Give us this day our daily bread," he said.

"And no baccy, Lord!" growled a voice from the rear of the chapel.

The minister had a momentary difficulty in concluding the petition, and a broad grin ran through the congregation. Mrs. Saumarez learned subsequently that the interrupter was a converted poacher, who abandoned his pipe, together with gun and beer jug, "when he found Christ." Eli Todd was a confirmed smoker, and the two were ever at variance on the point.

All stood up when their pastor gave out the opening verses of a hymn:

*O what a joyful meeting there,
In robes of white arrayed;
Palms in our hands we all shall bear
And crowns upon our heads.*

The joyous energy of his declamation, the no less eager volume of sound that arose from the congregation, atoned for any deficiencies of meter or rhyme. The village worshipers lost themselves in the influence of the moment. With spiritual vision they saw the last great meeting, and thundered vociferously the closing lines of the chorus:

*And then we shall in Heaven reign,
And never, never part again.*

"Grace before meat" was sung, and, to Mrs. Saumarez's great discomfiture, bread and water were passed round. Each one partook save herself; Bolland, with real tact, missed her in handing the tray and pitcher to the other occupants of their pew.

"Grace after meat" followed, and forthwith Eli Todd began to deliver an address. His discourse was simple and well reasoned, dealing wholly with the sustenance derived from God's saving spirit. It may be that the unexpected presence of a stranger like Mrs. Saumarez exercised a slightly unnerving influence, as he spoke more seriously and with less

dramatic intensity than was his wont.

Suddenly he rebelled against this sensation of restraint. Changing, with the skill of a born revivalist, from the rounded periods of ordinary English to the homely vernacular of the district, he thundered out:

"There's noa cittedell o' sin 'at God cannot destroy. Ay, friends, t' sword o' t' Spirit s'all oppen a way through walls o' brass an' iron yats (gates). Wean't ye jine His conquerin' army? He's willin' te list ye noo. There's none o' yer short service whilst ye dea t' Lord's work--it's for ivver an' ivver, an' yer pension is life ivverlastin'."

And so the curious service went to its end, which came not until various members of the congregation made public confession of faith, personal statements which often consisted of question and answer between pastor and penitent. It was a strange interrogatory. Eli Todd had a ready quip, a quick appreciation, an emphatic or amusing disclaimer, for each and every avowal of broad-minded Christianity or intolerant views. For these dalesfolk did not all think alike. Some were inclined to damn others who did not see through the myopic lenses of their own spiritual spectacles.

The preacher would have none of this exclusive righteousness. As he said, in his own strenuous way:

"The Lord is ivverywhere. He isn't a prisoner i' this little room te-night. He's yonder i' t' street amang t' organs an' shows. He's yonder i' t' tent where foolish youths an' maidens cannot see Him. If ye seek Him ye'll find Him, ay, in the abodes of sin and the palaces of wantonness. No door can be closed to His saving mercy, no heart too hardened to resist His love."

As it happened, his glance fell on Mrs. Saumarez as he uttered the concluding words, and his voice unconsciously tuned itself to suit her understanding. She dropped her eyes, and the observant minister thought that she was reading a personal meaning into his address.

At once he began the "Doxology," which was sung with great fervor, and the love feast broke up after a brief prayer. Mr. Todd overtook Mrs. Saumarez on the green. Bolland and his wife were escorting her to The Elms.

"I hope you liked the service, madam," he said politely.

"I thought it most interesting," she answered slowly. "I think I shall come again."

He took off his hat and assured her that she would always be welcome at Bethel Chapel. He, worthy man, no less than the Bollands, could little guess this woman's motives in thus currying favor with the villagers. Had an angel from Heaven laid bare her intent, they would scarce have believed, or, if conviction came, they would only have deemed her mad.

A breathless Françoise met her mistress at the gate. Angele was not to be found anywhere, and it was so late, nearly eight o'clock. Nor was Martin to be seen. Madam would remember, they had gone off together.

Mrs. Saumarez explained what all the gesticulation was about.

"If she's wi' Martin, she'll be all right," said Bolland. "He'll bring her yam afore ye git yer things off, ma'am."

He was right. Angele had discovered that Elsie Herbert would be at the church bazaar that evening, and planned the ramble with Martin so that the vicar's daughter might meet them together on the high road.

It delighted her to see the only rival she feared flash a quick side glance as she bowed smilingly and passed on, for Mr. Herbert did not wholly approve of Angele, so Elsie thought it best not to stop for a chat. Martin, too, was annoyed as he doffed his cap. He thought Elsie would surely ask how he was. Moreover, those hot kisses were burning yet on his lips; the memory made him profoundly uncomfortable.

That was all. When he left Angele at the gate she did not suggest a rendezvous at a later hour. Not only would it be useless, but she had seen Frank Beckett-Smythe earlier in the day, and he said there was a dinner party at the Hall.

Perhaps he might be able to slip away unnoticed about nine.

CHAPTER XIII

A DYING DEPOSITION

Before Mr. Beckett-Smythe sat down to dinner that evening a very unpleasant duty had been thrust on him.

The superintendent of police drove over from Nottonby to show him the county analyst's report. Divested of technicalities, this document proved that George Pickering's dangerous condition arose from blood poisoning caused by a stab from a contaminated knife. It was admitted that a wound inflicted by a rusty pitchfork might have had equally serious results, but the analysis of matter obtained from both instruments proved conclusively that the knife alone was impregnated with the putrid germs found in the blood corpuscles, which also contained an undue proportion of alcohol.

Moreover, Dr. MacGregor's statement on the one vital point was unanswerable. Pickering was suffering from an incised wound which could not have been inflicted by the rounded prongs of a fork. The doctor was equally emphatic in his belief that the injured man would succumb speedily.

In the face of these documents it was necessary that George Pickering's depositions should be taken by a magistrate. Most unwillingly, Mr. Beckett-Smythe accompanied the superintendent to the "Black Lion Hotel" for the purpose.

They entered the sick room about the time that Mrs. Saumarez was crossing the green on her way to the Methodist Chapel. A glance at Pickering's face showed that the doctor had not exaggerated the gravity of the affair. He was deathly pale, save for a number of vivid red spots on his skin. His eyes shone with fever. Were not his malady identified, the unskilled observer might conclude that he was suffering from a severe attack of German measles.

Betsy was there, and the prim nurse. The contrast between the two women was almost as startling as the change for the worse in Pickering's appearance. The nurse, strictly professional in deportment, paid heed to naught save the rules of treatment. The word "hospital," "certificate," "method," shrieked silently from her flowing coif and list slippers, from the clinical thermometer on the table, and the temperature chart on the mantelpiece.

Poor Betsy was sitting by the bedside, holding her lover's hand. She was smiling wistfully, striving to chatter in cheerful strain, yet all the time she wanted to wail her despair, to petition on her knees that her crime might be avenged on herself, not on its victim.

When the magistrate stepped gingerly forward, Pickering turned querulously to see who the visitor was, for the nurse had nodded permission to enter when the two men looked through the half-open door.

"Oh, it's you, squire," he said in a low voice. "I thought it might be MacGregor."

"How are you feeling now, George?"

"Pretty sick. I suppose you've heard the verdict?"

"The doctor says you are in a bad state."

"Booked, squire, booked! And no return ticket. I don't care. I've made all arrangements--that is, I'll have a free mind this time to-morrow--and then, well, I'll face the music."

He caught sight of the police officer.

"Hello, Jonas! You there? Come for my last dying depositions, eh? All right. Fire away! Betsy, my lass, leave us for a bit. The nurse can stay. The more witnesses the merrier."

Betsy arose. There was no fear in her eyes now--only dumb agony. She walked steadily from the room. While Mr. Beckett-Smythe was thanking Providence under his breath that a most distressing task was thus being made easy for him, they all heard a dreadful sob from the exterior landing, followed by a heavy thud. The nurse hurried out. Betsy had fainted.

With a painful effort Pickering raised himself on one arm. His forced gayety gave place to loud-voiced violence.

"Confound you all!" he roared. "Why come here to frighten the poor girl's life out of her?"

He cursed both the magistrate and Superintendent Jonas by name; were he able to rise he would break their necks down the stairs. The policeman crept out on tip-toe; Mr. Beckett-Smythe sat down. Pickering stormed away until the nurse returned.

"Miss Thwaites is better," she said. "She was overcome by the long strain, but she is with her sister now, and quite recovered."

Betsy was crying her heart out in Kitty's arms: fortunately, the sounds of her grief were shut out from their ears. Jonas came back and closed the door. The doomed man sank to the pillow and growled sullenly:

"Now, get on with your business, and be quick over it. I'll not have Betsy worried again while I have breath left to protest."

"I am, indeed, very sorry to disturb you, George," said the magistrate quietly. "It is a thankless office for an old friend. Try and calm yourself. I do not ask your forbearance toward myself and Mr. Jonas, but there are tremendous issues at stake. For your own sake you must help us to face this ordeal."

"Oh, go ahead, squire. My bark is worse than my bite--not that I have much of either in me now. If I spoke roughly, forgive me. I couldn't bear to hear yon lass suffering."

Thinking it best to avoid further delay, Mr. Beckett-Smythe nodded to the police officer, who drew forward a small table, which, with writing materials, he placed before the magistrate.

A foolscap sheet bore already some written words. The magistrate bent over it, and said, in a voice shaken with emotion:

"Listen, George. I have written here: 'I, George Pickering, being of sound mind, but believing myself to be in danger of death, solemnly take oath and depose as follows': Now, I want you to tell me, in your own words, what took place last Monday night. You are going to the awful presence of your Creator. You must tell the truth, fully and fearlessly, not striving to determine the course of justice by your own judgment, but leaving matters wholly in the hands of God. You are conscious of what you are doing, fully sensible that you will soon be called on to meet One who knoweth all things. I hope, I venture to pray, that you will give testimony in all sincerity and righteousness.... I am ready."

Pickering heard this solemn injunction with due gravity. His features were composed, his eyes fixed on the distant landscape through the open window. No disturbing noise reached him save the lowing of cattle and the far-off rattle of a reaping machine, for the police had ordered the removal of the shooting gallery and roundabout to the other end of the green.

He remained silent so long that the two men glanced at him anxiously, but were reassured by the belief that he was only collecting his thoughts. Indeed, it was not so. He was striving to bridge that dark chasm on whose perilous verge he tottered--striving to frame an excuse that would not be uttered by his mortal lips.

At last he spoke.

"On Monday night, about five minutes past ten, I met Kitty Thwaites, by appointment, at the wicket gate which opens into the garden from the bowling green of the 'Black Lion Hotel,' Elmsdale. We walked down the garden together. We were talking and laughing about the antics of a groom in this hotel, a fellow named Fred--I do not know his surname--who was jealous of me because I was in the habit of chaffing Kitty and placing my arm around her waist if I encountered her on the stairs. This man Fred, I believe, endeavored to pay attentions to Kitty, which she always refused to encourage. Kitty and I stopped at the foot of the garden beneath a pear tree which stands in the boundary fence of the paddock.

"I had my arm around her neck, but was only playing the fool, which Kitty knew as well as I. There was a bright moon, and, although almost invisible ourselves in the shadow of the hedge and tree, we could see clearly into both paddock and garden. My back was toward the hotel. Suddenly, we heard someone running down the gravel path. I turned and saw that it was Betsy Thwaites, Kitty's sister, a girl whom I believed to be then in a situation at Hereford. I had promised to marry Betsy, and was naturally vexed at being caught in an apparently compromising attitude with her sister. Betsy had a knife in her hand. I could see it glittering in the moonlight."

He paused. He was corpse-like in color. The red spots on his face were darker than before by contrast with the wan cheeks. He motioned to the nurse, who gave him a glass of barley water. He emptied it at a gulp. Catching Mr. Beckett-Smythe's mournful glance, he smiled with ghastly pleasantry.

"It sounds like a coroner's inquest, doesn't it?" he said.

Then, while his eyes roved incessantly from the face of the policeman to that of the magistrate, he continued:

"I imagined that Betsy meant to do her sister some harm, so sprang forward to meet her. Then I saw that she was minded to attack me, for she screamed out: 'You have ruined my life. I'll take care you do not ruin Kitty's.'"

The words, of course, were spoken very slowly. They alternated with the steady scratching of the pen. Others in the room were pallid now. Even the rigid nurse yielded to the excitement of the moment. Her linen bands fluttered and her bosom rose and fell with the restraint she imposed on her breathing.

George Pickering suddenly became the most composed person present. His hearers were face to face with a tragedy. After all, did he mean to tell the truth? Ah, it was well that his affianced wife was weeping in an adjoining room, that her soul was not pierced by the calm recital which would condemn her to prison, perchance to the scaffold.

"Her cry warned me," he went on. "I knew she could not hurt me. I was a strong and active man, she a weak, excited woman. She was very near, advancing down the path which runs close to the dividing hedge of the garden and the stackyard. To draw her away from Kitty, I ran toward this hedge and jumped over. It was dark there. I missed my footing and stumbled. I felt something run into my left breast. It was the prong of a pitchfork."

The pen ceased. A low gasp of relief came from the nurse, for she was a woman. The superintendent looked gravely at the floor. But the magistrate faltered:

"George--remember--you are a dying man!"

Pickering again lifted his body. His face was convulsed with a spasm of pain, but the strong voice cried fearlessly:

"Write what I have said. I'll swear it with my last breath. I'll tell the same story to either God or devil. Write, I say, or shall I finish it with my own hand?"

They thought that by some superhuman effort he would rise forthwith to reach the table. The nurse, the policeman, leaped to restrain him.

Mr. Beckett-Smythe was greatly agitated.

"If I cannot persuade you--" he began.

"Persuade me to do what? To bolster up a lying charge against the woman I am going to marry? By the Lord, do you think I'm mad?"

They released him. The set intensity of his face was terrible. It is hard to say what awful power could have changed George Pickering's purpose in that supreme moment. Yet he clenched his hands in the bedclothes, as if he would choke some mocking fiend that grinned at him, and his voice was hoarse as he murmured:

"Oh, man, if you have a heart, end your inquisition, or I'll die too soon!"

Again the pen resumed its monotonous scrape. It paused at last. The fateful words were on record.

"And then what happened?"

The magistrate's question was judicially cold. He held strong convictions regarding the deeper mysteries of life; his faculties were benumbed by this utter defiance of all that he believed most firmly.

"I said something, swore very likely, and staggered into the moonlight, at the same time tearing the fork from my breast. Betsy saw what I was doing, and screamed. I managed to get over the hedge again, and she ran away in mortal fright, for I had pulled open my waistcoat, and she could see the blood on my shirt. She fell as she ran, and cut herself with the knife. By that time Kitty had reached the hotel, screaming wildly that Betsy was trying to murder me. That is all. Betsy never touched me. The wound I am suffering from was inflicted by myself, accidentally. It was not caused by the knife, as is shown by the fact that I am dying of blood poisoning, while Betsy's cuts are healing and have left her unharmed otherwise."

His hearers were greatly perturbed, but they knew that further protest would be unavailing. And there was an even greater shock in store.

Pickering turned in the bed and poised his pain-racked frame so as to reach the manuscript placed before him for signature. With unwavering hand he added the words:

"So help me God!"

Then he wrote his name.

"Now, sign that, all of you, as witnesses," he commanded, and they did not gainsay him. It was useless. Why prolong his torture and their own?

Mr. Beckett-Smythe handed the sheets of paper to Jonas. He seemed inclined to leave the room without another spoken word, but humane impulse was stronger than dogma; he held out his hand.

"Good-by, George," he said brokenly. "'Judge not,' it is written. Let my farewell be a prayer that you may die peacefully and painlessly, if, indeed, God in His mercy does not grant your recovery."

"Good-by, squire. You've got two sons. Find 'em plenty of work; they'll have less time for mischief. Damn it all, hark to that reaper! It'll soon be time to rouse the cubs. I'll miss the next hunt breakfast, eh? Well, good luck to you all! I've had my last gallop. Good-by, Jonas! Do you remember the fight we had that morning with the poachers? Look here! When you meet Rabbit Jack, tell him to go to Stockwell for a sovereign and swim in beer for a week. Nurse, where's Betsy? I want her before it is dark."

And in a few minutes Betsy, the forlorn, was bending over him and whispering:

"I'll do it for your sake, George! But, oh, it will be hard to face everybody with a lie in my mouth. The hand that struck you should wither. Indeed, indeed, I shall suffer worse than death. If the Lord took pity on me, He would let me be the first to go."

He stroked her hair gently, and there were tears in his eyes.

"Never cry about spilt milk, dearie. At best, or worst, the whole thing was an accident. Come, now, no more weeping. Sit down there and write what I tell you. I can remember every word, and Kitty and you must just fit in your stories to suit mine. Stockwell will defend you. He's a smart chap, and you need have no fear. Bless your heart, you'll be twice married before you know where you are!"

She obeyed him. With careful accuracy he repeated the deposition. He rehearsed the evidence she would give. When the nurse came in, he bade her angrily to leave them alone, but recalled her in the next breath. He wanted Kitty. She, too, must be coached. At his command she had placed the fork where it was found. But she must learn her story with parrot-like accuracy. There must be no contradiction in the sisters' evidence.

Martin was eating his supper when Mrs. Bolland, bustling about the kitchen, made a discovery.

"I must be fair wool-gatherin'," she said crossly. "Here's a little pile o' handkerchiefs browt by Dr. MacGregor, an' I clean forgot all about 'em. Martin, it's none ower leat, an' ye can bide i' bed i' t' mornin'. Just run along te t' vicarage wi' these, there's a good lad. They'll mebbe be wantin' 'em."

He hailed the errand not the less joyfully that it led him through the fair. But he did not loiter. Perhaps he gazed with longing eyes at its vanishing glories, for some of the showmen were packing up in disgust, but he reached the vicarage quickly. It lay nearer the farm than The Elms, and, like that pretentious mansion, was shrouded from the highroad by leafy trees and clusters of laurels.

A broad drive led to the front door. The night was drawing in rapidly, and the moon would not rise until eleven o'clock. In the curving avenue it was pitch-dark, but a cheerful light shone from the drawing-room, and through an open French window he could see Elsie bending over a book.

She was not deeply interested, judging by the listless manner in which she turned the leaves. She was leaning with her elbows on the table, resting one knee on a chair, and the attitude revealed a foot and ankle quite as gracefully proportioned as Angele's elegant limbs, though Elsie was more robust.

Hearing the boy's firm tread on the graveled approach, she straightened herself and ran to the window.

"Who is there?" she said. Martin stepped into the light.

"Oh, it's you!"

"Yes, Miss Herbert. Mother sent me with these."

He held out the parcel of linen.

"What is it?" she asked, extending a hesitating hand.

"It is perfectly harmless, if you stroke it gently."

She could see the mischief dancing in his eyes, and grabbed the package. Then she laughed.

"Our handkerchiefs! It was very kind of Mrs. Bolland----"

"I think Dr. MacGregor had them washed."

This puzzled her, but a more personal topic was present in her mind.

"I saw you a little while ago," she said. "You were engaged, or I would have asked you if you were recovering all right. Your hands and arms are yet bound up, I see. Do they hurt you much?"

"No. Not a bit."

He felt absurdly tongue-tied, but bravely continued:

"I was told to take Miss Saumarez home. That is how you happened to meet us together."

"Indeed," she said, drawing back a little. Her tone conveyed that any explanation of Miss Saumarez's companionship was unnecessary. No other attitude could have set Martin's wits at work more effectually. He, too, retreated a pace.

"I'm very sorry if I disturbed you," he said. "I was going to ring for one of the servants."

She tittered.

"Then I am glad you didn't. They are both out, and auntie would have wondered who our late visitor was. She has just gone to bed."

"But isn't your--isn't Mr. Herbert at home?"

"No; he is at the bazaar. He asked me to sit up until one of the maids returns."

Again she approached the window. One foot rested on the threshold.

"I've been reading 'Rokeby,'" ventured Martin.

"Do you like it?"

"It must be very interesting when you know the place. Just imagine how nice it would be if Sir Walter had seen Elmsdale and written about the moor, and the river, and the ghylls."

"Do you think he would have found a wildcat in Thor ghyll?"

"I hope not. It might have spoiled the verse; and Thor ghyll is beautiful."

"I'll never forget that cat. I can see it yet. How its eyes blazed when it sprang at me! Oh, I don't know how you dared seize it in your hands."

She was outside the window now, standing on a strip of turf that ran between house and drive.

"I didn't give a second thought to it," said Martin in his offhand way.

"I can never thank you enough for saving me," she murmured.

"Then I'll tell you what," he cried. "To make quite sure you won't forget, I'll try and persuade mother to have the skin made into a muff for you. One of the men is curing it, with spirits of ammonia and saltpeter."

"Do you think I may need to have my memory jogged?"

"People forget things," he said airily. "Besides, I'm going away to school. When I come back you'll be a grown-up young lady."

"I'm nearly as tall as you."

"Indeed you are not."

"Well, I'm much taller than Angele Saumarez, at any rate."

"There's no comparison between you in any respect."

And this young spark three short hours ago, behind the woodpile, had gazed into Angele's eyes!

"Do you remember--we were talking about her when that creature flew at me?"

He laughed. It was odd how Angele's name kept cropping up. The church clock struck nine. They listened to the chimes. Neither spoke until the tremulous booming of the bell ceased.

"I'm afraid I must be going," said Martin, without budging an inch.

"Did you--did you--find any difficulty--in opening the gate? It is rather stiff. And your poor hands must be so sore."

From excessive politeness, or shyness, Elsie's tongue tripped somewhat.

"It was a bit stiff," he admitted. "I had to reach up, you know."

"Then I think I ought to come and open it for you."

"But you will be afraid to return alone."

"Afraid! Of what?"

"I really don't know," he said, "but I thought girls were always scared in the dark."

"Then I am an exception."

She cast a backward glance into the room.

"The lamp is quite safe. It will not take me a minute."

They walked together down the short avenue. The gate was standing open.

"Really," laughed Martin, "I had quite forgotten."

"So boys have weak memories, too?"

"Of gates, perhaps."

"Well, now, I must be off. Good-night, and thank you so much."

She held out her hand. He took it in both of his.

"I do hope Mr. Herbert will ask me to another picnic," he said.

A boy on a bicycle rode past slowly. Instinctively, they shrank into the shadow of a tree.

"Wasn't that Frank Beckett-Smythe?" whispered Elsie, forgetting to withdraw her imprisoned hand, and turning a startled face to Martin.

"Yes."

"Where can he be going at this time?"

Martin guessed accurately, but sheer chivalry prevented him from saying more than:

"To the fair, I suppose."

"At this hour; after nine o'clock?"

"S-s-h. He's coming back."

She drew closer. There was an air of mystery in this nocturnal bicycle ride that induced bewilderment. Martin's right hand still inclosed the girl's. What more natural than that his left arm should go around her waist, merely to emphasize the need for caution, concealment, secrecy? Most certainly his knowledge of womankind was striding onward in seven-leagued boots.

The trot of a horse sounded sharply on the hard road. It was being ridden by someone in a hurry. The young scion of the Hall, who appeared to be killing time, inclined his machine to the opposite hedge.

But the rider pulled up with the skill of a practiced horseman. Even in the dim light the boy and girl recognized one of Mr. Beckett-Smythe's grooms.

"Is that you, Master Frank?" they heard him say.

"Hello, Williams! What's up?"

"What's up, indeed! T' Squire has missed ye. A bonny row there'll be. Ye mun skip back lively, let me tell ye."

"Oh, the deuce!"

"Better lose nae mair time, Master Frank. I'll say I found ye yon side o' T' Elms."

"What has The Elms got to do with it?"

The man grinned.

"Noo, Master Frank, just mount an' be off in front. T' Squire thinks ye're effer that black-eyed lass o' Mrs. Saumarez's. Don't try an' humbug him. He telt me te lay my huntin'-crop across yer shoulders, but that's none o' my business. Off ye go!"

The heir, sulky and in deep tribulation, obeyed. They heard the horse's hoofbeats dying away rapidly.

Elsie, an exceedingly nice-mannered girl, was essentially feminine. The episode thrilled her, and pleased her, too, in some indefinable way, for her companion was holding her tightly.

"Just fancy that!" she whispered.

"Oh, he will only get a hiding."

"But, surely, he could not expect to meet Angele?"

"It looks like it. But why should we trouble about it?"

"I think it is horrid. But I must be going. Good-night--Martin."

He felt a gentle effort to loosen his clasp.

"Good-night, Elsie."

Their faces were very close. Assuredly, the boy must have been a trifle light-headed that day, for he bent and kissed her.

She tore herself from the encircling arm. Her cheeks were burning. At a little distance--a few feet--she halted.

"How dare you?" she cried.

He came to her with hands extended.

"Forgive me, Elsie; I couldn't help it."

"You must never, never do such a thing again."

He had nothing to say.

"Promise!" she cried, but her voice was less emphatic than she imagined.

"I won't," he said, and caught her arm.

"You--won't! How can you say such a thing?"

"Because I like you. I have known you for years, though we never spoke to each other until yesterday."

"Oh, dear! This is terrible! You frightened me so! I hope I didn't hurt your poor arms?"

"The pain was awful," he laughed.

The girl's heart was beating so frantically that she could almost hear its pulsations. The white bandages on Martin's wrists and hands aroused a tumult of emotion. The scene in the ghyll flashed before her eyes; she saw again the wild struggles of the snarling, tearing, biting animal, the boy's cool daring and endurance until he crushed the raging thing's life out of it and flung it away contemptuously.

An impulse came to her, and it was not to be repelled. She placed both hands on his shoulders and kissed him, quite fearlessly, on the lips.

"I think I owed you that," she said, with a little sob, and then ran away in good earnest, never turning her head until she was safe within the drawing-room.

Martin, his brain in a whirl and his blood on fire, closed the gate for himself. When the vicar came, half an hour later, his daughter was busy over the same book.

"What, Elsie! None of the maids home yet?" he cried.

"No, father, dear. But Martin Bolland brought these."

"Oh, our handkerchiefs. What did he say?"

"Nothing--of any importance. I understood that Dr. MacGregor caused the linen to be washed, but forgot to ask him why."

"Is that all?"

"Practically all, except that his arms and hands are all bound up, so I went with him as far as the gate. It is stiff, you know. And--yes--he has been reading 'Rokeby.' He likes it."

The vicar filled his pipe. He had had a trying day.

"Martin is a fine lad," he said. "I hope John Bolland will see fit to educate him. Such a youngster should not be allowed to vegetate in a village like this."

"Ah!" said Elsie, "that reminds me. He told me he was going away to school."

"Capital!" agreed the vicar. "Out of evil comes good. It required an earthquake to move a man like Bolland!"



CHAPTER XIV

THE STORM

On the morrow rain fell. At first the village regarded the break in the weather as a thunderstorm, and harvesters looked to an early resumption of work. "A sup o' wet'll do nowt any harm," they said. But a steadily declining "glass" and a continuous downpour that lost nothing in volume as the day wore caused increasing headshakes, anxious frowns, revilings not a few of the fickle elements.

The moorland becks became raging torrents. The gorged river rose until all the low-lying land was flooded, hundreds of pounds' worth of corn in stook swept away, and all standing crops were damaged to an enormous extent. Cattle, sheep, poultry, even a horse or two, were caught by the rushing waters and drowned. A bridge became blocked by floating debris and crumbled before the flood. Three men were standing on the structure, idly watching the articles whirling past in the eddies; one, given a second's firm footing, jumped for dear life and saved himself; the bodies of the others were found, many days afterwards, jammed against stakes placed in the stream a mile lower down to prevent fish poachers from netting an open reach.

This deluge, if indeed aught else were needed, wrecked the Feast. Every booth was dismantled, each wagon and caravan packed. The van dwellers only ceased their labors when all was in readiness for a move to the next fair ground; the Elmsdale week, usually a bright spot in their migratory calendar, was marked this year with absolute loss. At the best, and in few instances, it yielded a bare payment of expenses.

Farmers, of course, toiled early and late to avert further disaster. Stock were driven from pastures where danger threatened; cut corn was rescued in the hope that the next day's sun might dry it; choked ditches were raked with long hoes to permit the water to flow off.

At last, when night fell, and the rain diminished to a thin drizzle, though the barometer gave no promise of improvement, men gathered in the village street and began comparing notes. Everyone had suffered in some degree; even the shopkeepers and private residents complained of ruined goods, gardens rooted up, houses invaded by the all-pervading floods.

But the farmers endured the greatest damage. Some had lost their half-year's rent, many would be faced with privation and bankruptcy. Thrice fortunate now were the men with capital—those who could look forward with equanimity to another season when the wanton havoc inflicted by this wild raging of the waters should be recouped.

John Bolland, protected by an oilskin coat, crossed the road between the stockyard and the White House about eight o'clock.

"Eh, Mr. Bolland, but this is a sad day's wark," said a friend who encountered him.

"Ah, it's bad, very bad, an' likely te be worse," replied John, lifting his bent head and casting a weather-wise glance over the northerly moor.

"I've lost t' best part o' six acres o' wuts," (oats) growled his neighbor. "It's hard to know what spite there was in t' clouds te burst i' that way."

"Times an' seasons aren't i' man's hands," was the quiet answer. "There'd be ill deed if sunshine an' storm were settled by voates, like a county-council election."

"Mebbe, and mebbe nut," cried the other testily. "'Tis easy to leave ivvrything te Providence when yer money's mostly i' stock. Mine happens te be i' crops."

"An' if mine were i' crops, Mr. Pattison, I sud still thry te deserve well o' Providence."

This shrewd thrust evoked no wrath from Pattison, who was not a chapel-goer.

"Gosh!" he laughed, "some folks are lucky. They pile up riches both i' this wuld an' t' wuld te come. Hooivver, we won't argy. Hev ye heard t' news fra' te t' 'Black Lion'?"

"'About poor George Pickerin'? Noa. I've bin ower thrang i' t' cow-byre."

"He's married, an' med his will. Betsy is Mrs. Pickerin' noo. But she'll be a widdy afore t' mornin'!"

"Is he as bad as all that?"

"Sinkin' fast, they tell me. He kep' up, like the game 'un he allus was, until Mr. Croft left him alone wi' his wife. Then he fell away te nowt. He's ravin', I hear."

"Croft! I thowt Stockwell looked efther his affairs."

"Right enough! But Stockwell's ya (one) trustee, Mr. Herbert's t' other. So Croft had te act."

"Well, I'm rale sorry for t' poor chap. He's coom tiv a bad end."

"Ye'll be t' foreman o' t' jury, most like?"

"Noa. I'll be spared that job. Martin is a witness, more's t' pity. Good-night, Mr. Pattison. It'll hu't none if y' are minded te offer up a prayer for betther weather."

But the prayers of many just men did not avail to save Elmsdale that night. After a brief respite, the storm came on again with gusty malevolence. Black despair sat by many a fireside, and in no place was its grim visage seen more plainly than in the bedroom where George Pickering died.

Dr. MacGregor watched the fitful flickering of the strong man's life, until, at last, he led the afflicted wife from the room and consigned her to the care of her weeping sister and the hardly less sorrowful landlady.

At the foot of the stairs were waiting P. C. Benson and the reporter of the *Messenger*.

"It is all over," said the doctor. "He died at a quarter past ten."

"The same hour that he was--wounded," commented the reporter. "What was the precise cause of death?"

"Failure of the heart's action. It was a merciful release. Otherwise, he might have survived for days and suffered greatly."

The policeman adjusted his cape and lowered his chin-strap.

"I mun start for Nottonby," he said. "T' inquest'll likely be oppenned o' Satherday at two o'clock, doctor."

"Yes. By the way, Benson, you can tell Mr. Jonas that the county analyst and I are ready with our evidence. There is no need for an adjournment, unless the police require it."

The constable saluted and set off on a lonely tramp through the rain. He crossed the footbridge over the beck--the water was nearly level with the stout planks.

"I haven't seen a wilder night for monny a year," he muttered. "There'll be a nice how-d'ye-do if t' brig is gone afore daylight."

He trudged the four miles to Nottonby. Nearing the outskirts of the small market town, he was startled by finding the body of a man lying face down in the roadway. The pelting gale had extinguished his lamp. He managed to turn the prostrate form and raise the man's head. Then, after several failures, he induced a match to flare for a second. One glance sufficed.

"Rabbit Jack!" he growled. "And blind as a bat! Get up, ye drunken swine. 'Twould be sarvin' ye right te lave ye i' the road until ye were runned over or caught yer death o' cold."

From the manner of P. C. Benson's language it may be inferred that his actions were not characterized by extreme gentleness. He managed to shake the poacher into semi-consciousness. Rabbit Jack, wobbling on his feet, lurched against the policeman.

"Hello, ole fell', coom along wi' me," he mumbled amiably. "Nivver mind t' brass. I've got plenty. Good soart, George Pickerin'. Gimme me a sov', 'e did. Fo-or, 'e's a jolly good feller----"

A further shaking was disastrous. He collapsed again. The perplexed policeman noted a haymew behind a neighboring gate. He dragged the nondescript thither by the scruff of his neck and threw him on the lee side of the shelter.

"He'll be sober by momin'," he thought. "I hev overmuch thrubble aboot te tew mysen wi' this varmint."

And so ended the first of the dead man's bequests.

The gathering of a jury in a country village for an important inquest like that occasioned by George Pickering's death is a solemn function. Care is exercised in empaneling men of repute, and, in the present instance, several prominent farmers were debarred from service because their children would be called as witnesses.

The inquest was held, by permission, in the National schoolhouse. No room in the inn would accommodate a tithe of the people who wished to attend. Many journalists put in an appearance, the *Messenger* reporter's paragraphs having attracted widespread attention.

It was noteworthy, too, that Superintendent Jonas did not conduct the case for the police. He obtained the aid of a solicitor, Mr. Dane, with whom the coroner, Dr. Magnus, drove from Nottonby in a closed carriage, for the rain had not ceased, save during very brief intervals, since the outbreak on Thursday morning.

The jury, having been sworn, elected Mr. Webster, grocer, as their foreman, and proceeded to view the body. When they reassembled in the schoolroom it was seen that Betsy, now Mrs. Pickering, was seated next her sister. With them were two old people whom a few persons present recognized as the girls' parents, and by Betsy's side was Mr. Stockwell. Among the crowd of witnesses were Martin, Frank and Ernest Beckett-Smythe, and Angele.

The mortification, the angry dismay of Mrs. Saumarez when her daughter was warned to attend the inquest may well be imagined. The police are no respecters of persons, and P. C. Benson, of course, ascertained easily the name of the girl concerning whom Martin and young Beckett-Smythe fought on the eventful night. She might be an important witness, so her mother was told to send her to the court.

Mrs. Saumarez disdained to accompany the girl in person, and Françoise was deputed to act as convoy. The Normandy nurse's white linen bands offered a quaint contrast to the black robes worn by the other women and gave material for a descriptive sentence to every journalist in the room.

Mr. Beckett-Smythe, the vicar, Dr. MacGregor, and the county analyst occupied chairs beside the Coroner. The latter gentleman described the nature of the inquiry with businesslike brevity, committing himself to no statements save those that were obvious. When he concluded, Mr. Dane rose.

"I appear for the police," he said.

"And I," said Mr. Stockwell, "am here to watch the interests of Mrs. Pickering, having received her husband's written instructions to that effect."

A deep hush fell on the packed assembly. The curious nature of the announcement was a surprise in itself. The reporters' pencils were busy, and the Coroner adjusted his spectacles.

"The written instructions of the dead man?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir. My friend, my lifelong friend, Mr. George Pickering, was but too well aware of the fate that threatened him. I have here a letter, written and signed by him on Thursday morning. With your permission, I will read it."

"I object," cried Mr. Dane.

"On what grounds?" asked the Coroner.

"Such a letter may have a prejudicial effect on the minds of the jury. They are here to determine, with your direction, a verdict to be arrived at on certain evidence. This letter cannot be regarded as evidence."

Mr. Stockwell shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not press the point," he said. "I fail to see any harm in showing a husband's anxiety that his wife should be cleared of absurd imputations."

Mr. Dane reddened.

"I consider that a highly improper remark," he cried.

The other only smiled. He had won the first round. The jury knew what the letter contained, and he had placed the case for the police in an unfavorable light.

The first witness, Pickering's farm bailiff, gave formal evidence of identity.

Then the Coroner read the dead man's deposition, which was attested by the local justice of the peace. Dr. Magnus rendered the document impressively. Its concluding appeal to the Deity turned all eyes on Betsy. She was pale, but composed. Since her husband's death she had cried but little. Her mute grief rendered her beautiful. Sorrow had given dignity to a pretty face. She was so white, so unmoved outwardly, that she resembled a clothed statue. Kitty wept quietly all the time, but Betsy sat like one in a dream.

"Catherine Thwaites," said the Coroner's officer, and Kitty was led by Mr. Jones to the witness stand. The girl's

evidence, punctuated by sobs, was practically a resume of Pickering's sworn statement.

From Mr. Dane's attitude it was apparent that he regarded this witness as untruthful.

"Of course," he said, with quiet satire in word and look, "as Mr. Pickering impaled himself on a fork, you did not see your sister plunge a knife into his breast?"

"No, sir."

"Nor did you run down the garden shrieking: 'Oh, Betsy, Betsy, you've killed him.' You did not cry 'Murder, murder! Come, someone, for God's sake?'"

"Yes, sir; I did."

This unexpected admission puzzled the solicitor. He darted a sharp side glance at Stockwell, but the latter was busy scribbling notes. Every pulse in court quickened.

"Oh, you did, eh? But why charge your sister with a crime you did not see her commit?"

"Because she had a knife in her hand, and I saw Mr. Pickering stagger across the garden and fall."

"In what direction did he stagger?"

"Away from the stackyard hedge."

"This is a serious matter. You are on your oath, and there is such a thing as being an accessory after----"

Up sprang Stockwell.

"I protest most strongly against this witness being threatened," he shouted.

"I think Mr. Dane is entitled to warn the witness against false testimony," said the Coroner. "Of course, he knows the grave responsibility attached to such insinuations."

Mr. Dane waved an emphatic hand.

"I require no threats," he said. "I have evidence in plenty. Do you swear that Mr. Pickering did not lurch forward from beneath the pear tree at the foot of the garden after being stabbed by your sister, who surprised him in your arms, or you in his arms? It is the same thing."

"I do," was the prompt answer.

The lawyer sat down, shrugging his shoulders.

"Any questions to put to the witness, Mr. Stockwell?" said the Coroner.

"No, sir. I regard her evidence as quite clear."

"Will you--er--does your client Mrs. Pickering wish to give evidence?"

"My client--she is not my client of her own volition, but by the definite instructions of her dead husband--will certainly give evidence. May I express the hope that my learned friend will not deal with her too harshly? She is hardly in a fit state to appear here to-day."

Mr. Dane smiled cynically, but made no reply. He declined to help his adversary's adroit maneuvers by fiery opposition, though again had Mr. Stockwell succeeded in playing a trump card.

Betsy was duly warned by the Coroner that she might be charged with the wilful murder of George Pickering, notwithstanding the sworn deposition read in court. She could exercise her own judgment as to whether or not she would offer testimony, but anything she said would be taken down in writing, and might be used as evidence against her.

She never raised her eyes. Not even those terrible words, "wilful murder," had power to move her. She stood like an automaton, and seemed to await permission to speak.

"Now, Mrs. Pickering," said Dr. Magnus, "tell us, in your own words, what happened."

She began her story. No one could fail to perceive that she was reciting a narrative learnt by heart. She used no words in the vernacular. All was good English, coherent, simple, straightforward. On the Monday morning, she said, she

received a letter at Hereford from Fred Marshall, ostler at the "Black Lion Hotel."

"Have you that letter?" asked the Coroner.

"Yes," interposed Mr. Stockwell. "Here it is."

He handed forward a document. A buzz of whispered comment arose. In compliance with Dr. Magnus's request, Betsy identified it listlessly. Then it was read aloud. Apart from mistakes in spelling, it ran as follows:

"Dear Miss Thwaites.--This is to let you know that George Pickering is carrying on with your sister Kitty. He has promised to meet her here on Monday. He has engaged a bedroom here. You ought to come and stop it. I inclose P.O. for one pound toward your fare.--Yours truly, Fred Marshall, groom, 'Black Lion,' Elmsdale."

The fact that this meddlesome personage had sent Betsy her railway fare became known now for the first time. A hiss writhed through the court.

"Silence!" yelled a police sergeant, glaring around with steely eyes.

"There must be no demonstrations of any sort here," said the Coroner sternly. "Well, Mrs. Pickering, you traveled to Elmsdale?"

"Yes."

"With what purpose in view?"

"George had promised to marry me. Kitty knew this quite well. I thought that my presence would put an end to any courtship that was going on. It was very wrong."

"None will dispute that. But I prefer not to question you. Tell us your own story."

"I traveled all day," she recommenced, "and reached Elmsdale station by the last train. I was very tired. At the door of the inn I met Fred Marshall. He was waiting, I suppose. He told me George and Kitty were at the bottom of the garden."

A quiver ran through the audience, but the police sergeant was watching, and they feared expulsion.

"He said they had been there ten minutes. I ran through the hotel kitchen. On a table was lying a long knife near a dish of grouse. I picked it up, hardly knowing what I was doing, and went into the garden. When I was halfway down Kitty saw me and screamed. George turned round and backed away toward the middle hedge. I remember crying out--some--things--but I do not--know--what I said."

She swayed slightly, and everyone thought she was about to faint. But she clutched the back of a chair and steadied herself. Mr. Jones offered her a glass of water, but she refused it.

"I can go on," she said bravely.

And she persevered to the end, substantially repeating her sister's evidence.

When Mr. Dane rose to cross-examine, the silence in court was appalling. The girl's parents were pallid with fear. Kitty sat spellbound. Mr. Stockwell pushed his papers away and gazed fixedly at his client.

"Why did you pick up the knife, Mrs. Pickering?" was the first question.

"I think--I am almost sure--I intended to strike my sister with it."

This was another bombshell. Mr. Dane moved uneasily on his feet.

"Your sister!" he repeated in amazement.

"Yes. She was aware of my circumstances. What right had she to be flirting with my promised husband?"

"Hum! You have forgiven her since, no doubt?"

"I forgave her then, when I regained my senses. She was acting thoughtlessly. I believe that George and she went into the garden only to spite Fred Marshall."

Mr. Dane shook his head.

"So, if we accept your statement, Mrs. Pickering, you harmed no one with the knife except yourself?"

"That is so."

He seemed to hesitate a moment, but seemingly made up his mind to leave the evidence where it stood.

"I shall not detain you long," said Mr. Stockwell when his legal opponent desisted from further cross-examination. "You were married to Mr. Pickering on Thursday morning by special license?"

"Yes."

"He had executed a marriage settlement securing you PS400 a year for life?"

"Yes."

"And, after the accident, you remained with him until he died?"

"Yes--God help me!"

"Thank you. That is all."

"Just one moment," interposed the Coroner. "Were you previously acquainted with this man, Marshall, the groom?"

"No, sir. I saw him for the first time in my life when he met me at the hotel door and asked me if I was Miss Thwaites."

"How did he obtain your Hereford address? It appears to be given in full on the envelope."

"I don't know, sir."

Fred Marshall was the next witness. He was sober and exceedingly nervous. He had been made aware during the past week that public opinion condemned him utterly. His old cronies refused to drink with him. Mrs. Atkinson had dismissed him; he was a pariah, an outcast, in the village.

His evidence consisted of a disconnected series of insinuations against Kitty's character, interlarded with protests that he meant no harm. Mr. Stockwell showed him scant mercy.

"You say you saw Mrs. Pickering, or Betsy Thwaites, as she was at that time, seize a knife from the table?"

"I did."

"What did you think she meant to do with it?"

"What she did do--stick George Pickerin'. I heerd her bawlin' that oot both afore an' efter."

The man was desperate. In his own parlance, he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, and he would spare no one.

"Oh, indeed! You knew she intended to commit murder?"

"I thowt so."

"Then why did you not follow her?"

"I was skeered."

"What! Afraid of a weak woman?"

"Well, I didn't give a damn if she did stab him! There, ye hev it straight!"

Mr. Stockwell turned to Mr. Dane.

"If you are looking for accessories in this trumped-up case, you have one ready to hand," he exclaimed.

"You must be careful what you are saying, Marshall," observed the Coroner severely. "And moderate your language, too. This court is not a stable."

"He shouldn't badger me," cried the witness in sullen anger.

"I'll treat you with great tenderness," said Mr. Stockwell suavely, and a general smile relieved the tension.

"How did you obtain Miss Thwaites's address at Hereford?"

No answer.

"Come, now. Where are your wits? Will you accuse me of badgering you, if I suggest that you stole a letter from Kitty Thwaites's pocket?"

"I didn't steal it. It was in a frock of hers, hangin' in her bedroom."

"You are most obliging. And the sovereign you sent her? Did you, by any chance, borrow it from Mrs. Atkinson?"

"Frae Mrs. Atkinson? Whea said that?"

"Oh, I mean without her knowledge, of course. From Mrs. Atkinson's till, I should have said."

The chance shot went home. The miserable groom growled a denial, but no one believed him. Quite satisfied that he had destroyed the man's credibility, Mr. Stockwell sat down.

"Martin Court Bolland!" said the Coroner's officer, and a wave of renewed interest galvanized the court. Mr. Dane arranged his papers and looked around with the air of one who says:

"Now we shall hear the truth of this business."

Martin came forward. It chanced that the first pair of eyes he encountered were Angele's. The girl was gazing at him with a spiteful intensity he could not understand. He did not know then of the painful expose which took place at The Elms when Mrs. Saumarez learnt on the preceding day that her daughter was a leading figure among the children in the "Black Lion" yard on the night of the tragedy.

Angele blamed Martin for having betrayed her to the authorities. She did not know how resolutely he had declined to mention her name; he loomed large in her mind, to the exclusion of the others.

She regarded him now with a venomous malice all the more bitter because of the ultra-friendly relations she had forced on him.

He looked at her with genuine astonishment. She reminded him of the wildcat he choked to death in Thor ghyll. But he had to collect his wandering faculties, for the Coroner was speaking.



CHAPTER XV

THE UNWRITTEN LAW

Martin's evidence was concise. He happened to be in the "Black Lion" yard with other children at a quarter past ten on Monday night. He heard a woman's scream, followed by a man's loud cry of pain, and both sounds seemed to come from the extreme end of the garden.

Kitty Thwaites ran toward the hotel shrieking, "Oh, Betsy, Betsy, you've killed him!" She screamed "Murder" and called for someone to come, "for God's sake!" She fell exactly opposite the place where he was standing. Then he saw Betsy Thwaites--he identified her now as Mrs. Pickering--running after her sister and brandishing a knife. She appeared to be very excited, and cried out, "I'll swing for him. May the Lord deal wi' him as he dealt wi' me!" She called her sister a "strumpet," and said it would "serve her right to stick her with the same knife." He was quite sure those were the exact words. He was not alarmed in any way, only surprised by the sudden uproar, and he saw the two women and the knife as plainly as if it were broad daylight.

Mr. Dane concluded the examination-in-chief, which he punctuated with expressive glances at the jury, by touching on a point which he expected his acute rival to raise.

"What were you doing in the 'Black Lion' yard at that hour, Bolland?"

"I was having a dispute with Master Frank Beckett-Smythe."

"What sort of a dispute?"

"Well, we were fighting."

A grin ran through the court.

"He is an intelligent boy and older than you. Can you suggest any reason why he should have failed to see and hear all that you saw and heard?"

Martin paused. He disliked to pose as a vainglorious pugilist, but there was no help for it.

"I got the better of him," he said quietly. "One, at least, of his eyes were closed, and I had just given him an uppercut on the nose."

"But his brother was there, too?"

"Master Ernest was looking after him."

"How about the other children?"

"They ran away."

"All of them?"

"Well, nearly all. I can only speak for myself, sir. No doubt the others will tell you what they saw."

Obviously, Mr. Dane was unprepared for the cool self-possession displayed by this farmer's son. He nodded acquiescence with Martin's views and sat down.

Mr. Stockwell, watching the boy narrowly, had caught the momentary gleam of surprise when his look encountered that of the pretty dark-eyed child whose fashionable attire distinguished her from the village urchins among whom she was sitting.

"By the way," he began, "why do you call yourself Bolland?"

"That is my name, sir."

"Are you John Bolland's son?"

"No, sir."

"Then whose son are you?"

"I do not know. My father and mother adopted me thirteen years ago."

The lawyer gathered by the expression on the stolid faces of the jury that this line of inquiry would be fruitless.

"What was the cause of the fight between you and young Beckett-Smythe?"

This was the signal for an interruption from the jury. Mr. Webster, the foreman, did not wish any slight to be placed on Mrs. Saumarez. The upshot might be that he would lose a good customer. The Squire dealt at the Stores. Let him protect his own children. But Mrs. Saumarez needed a champion.

"May I ask, sir," he said to the Coroner, "what a bit of a row atween youngsters hez te do wi' t' case?"

"Nothing that I can see," was the answer.

"It has a highly important bearing," put in Mr. Stockwell. "If my information is correct, this witness is the only one whose evidence connects Mrs. Pickering even remotely with the injuries received by her husband. I assume, of course, that Marshall's testimony is not worth a straw. I shall endeavor to elicit facts that may tend to prove the boy's statements unreliable."

"I cannot interfere with your discretion, Mr. Stockwell," was the ruling.

"Now, answer my question," cried the lawyer.

Martin's brown eyes flashed back indignantly.

"We fought because I wished to take a young lady home, and he tried to prevent me."

"A young lady! What young lady?"

"I refuse to mention her name. You asked why we fought, and I've told you."

"Why this squeamishness, my young squire of dames? Was it not Angele Saumarez?"

Martin turned to the Coroner.

"Must I reply, sir?"

"Yes.... I fail still to see the drift of the cross-examination, Mr. Stockwell."

"It will become apparent quickly. Yes, or no, Bolland?"

"Yes; it was."

"Was she committed to your care by her mother?"

"No. She came out to see the fair. I promised to look after her."

"Were you better fitted to protect this child than the two sons of Mr. Beckett-Smythe?"

"I thought so."

"From what evil influences, then, was it necessary to rescue her?"

"That's not a fair way to put it. It was too late for her to be out."

"When did you discover this undeniable fact?"

"Just then."

"Not when you were taking her through the fair in lordly style?"

"No. There was no harm in the shows, and I realized the time only when the clock struck ten."

Every adult listener nodded approval. The adroit lawyer saw that he was merely strengthening the jury's good opinion of the boy. He must strike hard and unmercifully if he would shake their belief in Martin's good faith.

"There were several other children there--a boy named Bates, another named Beadlam, Mrs. Atkinson's three girls, and others?"

"Bates was with me. The others were in the yard."

"Ah, yes; they had left you a few minutes earlier. Now, is it not a fact that these children, and you with them, had gone to this hiding-place to escape being caught by your seniors?"

"No; it is a lie."

"Is that your honest belief? Do you swear it?"

"I shirked nothing. Neither did the others. Hundreds of people saw us. As for Miss Saumarez, I think she went there for a lark more than anything else."

"A questionable sort of lark. It is amazing to hear of respectable children being out at such an hour. Did your parents-- did the parents of any of the others realize what was going on?"

"I think not. The whole thing was an accident."

"But, surely, there must be some adequate explanation of this fight between you and Beckett-Smythe. It was no mere scuffle, but a severe set-to. He bears even yet the marks of the encounter."

Master Frank was supremely uncomfortable when the united gaze of the court was thus directed to him. His right eye was discolored, as all might see, but his nose was normal.

"I have told you the exact truth. I wished her to go home----"

"Did she wish it?"

"She meant to tease me, and said she would remain. Frank Beckett-Smythe and I agreed to fight, and settle whether she should go or stay."

"So you ask us to believe that not only did you engage in a bout of fisticuffs in order to convoy to her home a girl already hours too late abroad, but that you alone, of all these children, can give us a correct version of occurrences on the other side of the hedge?"

"I don't remember asking you that, sir," said Martin seriously, and the court laughed.

Mr. Stockwell betrayed a little heat.

"You know well what I mean," he said. "You are a clever boy. Are you not depending on your imagination for some of your facts?"

"I wish I were, sir," was the sorrowful answer.

Quite unconsciously, Martin looked at Betsy. Some magnetic influence caused her to raise her eyes for the first time, and each gazed into the soul of the other.

Mr. Stockwell covered his retreat by an assumption of indifference.

"Fortunately, there is a host of witnesses to be heard in regard to these particular events," he exclaimed, and Martin's inquisition ceased.

The superintendent whispered something to Mr. Dane, who rose.

"A great deal has been made out of this quarrel about a little girl," he said to the boy. "Is it not the fact that you have endeavored consistently to keep her name out of the affair altogether?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because Mrs. Saumarez is only a visitor here, and her daughter could not know anything of village ways. I was mostly to blame for allowing her to be there at all, so I tried to take it onto my shoulders."

It was interesting to note how Angele received this statement. Her black eyes became tearful. Her hero was rehabilitated. She worshiped him again passionately. Someone else had peached. She brushed away the tears and darted a quick look at the Squire's eldest son.

He was the next witness. He saw George Pickering and Kitty go down the garden, the man's arm being around Kitty's neck. Then he fought with Martin. Afterwards he heard some screaming, but could not tell a word that was said--he was too dazed.

"Is it not possible the hubbub was too confused that you should gain any intelligible idea of it?" asked Mr. Stockwell.

"Yes, that might be so."

"You are a bigger boy than young Bolland. Surely he could not pummel the wits out of you?"

"I don't think he will next time. He caught me a stinger by chance."

A roar of laughter greeted this candid confession of future intentions. Even Mr. Beckett-Smythe and the vicar joined in.

"Why did you wish to keep this girl, Angele Saumarez, away from her residence?"

"She's a jolly sort of girl, and I think we were all a bit off our heads," said Frank ruefully.

"But you had some motive, some design. Remember, you fought to retain her."

"I wish I hadn't," said the boy, glancing at his father. His most active memory was of a certain painful interview on Wednesday night.

"*You* were not groggy on your legs," was Mr. Stockwell's first remark to Ernest. "What did you hear or see beyond the garden hedge?"

"There was a lot of yelling, and two women ran toward the hotel. The woman with a knife was threatening to stick it into somebody, but I couldn't tell who."

"Ah. She was running after the other woman. Don't you think she might have been threatening her only?"

"It certainly looked like it."

"Can't you help us by being more definite?"

"No. Frank was asking for a pump. I was thinking of that more than of the beastly row in the garden."

He was dismissed.

"Angele Saumarez."

The strangers present surveyed the girl with expectant interest. She looked a delightfully innocent child. She was attired in the dark dress she wore on the Monday evening. Her hat, gloves, and shoes were in perfect taste. No personality could be more oddly at variance with a village brawl than this delicate, gossamer, fairy-like little mortal.

She gave her evidence without constraint or shyness. Her pretty continental accent enhanced the charm of her manners. In no sense forward, she won instant approbation, and the general view was that she had drifted into an unpleasant predicament by sheer force of circumstances. The mere love of fun brought her out to see the fair, and her presence in the stackyard was accounted for by a girlish delight in setting boys at loggerheads.

But she helped the police contention by declaring that she heard Betsy say:

"I'll swing for him."

"I remember," she said sweetly, "wondering what she meant. To swing for anybody! That is odd."

"Might it not have been 'for her' and not 'for him'?" suggested Mr. Stockwell.

"Oh, yes," agreed Angele. "I wouldn't be sure about that. They talk queerly, these people. I am certain about the 'swing'."

Really, there never was a more simple little maid.

"You must never again go out at night to such places," remarked the Coroner paternally.

She cast down her eyes.

"Mamma was very angry," she simpered. "I have been kept at home for days and days on account of it."

She glanced at Martin. That explanation was intended for him. As a matter of fact, Mr. Beckett-Smythe called at The Elms on Thursday morning and told Mrs. Saumarez that her child needed more control. He had thrashed Frank soundly the previous evening for riding off to a rendezvous fixed with Angele for nine o'clock. He whispered this information to Mr. Herbert, and the vicar's eyes opened wide.

The other non-professional witnesses, children and adults, did not advance the inquiry materially. Many heard Kitty shrieking that her sister had murdered George Pickering, but Kitty herself had admitted saying so under a misapprehension.

P. C. Benson raised an important point. The pitchfork was first mentioned about eleven o'clock, when Mr. Pickering was able to talk coherently, after being laid on a bed and drinking some brandy. Neither of the two women had spoken of it. And there were footprints that did not bear out the movements described in the dead man's deposition.

"But Mr. Pickering's first lucid thought referred to this implement?" said Mr. Stockwell.

"Neabody was holdin' him, sir."

The policeman imagined the lawyer had said "loosened."

"I mean that the first account he ever gave of this accident referred to the pitchfork, and his subsequent statements were to the same effect."

"Oah, yes. There's no denyin' that."

"And you found the fork lying exactly where he described its position?"

"Why, yes; but he was a desp'rate lang time i' studdyin' t' matter oot afore he's speak."

"Do you suggest that someone placed the fork there by his instructions?"

"Noa, sir. Most like he'd seen it there hissen."

"Then why do you refuse to accept his statement that an accident took place?"

"Because I fund his footprints where he ran across t' garden te t' spot where he was picked up."

"Footprints! After a month of fine weather!"

"It was soft mold, sir, an' they were plain enough."

"Were not a dozen men running about this garden at twenty minutes past ten?"

"Ay--quite that."

"And you tell us coolly that you could distinguish those of one man?"

"There was on'y one man's track i' that please, sir."

Benson was not to be flurried. Mr. Jonas and a police sergeant corroborated his opinion.

Dr. MacGregor followed. He described Pickering's wound, the nature of his illness, and the cause of death. The stab itself was not of a fatal character. Had it diverged slightly it must have reached the lung. As it was, the poison, not the knife, had done the mischief.

The county analyst was scientifically dogmatic. His analyses had been conducted with the utmost care. The knife was contaminated, the pitchfork was only rusty. The latter was a dangerous implement, but in no way responsible for the state of Pickering's blood corpuscles.

Mr. Dane, of course, made the most of these witnesses, but Mr. Stockwell wisely forbore from pressing them, and thus hammering the main items again into the heads of the jury.

The Coroner glanced at his watch. It was six o'clock. Neither of the solicitors was permitted to address the court, and he made up his mind to conclude the inquiry forthwith.

"There is one matter which might be cleared up," he said. "Where is Marshall, the groom?"

It was discovered that the man had left the court half an hour ago. He had not returned. P.C. Benson was sent to find him. The two came back in five minutes. Their arrival was heralded by loud shouts and laughter outside. When they entered the schoolroom Marshall presented a ludicrous spectacle. He was dripping wet, and not from rain, for his clothes were covered with slime and mud.

It transpired that he had gone to a public house for a pint of beer. Several men and youths who could not gain admittance to the court took advantage of the absence of the police and amused themselves by ducking him in a convenient horse pond.

The Coroner, having expressed his official annoyance at the incident, asked the shivering man if he followed Betsy into the garden.

No; he saw her go out through the back door.

"Then the threats you heard were uttered while she was in the passage of the hotel or in the kitchen?"

Yes; that was so.

"It is noteworthy," said the Coroner, "that none of the children heard this young woman going toward the couple. She must have run swiftly and silently down the path, and the witnesses were so absorbed in the fight that she passed them unheard and unseen."

Mr. Stockwell frowned. If this gave any indication of the Coroner's summing-up, it was not favorable to his client.

Dr. Magnus showed at once that he meant to cast aside all sentimental considerations and adhere solely to the judicial elements. He treated George Pickering's deposition with all respect, but pointed out that the dying man might be actuated by the desire to make atonement to the woman he had wronged. The human mind was capable of strange vagaries. A man who would slight, or, at any rate, be indifferent, to one of the opposite sex, when far removed from personal contact, was often swayed by latent ties of affection when brought face to face with the woman herself.

In a word, the Coroner threw all his weight on the side of the police and against Betsy. He regarded Fred Marshall and young Bolland as truthful witnesses, though inspired by different motives, and deemed the medical evidence conclusive.

Betsy sat sphinx-like through this ordeal. Her unhappy parents, and even more unhappy sister, were profoundly distressed, and Stockwell watched the jury keenly as each damning point against his client was emphasized.

"The law is quite clear in affairs of this kind," concluded Dr. Magnus gravely. "Either this unfortunate man was murdered, in which event your verdict can only take one form, or he met with an accident. Most fortunately, the last word does not rest with this court, or it would be impossible to close the inquiry to-day. The deceased himself raised a pertinent question: Why did his wife escape blood-poisoning, although he became infected? But the solicitors present apparently concur with me that this is a matter which must be determined elsewhere----"

"No, no," broke in Mr. Stockwell. "I admit nothing of the sort."

The Coroner bowed.

"You have the benefit of my opinion, gentlemen," he said to the jury. "You must retire now and consider your verdict."

The jury filed out into a classroom, an unusual proceeding, but highly expedient in an inquiry of such importance. Tongues were loosened instantly, and a hum of talk arose, while the witnesses signed their recorded statements. Kitty endeavored to arouse her sister from the condition of stupor in which she remained, and the girl's mother placed an arm around her shoulders. But Betsy paid little heed. Her mind dwelt on one object only--a sheet-covered form, lying cold and inanimate in a room of the neighboring hotel.

Angele sidled toward Martin when a movement in court permitted. Francoise would have restrained her, but the child slid along a bench so quickly that the nurse's protest came too late.

"Martin," she whispered, "you behaved beautifully. I was so angry with you at first. But it was not you. I know now. Evelyn Atkinson told."

"I wish it had never happened," said the boy bitterly. He hated the notion that his evidence was the strongest link in the chain encircling the hapless Betsy.

"Oh, I don't find it bad, this court. One is all pins and needles at first. But the men are nice."

"I am not thinking of ourselves," he growled.

"Tiens! Of whom, then?"

"Angele, you're awfully selfish. What have we to endure, compared with poor Mrs. Pickering?"

"Oh, pouf! That is her affair. Mamma beat me on Thursday. Beat me, look you! But I made her stop, oh, so quickly. Miss Walker pretends that mamma was ill. I know better, and so do you. I said if she hit me again----"

He caught her wrist.

"Shut up!" he said in a firm whisper.

"Don't. You are hurting me. Why are you so horrid? Do you want me to be beaten?"

"No; but how can you dare threaten your mother?"

"I would dare anything rather than be kept in the house--away from you."

Frank Beckett-Smythe, sitting near his father, was wondering dully why he had been such a fool as to incur severe penalties for the sake of this "silly kid," who was now ogling his rival and whispering coyly in that rival's ear. Martin was welcome to her, for all he cared. No girl was worth the uneasiness of the chair he occupied, for his father's hunting-crop had fallen with such emphasis that he felt the bruises yet.

The jury returned. They had been absent half an hour. Mr. Webster was flustered--that was perceptible instantly. He, as foreman, had to deliver the finding.

"Have you agreed as to your verdict?" said the Coroner.

"We have."

"And it is?"

"Not guilty!"

"What are you talking about? This is not a criminal court. You are asked to determine how George Pickering met his death."

"I beg pardon," stammered Mr. Webster. He turned anxiously to his colleagues. Some of them prompted him.

"I mean," he went on, "that our verdict is 'Accidental death.' That's it, sir. 'Accidental death,' I should hev said. Mr. Pickerin's own words----"

The Coroner frowned.

"It is an amazing verdict," he said. "I feel it my bounden duty----"

Mr. Stockwell, pale but determined, sprang to his feet.

"Do hear me for one moment!" he cried.

The Coroner did not answer, so the solicitor took advantage of the tacit permission.

"I will recognize that the police cannot let the matter rest here," he pleaded. "On your warrant they will arrest my client. Such a proceeding is unnecessary. In her present state of health it might be fatal. Surely it will suffice if you record your dissent and the inquiry is left to other authorities. I am sure that you, that Mr. Dane, will forgive the informality of my request. It arises solely from motives of humanity."

The Coroner shook his head.

"I am sorry, Mr. Stockwell, but I must discharge my duty conscientiously. The verdict is against the weight of evidence, and the ultimate decision rests with me, not with the jury. They have chosen deliberately to ignore my directions, and I have no option but to set aside their finding. I am compelled to issue a warrant charging your client with 'wilful murder.' Protests only render the task more painful, and I may point out that, under any circumstances, the date of arrest cannot be long deferred."

A howl of vehement indignation came from the packed court. Nearly everyone present sympathized with Betsy. They accepted George Pickering's dying declaration as final; they regarded the Coroner's attitude as outrageous.

For an instant the situation was threatening. It looked as though the people would wrest the girl from the hands of the police by main force. Old Mrs. Thwaites fainted, Kitty screamed dreadful words at the Coroner, and the girl's father sprawled across the table with his face in his hands and crying pitifully.

Mr. Beckett-Smythe rose, but none would listen. There was a scene of tense excitement. Already men were crowding to the center of the room, while an irresistible rush from outside drove a policeman headlong from the door.

Mr. Herbert strove to make himself heard, but an overwrought member of the jury bellowed:

"Mak' him record oor vardict, parson. What right hez he te go agean t' opinion o' twelve honest men?"

Solicitors and reporters gathered their papers hastily, fearing an instant onslaught on the Coroner, and someone chanced to step on Angele's foot as she clung in fright to Martin. The child squealed loudly; her toes had been squeezed under a heavy boot.

Francoise, whose broad Norman face depicted every sort of bewilderment at the tumult which had sprung up for some cause she in no way understood, rose at the child's cry of anguish, and incontinently flung two pressmen out of her path. She reached Angele and faced the crowd with splendid courage.

The voluble harangue she poured forth in French, her uncommon costume, and fierce gesticulations gained her a hearing which would have been denied any other person in the room, save, perhaps, Betsy. And Betsy was striving to bring her mother back to consciousness, without, however, departing in the least particular from her own attitude of stoic despair.

The Coroner availed himself of the momentary lull. Francoise paused for sheer lack of breath, and Dr. Magnus made his voice heard far out into the village street.

"Why all this excitement?" he shouted. "The jury's verdict will be recorded, but you cannot force me to agree with it. The police need not arrest Mrs. Pickering on my warrant at once. I hope they will not do so. Surely, as men of sense, you will not endeavor to defy the law? You are injuring this poor woman's cause by an unseemly turmoil. Make way, there, at the door, and allow Mrs. Pickering to escort her mother to the hotel. You are frightening women and children by your bluster."

Mr. Stockwell joined the superintendent in appealing to the crowd to disperse, and the crisis passed. In a few minutes the members of the Thwaites family were safe within the portals of the inn, and the schoolroom was empty of all save a few officials and busy reporters.

Francoise held fast to Angele, but the girl appealed to Martin to accompany her a little way. He yielded, though he turned back before reaching the vicarage.

"Mother and I are coming to tea to-morrow," she cried as they parted.

"All right," he replied. "Mind you don't vex her again."

"Not I. She will want to hear all about the inquest. It was as good as a play. Wasn't Francoise funny? Oh, I do wish you had understood her. She called the men 'sacres cochons d'Anglais!' It is so naughty in English."

On the green, and dotted about the roadway, excited groups discussed the lively episode in the schoolroom. They were rancorous against the Coroner, and not a few booed as he entered his carriage with Mr. Dane.

"Ay, they'd hang t' poor lass, t' pair of 'em, if they could," shouted a buxom woman.

"Sheam on ye!" screamed another. "I'll lay owt ye won't sleep soond i' yer beds te-night."

But these vaporings broke no bones, and the Coroner drove away, glad enough that so far as he was concerned a distasteful experience had ended.

The persistent rain soon cleared loiterers from the center of the village. John Bolland came to the farm while Martin was eating a belated meal.

"A nice deed there was at t' inquest, I hear," he said. "I don't know what's come te Elmsdale. It's fair smitten wi' a moral pestilence. One reads o' sike doin's i' foreign lands, but I nivver thowt te see 'em i' this law-abidin' counthry."

Then Martha flared up.

"Whea's i' t' fault?" she cried. "Can ye bleam t' folk for lossin' their tempers when a daft Crouner cooms here an' puts hissen up agean t' jury? If he had a bit o' my tongue, I'd teng (sting) him!"

So Elmsdale declared itself unhesitatingly on Betsy's side. A dead man's word carried more weight than all the law in the land.

CHAPTER XVI

UNDERCURRENTS

Undoubtedly the Coroner's expedient had prevented a riot in the village. The police deferred execution of the warrant, and Mr. Stockwell, recognizing the hopelessness of the situation, co-operated with them in making arrangements which would serve to allay public excitement.

The dead man was removed unobtrusively to his Nottonby residence on Sunday evening. Accompanying the hearse was a closed carriage in which rode Mrs. Pickering and Kitty. At the door of Wetherby Lodge, Mr. Stockwell met the cortege, and when the coffin was installed in the spacious library the solicitor introduced the weeping servants to their temporary mistress, since he and Mr. Herbert had decided that she ought to reside in the house for a time. Such a fact, when it became known, would help to mold public opinion.

An elderly housekeeper was minded to greet Betsy with bitter words. Her young master had been dear to her, and she had not scrupled earlier to denounce in scathing terms the woman who had encompassed his death.

But the sight of the wan, white face, the sorrow-laden eyes, the graceful, shrinking figure of the girl-widow, restrained an imminent outburst, and the inevitable reaction carried the housekeeper to the other extreme.

"How d'ye do, ma'am," she said brokenly. "'Tis a weary homecomin' ye've had. Mebbe ye'll be likin' a cup o' tea."

Betsy murmured that she had no wants, but Yorkshire regards food as a panacea for most evils, and the housekeeper bade one of the maids "put a kettle on."

So the ice was broken, and Mr. Stockwell breathed freely again, for he had feared difficulty in this quarter.

On Monday Pickering was buried, and the whole countryside attended the funeral, which was made impressive by the drumming and marching of the dead man's company of Territorials. On Tuesday morning a special sitting of the county magistrates was held in the local police court. Betsy attended with her solicitor, the Coroner's warrant was enforced, she was charged by the police with the murder of George Pickering, and remanded for a week in custody.

The whole affair was carried out so unostentatiously that Betsy was in jail before the public knew that she had appeared at the police court. In one short week the unhappy dairymaid had experienced sharp transitions. She had become a wife, a widow. She was raised from the condition of a wage-earner to the status of an independent lady, and taken from a mansion to a prison. Bereft of her husband by her own act and separated from friends and relatives by the inexorable decree of the law, she was faced by the uncertain issue of a trial by an impartial judge and a strange jury. Surely, the Furies were exhausting their spite on one frail creature.

On Sunday evening Mrs. Saumarez drove in her car through the rain to tea at the White House. She was alone. Her manner was more reserved than usual, though she shook hands with Mrs. Bolland with a quiet friendliness that more than atoned for the perceptible change in her demeanor. Her wonted air of affable condescension had gone. Her face held a new seriousness which the other woman was quick to perceive.

"I have come to have a little chat with you," she said. "I am going away soon."

The farmer's wife thought she understood.

"I'm rale sorry te hear that, yer leddyship."

"Indeed, I regret the necessity myself. But recent events have opened my eyes to the danger of allowing my child to grow up in the untrammelled freedom which I have permitted--encouraged, I may say. It breaks my heart to be stern toward her. I must send her to the South, where there are good schools, where others will fulfil obligations in which I have failed."

And, behold! Mrs. Saumarez choked back a sob.

"Eh, ma'am," cried the perturbed Martha, "there's nowt to greet aboot. T' lass is young eneuf yet, an' she's a bonny baim, bless her heart. We all hae te part wi' 'em. It'll trouble me sore when Martin goes away, but 'twill be for t' lad's good."

"You dear woman, you have nothing to reproach yourself with. I have. Your fine boy would never dream of rending your soul as Angele has rent mine to-day--all because I wished her to read an instructive book instead of a French novel."

"Mebbe you were a bit hard wi' her," said the older woman. "To be sure, ye wouldn't be suited by this nasty inquest; but is it wise to change all at once? Slow an' sure, ma'am, is better'n fast an' feckless. Where is t' little 'un now?"

"At home, crying her eyes out because I insisted that she should remain there."

"Ay, I reckon she'd be wantin' te see Martin."

"Do you think I may have been too severe with her?"

"It's not for t' likes o' me to advise a leddy like you, but yon bairn needs to be treated gently, for all t' wulld like a bit o' delicate chiney. Noo, when Martin was younger, I'd gie him a slap ower t' head, an' he'd grin t' minnit me back was turned. Your little gell is different."

"In my place, would you go back for her now?"

"No, ma'am, I wouldn't. That'd show weak. But I'd mek up for't te-morrow. Then she'll think all t' more o' yer kindness."

So the regeneration of Angele commenced. Was it too late? She was only a child in years. Surely there was yet time to mold her character in better shape. Mrs. Saumarez hoped so. She dried her tears, and, with Bolland's appearance, the conversation turned on the lamentable weather. She was surprised to hear that August was often an unsettled month, though this storm was not only belated but almost unprecedented in its severity.

Mr. Herbert went to Nottonby early next day. He attended the funeral, heard the will read at Wetherby Grange in the presence of some disappointed cousins of the dead man, visited Betsy to say a few consoling words, and drove back to the vicarage through the unceasing rain.

Tea awaited him in the drawing-room, but his first glance at Elsie alarmed him. Her face was flushed, her eyes red. She was a most woebegone little maid.

"My dear child," he cried, "what is the matter?"

"I want you--to forgive me--first," she stammered brokenly.

"Forgive you, my darling! Forgive you for what?"

"I've been--reading the paper."

He drew her to his knee.

"What crime is there in reading the paper, sweet one?"

"I mean that horrid inquest, father dear."

"Oh!"

The smiling wonder left his face. Elsie looked up timidly.

"I ought to have asked your permission," she said, "but you were away, and auntie has a headache, and Miss Holland (her governess) has gone on her holidays, and I was so curious to know what all the bother was about."

Yet he did not answer. Hitherto his daughter, his one cherished possession, had been kept sedulously from knowledge of the external world. But she was shooting up, slender and straight, the image of her dead mother. Soon she would be a woman, and it was no part of his theory of life that a girl should be plunged into the jungle of adult existence without a reasonable consciousness of its snares and pitfalls. So ideal were the relations of father and daughter that the vicar had deferred the day of enlightenment. It had come sooner than he counted on.

Elsie was frightened now. Her tears ceased and the flush left her cheeks.

"Are you very angry?" she whispered. He kissed her.

"No, darling, not angry, but just a little pained. It was an unpleasing record for your eyes. There, now. Give me some tea, and we'll talk about it. You may have formed some mistaken notions. Tell me what you thought of it all. In any case, Elsie, why were you crying?"

"I was so sorry for that poor woman. And why did the Coroner believe she killed her husband, when Mr. Pickering said she had not touched him?"

The vicar saw instantly that the girl had missed the more unpleasing phases of the tragedy. He smiled again.

"Bring me the paper," he said. "I was present at the inquest. Perhaps the story is somewhat garbled."

She obeyed. He cast a critical glance over the leaded columns, for the weekly newspaper had given practically a verbatim report of the evidence, and there was a vivid description of the scene in the schoolroom, with its dramatic close.

"It is by no means certain, from the evidence tendered, that the Coroner is right," said Mr. Herbert slowly. "In these matters, however, the police are compelled to sift all statements thoroughly, and the only legal way is to frame a charge. Although Mrs. Pickering may be tried for murder, it does not follow that she will be convicted."

"But," questioned Elsie, "Martin Bolland said he heard her crying out that she had killed Mr. Pickering?"

"He may have misunderstood."

"Just imagine him fighting with Frank, and about Angele Saumarez, too."

"You may take it from me that Martin behaved very well indeed. Angele is a little vixen, a badly behaved, spoilt child, I fear. Young Beckett-Smythe is a booby who encouraged her wilfulness. Martin thrashed him. It would have been far better had Martin not been there at all; but if he were my son I should still be proud of him."

The girl's face brightened visibly. There was manifest relief in her voice.

"I am so glad we've had this talk," she cried. "I--like Martin, and it did seem so odd that he should have been fighting about Angele."

"He knew she ought to be at home, and told her so. Frank interfered, and got punched for his pains. It served him right."

She helped herself to a large slice of tea-cake.

"I don't know why I was so silly as to cry--but--I really did think Mrs. Pickering was in awful trouble."

The vicar laid the paper aside. His innocent-minded daughter had not even given a thought to the vital issues of the affair. He breathed freely, and told her of the funeral. Nevertheless, he had failed to fathom the cause of those red eyes.

A servant clearing the tea-table bethought her of a note which came for Mr. Herbert some two hours earlier. She brought it from the study. It was from Mrs. Saumarez, inviting him and Elsie to luncheon next day.

"Angele will be delighted," she wrote, "if Elsie will remain longer than usual. It is dull for children to be cooped within doors during this miserable weather. I am asking Martin Bolland to join us for tea."

Mr. Herbert was a kind-hearted man, yet he wished most emphatically that Mrs. Saumarez had not proffered this request. To make an excuse for his daughter's non-attendance would convey a distinct slight which could only be interpreted in one way, after the publicity given to Angele's appearance at the inquest. He shirked the ordeal. Bother Angele!

He glanced covertly at Elsie. All unconscious of the letter's contents, the girl was looking out ruefully at the leaden sky. There might be no more picnics for weeks.

"Mrs. Saumarez has invited us to luncheon," he said.

"When?" she asked unconcernedly.

"To-morrow. She wishes you to spend the afternoon with Angele."

Elsie turned, with quick animation.

"I don't care to go," she said.

"Why not? You know very little about her."

"She seems to me--curious."

"Well, I personally don't regard her as a desirable companion for you. But there is no need to give offense, and it will not hurt you to meet her for an hour or so. Your friend Martin is coming, too."

"Oh," she cried, "that makes a great difference."

Her father laughed.

"Between you, you will surely manage to keep Angele out of mischief. And, now, my pet, what do you say to an hour with La Fontaine, while I attend to some correspondence? Where are my pupils?"

"They went for a long walk. Mr. Gregory said they would not be home until dinner-time."

Next morning, for a wonder, the clouds broke, and an autumn sun strove to cheer the scarred and drowned earth. Mrs. Saumarez met her guests with the unobtrusive charm of a skilled hostess. Angele, demure and shrinking, extended her hand to Elsie with a shy civility that was an exact copy of Elsie's own attitude.

During luncheon she behaved so charmingly and spoke with such sweet naturalness when any question was addressed to her that Mr. Herbert found himself steadily recasting his unfavorable opinion.

The conversation steered clear of any reference to the inquest. Mrs. Saumarez was a widely read and traveled woman, and versed in the art of agreeable small talk.

Once, in referring to Angele, she said smilingly:

"I have been somewhat selfish in keeping her with me always. But, now, I have decided that she must go to school. I'll winter in Brighton, with that object in view."

"Will you like that?" said the vicar to the child.

"I'll not like leaving mamma; but school, yes. I feel I want to learn a lot. I suppose Elsie is, oh, so clever?"

She peeped at the other girl under her long eyelashes, and made pretense of being awe-stricken by such eminent scholastic attainments in one of her own age.

"Elsie has learnt a good deal from books, but you have seen much more of the world. If you work hard, you will soon make up the lost ground."

"I'll try. I have been trying--all day yesterday! Eh, mamma?"

Mrs. Saumarez sighed.

"I ought to have engaged a governess," she said. "I cannot teach. I have no patience."

Mr. Herbert did not know that Angele's educational efforts of the preceding day consisted in a smug decorum that irritated her mother exceedingly. This luncheon party had been devised as a relief from Angele's burlesque. She termed it "jouer le bon enfant."

After the meal they strolled into the garden. The storm had played havoc with shrubs and flowers, but the graveled paths were dry, and the lawn was firm, if somewhat damp. Mrs. Saumarez had caused a fine swing to be erected beneath a spreading oak. It held two cushioned seats, and two propelling ropes were attached to a crossbar. It made swinging a luxury, not an exercise.

"By the way," cried Mrs. Saumarez to the vicar, "do you smoke?"

He pleaded guilty to a pipe.

"Then you can smoke a cigar. Françoise packed a box among my belongings--the remnants of some forgotten festivity in the Savoy. Do try one. If you like it, may I send you the others?"

The vicar discovered that the gift would be costly--nearly forty Villar y Villars, of exquisite flavor.

"Do you know that you are giving me five pounds?" he laughed.

"I never learn the price of these things. I am so glad they are good. You will enjoy them."

"It tickles a poor country vicar to hear you talk so easily of Lucullan feasts, Mrs. Saumarez. What must the banquet have been, when the cigars cost a half-crown each!"

"Oh, I am not hard up. Colonel Saumarez had only his army pay, but my estates lie near Hamburg, and you know how that port has grown of recent years."

"Do you never reside there?"

Mrs. Saumarez inclined a pink-lined parasol so that its reflected tint mingled with the rush of color which suffused her face. Had the worthy vicar given a moment's thought to the matter, he would have known that his companion wished she had bitten her tongue before it wagged so freely.

"I prefer English society to German," she answered, after a slight pause.

Oddly enough, this statement was literally true, but she dared not qualify it by the explanation that an autocratic government exacted heavy terms for permitting her to draw a large revenue from her Hamburg property.

Blissfully unaware of treading on anyone's toes, Mr. Herbert pursued the theme.

"In my spare hours I take an interest in law," he said. "Your marriage made you a British subject. Does German law raise no difficulty as to alien ownership of land and houses?"

"My family, the von Edelsteins, have great influence."

This time the vicar awoke to the fact that he might be deemed unduly inquisitive. He knew better than to apologize, or even change the subject abruptly.

"Land tenure is a complex business in old-established countries," he went on. "Take this village, for example. You may have noticed how every garth runs up the hillside in a long, narrow strip. Ownership of land bordering the moor carries the right of free grazing for a certain number of sheep, so every freeholder contrives to touch the heather at some point."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Saumarez, promptly interested, "that explains the peculiar shape of the Bolland land at the back of the White House. An admirable couple, are they not? And so medieval in their notions. I attended what they call a 'love feast' the other evening. John Bolland introduced me as 'Sister Saumarez.' When he became wrapped up in the service he reminded me, or, rather, filled my ideal, of a high priest in Israel."

"Was Eli Todd there?"

"The preacher? Yes."

"He is a fine fellow. Given to use a spiritual sledge-hammer, perhaps, but the implements of the Lord are many and varied. Far be it from me to gainsay the good work done by the dissenting congregations. If there were more chapels, there would be more churches in the land, Mrs. Saumarez."

They had strolled away from the girls, and little did the vicar dream what deeps they had skirted in their talk.

Angele led Elsie to the swing.

"Try this," she said. "It's just lovely to feel the air sizzing past your ears."

"I have a swing," said Elsie, "but not like this one. It is a single rope, with a little crossbar, which I hold in my hands and propel with my feet. It is hard work, I assure you."

"Grand Dieu! So I should think."

"Oh!" cried Elsie, "you shouldn't say that."

"Vous me faites rire! You speak French?"

"Yes--a little."

"How stupid of me not to guess. I can say what I like before Martin Bolland. He is a nice boy--Martin."

"Yes," agreed Elsie shortly.

She blushed. They were in the swing now, and swooping to and fro in long rushes. Angele's black eyes were searching Elsie's blue ones. She tittered unpleasantly.

"What makes you so red when I speak of Martin?" she demanded.

"I am not red--that is, I have no reason to be."

"You know him well?"

"Do you mean Martin?"

"Sapristi!--I beg your pardon--who else?"

"I--I have only met him twice, to speak to. I have known him by sight for years."

"Twice? The first time when he killed that thing--the cat. When was the second?"

Angele was tugging her rope with greater energy than might be credited to one of her slight frame. The swing was traveling at a great pace. Her fierce gaze disquieted Elsie, to whom this inquisition was irksome.

"Let us stop now," she said.

"No, no. Tell me when next you saw Martin. I *must* know."

"But why?"

"Because he became different in his manner all at once. One day he kissed me----"

"Oh, you *are* horrid."

"I swear it. He kissed me last Wednesday afternoon. I did not see him again until Saturday. Then he was cold. He saw you after Wednesday."

By this time Elsie's blood was boiling.

"Yes," she said, and the blue in her eyes held a hard glint. "He saw me on Wednesday night. We happened to be standing at our gate. Frank Beckett-Smythe passed on his bicycle. He was chased by a groom--sent home to be horsewhipped--because he was coming to meet you."

"O la la!" shrilled Angele. "That was nine o'clock. Does papa know?"

Poor Elsie crimsoned to the nape of her neck. She wanted to cry--to slap this tormentor's face. Yet she returned Angele's fiery scrutiny with interest.

"Yes," she said with real heat. "I told him Martin came to our house, but I said nothing about Frank--and you. It was too disgraceful."

She jerked viciously at her rope to counteract the pull given by Angele. The opposing strains snapped the crossbar. Both ropes fell, and with them the two pieces of wood. One piece tapped Angele somewhat sharply on the shoulder, and she uttered an involuntary cry.

The vicar and Mrs. Saumarez hurried up, but the swing stopped gradually. Obviously, neither of the girls was injured.

"You must have been using great force to break that stout bar," said Mr. Herbert, helping Angele to alight.

"Yes. Elsie and I were pulling against each other. But we had a lovely time, didn't we, Elsie?"

"I think I enjoyed it even more than you," retorted Elsie. The elders attributed her excited demeanor to the accident.

"If the ropes were tied to the crossbeam, they would be safer, and almost as effective," said the vicar. "Ah! Here comes Martin. Perhaps he can put matters right."

"I don't want to swing any more," vowed Elsie.

"But Martin will," laughed Angele. "We can swap partners. That will be jolly, won't it?"

Blissfully unaware of the thorns awaiting him, the boy advanced. To be candid, he was somewhat awkward in manner. He did not know whether to shake hands all round or simply doff his cap to the entire company. Moreover, he noted Elsie's presence with mixed feelings, for Mrs. Saumarez's note had merely invited him to tea. There was no mention of other visitors. He was delighted, yet suspicious. Elsie and Angele were flint and steel. There might be sparks.

Mrs. Saumarez rescued him from one horn of the dilemma. She extended a hand and asked if Mr. Bolland were not pleased that the rain had ceased.

"Now, Martin," said the vicar briskly, "shin up the pole and tie the ropes to the center-piece. These strong-armed giantesses have smashed a chunk of timber as thick as your wrist. Don't allow either of them to hit you. They'll pulverize you at a stroke."

"I fear it was I who broke it," admitted Elsie.

"Then it is you he must beware of."

The vicar, in the midst of this chaff, gave Martin a "leg-up" the pole, and repairs were effected.

When the swing was in order he slid to the ground. Mr. Herbert resumed the stroll with Mrs. Saumarez. There was an awkward pause before Martin said:

"You girls get in. I'll start you."

He spoke collectively, but addressed Elsie. He wondered why her air was so distant.

"No, thank you," she said. "I've done damage enough already."

"Martin," murmured Angele, "she is furious because I said you kissed me."

This direct attack was a crude blunder. Mischievous and utterly unscrupulous though the girl was, she could not measure this boy's real strength of character. The great man is not daunted by great difficulties—he grapples with them; and Martin had in him the material of greatness. He felt at once that he must now choose irrevocably between the two girls, with a most unpromising chance of ever again recovering lost ground with one of them. He did not hesitate an instant.

"Did you say that?" he demanded sternly.

"Ma foi! Isn't it true?"

"The truth may be an insult. You had no right to thrust your schemes into Elsie's knowledge."

"My schemes, you—you pig. I spit at you. Isn't it true?"

"Yes--unfortunately. I shall regret it always."

Angele nearly flew at him with her nails. But she contrived to laugh airily.

"Eh bien, mon cher Martin! There will come another time. I shall remember."

"There will come no other time. You dared me to it. I was stupid enough to forget--for a moment."

"Forget what?"

"That there was a girl in Elmsdale worth fifty of you--an English girl, not a mongrel!"

It was a boyish retort, feeble, unfair, but the most cutting thing he could think of. The words were spoken in heat; he would have recalled them at once if that were possible, but Angele seized the opening with glee.

"That's you!" she cried, stabbing her rival with a finger. "Parbleu! I'm a mixture, half English, half German, but really bad French!"

"Please don't drag me into your interesting conversation," said Elsie with bitter politeness.

"I am sorry I said that," put in the boy. "I might have had two friends. Now I have lost both."

He turned. His intent was to quit the place forthwith. Elsie caught his arm with an alarmed cry.

"Martin," she almost screamed, "look at your left hand. It is covered with blood!"

Surprised as she, he raised his hand. Blood was streaming down the fingers.

"It's nothing," he said coolly. "I must have opened a deep cut by climbing the swing."

"Quelle horreur!" exclaimed Angele. "I hate blood!"

"I'm awfully sorry--" began Martin.

"Nonsense! Come at once to the kitchen and have it bound up," said Elsie.

They hurried off together. Angele did not offer to accompany them. Martin glanced at Elsie through the corner of his eye. Her set mouth had relaxed somewhat. Anger was yielding to sympathy.

"I was fighting another wildcat, so was sure to get scratched," he whispered.

"You needn't have kissed it, anyhow," she snapped.

"That, certainly, was a mistake," he admitted.

She made no reply. Once within the house she removed the stained bandage without flinching from the ugly sight of half-healed scars, one of which was bleeding profusely. Cold water soon stopped the outflow, and one of the maids procured some strips of linen, with which Elsie bound the wound tightly.

They had a moment to themselves in recrossing the hall. Martin ventured to touch the girl's shoulder.

"Look here, Elsie," he said boldly, "do you forgive me?"

Something in his voice told her that mere verbal fencing would be useless.

"Yes," she murmured with a wistful smile. "I'll forgive, but I can't forget--for a long time."

On the lawn they encountered Mrs. Saumarez. Learning from Angele why the trio had dispersed so suddenly, she was coming to attend to Martin herself.

The vicar joined them.

"Really," he said, "some sort of ill luck is attached to that swing to-day."

And then Francoise appeared, to tell them that tea was ready.

"What curious French she talks," commented the smiling Elsie.

"Yes," cried Angele tartly. "Bad French, eh? And I know heaps and heaps of it."

She caught Mr. Herbert's eye, and added an excuse:

"I'm going to change all that. People think I'm naughty when I speak like a domestic. And I really don't mean anything wrong."

"We all use too much slang," said the tolerant-minded vicar. "It is sheer indolence. We refuse to bother our brains for the right word."



CHAPTER XVII

TWO MOORLAND EPISODES

Though all hands were needed on the farm in strenuous endeavor to repair the storm's havoc, Dr. MacGregor forbade Martin to work when he examined the reopened cut. Thus, the boy was free to guide Fritz, the chauffeur, on the morning the man came to look at Bolland's herd.

Fritz Bauer--that was the name he gave--had improved his English pronunciation marvelously within a fortnight. He no longer confused "d's" and "t's." He had conquered the sibilant sound of the "s." He was even wrestling with the elusive "th," substituting "d" for "z."

"I learnt from a book," he explained, when Martin complimented him on his mastery of English. "Dat is goot--no, good--but one trains de ear only in de country where de people spik--speak--de language all de time."

The sharp-witted boy soon came to the conclusion that his German friend was more interested in the money value of the cattle as pedigreed stock than in the "points"--such as weight, color, bone, level back, and milking qualities--which commended them to the experienced eye. Bauer asked where he could obtain a show catalogue, and jotted down the printer's address. When they happened on a team of Cleveland bays, however, Fritz was thoroughly at home, and gratified his hearer by displaying a horseman's knowledge of a truly superb animal.

"Dey are light, yet strong," he said, his eyes roving from high-set withers to shapely hocks and clean-cut fetlocks. "Each could pull a ton on a bad road--yes?"

Martin laughed. He was blind to the cynical smile called forth by his amusement.

"A ton? Two tons. Why, one day last winter, when a pair of Belgians couldn't move a loaded lorry in the deep snow, my father had the man take out both of 'em, and Prince walked away with the lot."

"So?" cried the German admiringly.

"But you understand horses," went on Martin. "Yet I've read that men who drive motors don't care for anything else, as a rule."

"Ah, dat reminds me," said the other. "It is a fine day. Come wid me in de machine."

"That'll be grand," said Martin elatedly. "Can you take it out?"

"Oh, yes. Any time I--dat is, I'll ask Mrs. Saumarez, and she will permit--yes."

Quarter of an hour later the chauffeur was explaining, in German, that he was going into the country for a long spin, and Mrs. Saumarez was listening, not consenting.

"Going alone?" she inquired languidly.

"No, madam," he answered. "Martin Bolland will come with me."

"Why not take Miss Angele?"

The man smiled.

"I want the boy to talk," he explained.

Mrs. Saumarez nodded. She treated the matter with indifference. Not so Angele, who heard the car purring down the drive, and inquired Fritz's errand. She was furious when her mother blurted out the news that Martin would accompany Bauer.

"Ce cochon d'Allemand!" she stormed, her long lashes wet with vexed tears. "He has done that purposely. He knew I wanted to go. But I'll get even with him! See if I don't."

"Angele!" and Mrs. Saumarez reddened with annoyance; "if ever you say a word about such matters to Fritz I'll pack you off to school within the hour. I mean it, so believe me."

Angele stamped a rebellious foot, but curbed her tongue and vanished. She ran all the way to the village and was just in time to see the Mercedes bowling smoothly out of sight, with Martin seated beside the chauffeur. She was so angry that she stamped again in rage, and Evelyn Atkinson came from the inn to inquire the cause. But Angele snubbed her,

bought some chocolates from Mr. Webster, and never offered the other girl a taste.

It happened that Martin, for his part, had suggested a call at the vicarage. Fritz vetoed the motion promptly.

"Impossible!" he grinned. "I had to dodge de odder one, yes."

Evidently Fritz had kept both eyes and ears open.

They headed for the moors. Wise Martin had counseled a slow speed in the village to allay Mrs. Bolland's dread of a new-fangled device which she "couldn't abide"; but once on the open road the car breasted a steep hill at a rate which the boy thought neck-breaking.

"Dat is nodding," said Fritz nonchalantly. "Twenty--twenty-five. Wait till we are on de level. Den I show you fifty."

Within six minutes Martin flew past Mrs. Summersgill's moor-edge farm. Never before had he reached that point in less than half an hour. The stout party was in the porch, peeling potatoes for the midday meal. She lifted her hands in astonishment as her young friend sped by. Martin waved a greeting. He could almost hear her say:

"That lad o' Bolland's must ha' gone clean daft. I'm surprised at Martha te let him ride i' such a conthraption."

On the hedgeless road of the undulating moor, even after the ravages of the gale, fifty miles an hour was practicable for long stretches. Fritz was a skilled driver. He seemed to have a sixth sense which warned him of rain-gullies, and slowed up to avoid straining the car. He began explaining the mechanism, and halted on the highest point of a far-flung tableland to lift the bonnet and show the delighted boy the operations of the Otto cycle. In those days the self-starter was unknown, but Martin found he could start the heated engine without any difficulty. Fritz permitted him to drive slowly, and taught him the use of the brakes. Finally, this most agreeable Teuton produced a packet of sandwiches. He was in no hurry to return.

"Dese farms," he said, pointing to a low-built house with tiled roof, and a cluster of stables and haymows, "dey do not raise stock, eh? Only little sheep?"

"They all keep milk-cows, and bring butter to the market, so they often have calves and yearlings," was the ready answer.

"And horses?"

"Always a couple, and a nag for counting the sheep."

"How many sheep?"

"Never less than a hundred. Some flocks run to three or four hundred."

"Ah. Where are dey?"

Martin, proud of his knowledge, indicated the position and approximate distance of the hollows, invisible for the most part, in which lay the larger holdings.

"Do you understand a map?" inquired Fritz.

"Yes. I love maps. They tell you everything, when you can read them properly."

"Not everyding," and the man smiled. "Some day I want to visit one of dose big farms. Can you mark a few?"

He spread an Ordnance map--a clean sheet--and gave his guide a pencil. Soon Martin had dotted the paper with accurate information, such as none but one reared in that wild country could have supplied. He was eager to prove his familiarity with a map, and followed each bend and twist of the prehistoric glacier beds, where the lowland becks had their origin. He was not "showing off" before a foreigner. He loved this brown moor and was only too pleased to have found a sympathetic listener.

"The heather is losing its color now," he said, pausing for a moment in his task. "You ought to see it early in August, when it is all one mass of purple flowers, with here and there a bunch of golden gorse--'whin,' we call it. Our moor is almost free from bog-holes, so you can walk or ride anywhere with safety. I have often thought what a fine place it would be for an army."

"Wass ist das?" cried Fritz sharply. He corrected the slip with a laugh. "An army?" he went on, though his newly acquired accent escaped him. "Vot woot an army pe toing here?"

"Oh, just a camp, you know. We hold maneuvers every year in England."

"Yez. You coot pud all your leedle army on dis grount. Bud dere iss von grade tefecd. Dere iss no water. A vell, in eej farm, yez, bud nod enough for a hundret dousand men, und de horses of four divisions."

This point of view was novel to the boy. He knit his brows.

"I hadn't thought of that," he confessed. "But, wait a bit. There's far more water here than you would imagine. Stocks have to be watered, you know. Some of the farmers dam the becks. Why, in the Dickenson place over there," and out went a hand, "they have quite a large reservoir, with trout in it. You'd never guess it existed, if you weren't told."

Fritz nodded. He had turned against the breeze to shield a match for a cigarette, and his face was hidden.

"You surprise me," he murmured, speaking slowly and with care again. "And dere are odders, you say?"

"Five that I know of. Mrs. Walker, at the Broad Ings, rears hundreds of ducks on her pond."

Fritz took the map and pencil.

"You show me," he chuckled. "I write an essay on Yorkshire moor farms, and perhaps earn a new suit of clo'es, yes? Our Cherman magazines print dose tings."

That same afternoon a party of guns on a Scottish moor had been shooting driven grouse flying low and fast over the butts before a strong wind. The sportsmen, five in number, were all experts. Around each shelter, with its solitary marksman and his attendant loader, lay a deep crescent of game, every bird shot cleanly.

The last drive of the day was the most successful. One man, whose bronzed skin and military bearing told his profession, handed the empty 12-bore to the gillie when the line of beaters came over the crest of the hill, and betook himself, filling his pipe the while, to a group of ponies waiting on the moorland road in the valley beneath.

He joined another, the earliest arrival.

"Capital ground, this," he said. "I don't know whose lot is the more enviable, Heronsdale--yours, who have the pains as well as the pleasure of ownership, or that of wandering vagabonds like myself whom you make your guests."

Lord Heronsdale smiled.

"You may call yourself a wandering vagabond, Grant--the envy rests with me," he said. "It's all very well to have large estates, but I feel like degenerating into a sort of head gamekeeper and farm bailiff combined. Of course, I'm proud of Cairn-corrie, yet I pine sometimes for the excitement of a life that does not travel in grooves."

The other shook his head.

"Don't tempt fate," he said. "My life has been spent among the outer beasts. It isn't worth it. For a few years of a man's youth, yes--perhaps. But I am forty, and I live in a club. There, you have my career in a nutshell."

"There is a fine kernel within. By Gad! Grant, why don't you pretend I meant that pun? I didn't, but I'll claim it at dinner. Gad, it's fine!"

Colonel Grant laughed. His mirth had a pleasant, wholesome ring.

"If you bribe me with as good a berth to-morrow," he said, "I'll give you the chance of throwing it off spontaneously during the first lull in the conversation. The best impromptus are always prepared beforehand, you know."

Others came up. The shooters mounted, and the wise ponies picked their way with cautious celerity over an uneven track. Colonel Grant again found himself riding beside his host.

"Tell you what," said Lord Heronsdale suddenly, "you're a bit of an enigma, Grant."

"I have often been told that."

"Gad, I don't doubt it. A chap like you, with five thousand a year, to chuck the Guards for the Indian Staff Corps, exchange town for the Northwest frontier, go in for potting Afghans instead of running a drag to Sandown; and, to crown all, remain a bachelor. I don't understand it."

"Yet, ten minutes ago you were growling about the monotony of existence at Cairn-corrie and half a dozen other places."

"Not even a *tu quoque* like that explains the mystery."

"Some day I'll tell you all about it. When the time comes I must ask Lady Heronsdale to find me a nice wife, with a warranty."

"Gad, that's the job for Mollie. *She'll* put the future Mrs. Grant through her paces. You're not flying off to India again, then?"

"No. I heard last week that a post is to be found for me in the Intelligence Department."

"Capital! You'll soon have a K. before the C. B."

"Possibly. Some fellows wear themselves to the bone in trying for those things. My scheming for years has been to avoid the humdrum of cantonment life. And, behold! I am spotted for promotion. I don't know how the deuce they ever heard of me in Pall Mall."

"Gad! Don't you read the papers?"

"Never."

"My dear fellow, they were full of you last year. That march through the snow, pulling those guns through the pass, the final relief of the fort--Gad, Molly has the cuttings. She'll show 'em to you after dinner."

"I sincerely hope Lady Heronsdale will do no such thing. Why on earth does she keep such screeds?"

His lordship dropped his bantering air.

"Do you really imagine, Grant," he said seriously, "that either she or I will ever forget what you did for Arthur at Peshawar?"

The other man reddened.

"A mere schoolboy episode," he growled.

"Yes, in a sense. Yet Arthur told me that he had a revolver in his pocket when you met him that night at the mess and persuaded him to leave the business in your hands. You saved our boy, Grant. Gad, ask Mollie what she thinks!"

"Has he been steady since?"

"A rock, my dear chap--adamant where women are concerned. His mother is beginning to worry about him; he wouldn't look at Helen Forbes, and Madge Bolingbrooke does her skirt-dances in vain. Both deuced nice girls, too."

Colonel Grant had navigated the talk into a safe channel, and kept it there. He never spoke of the past.

At dinner a man asked him if he was reading the Elmsdale sensation. He had not even heard of it, so the tale of Betsy and George Pickering, of Martin Bolland and Angele Saumarez was poured into his ears.

"I am interested," said his neighbor, "because I knew poor Pickering. He hunted regularly with the York and Ainsty."

"Saumarez!" murmured Colonel Grant. "I once met a man of that name. He was shot on the Modder River."

"This girl may be his daughter. The paper describes her mother as a lady of independent means, visiting the moors for her health."

"Poor Saumarez! From what I remember of his character, the child must be a chip of the same block--he was an irresponsible daredevil, a terror among women. But he died gallantly."

"There's a lot about her in the local paper, which reached me this morning. Would you care to see it?"

"Newspapers are so inaccurate. They never know the facts."

Yet the colonel, not caring to play bridge, asked later for the loan of the journal named by his informant, and read therein the story of the village tragedy. As fate willed it, the writer was the reporter of the *Messenger*, and his account was replete with local knowledge.

Yes, Mrs. Saumarez was the widow of Colonel Saumarez, late of the Hussars. But--what was this?

"Martin Court Bolland, a bright-faced boy, of an intelligence far greater than one looks for in rustic youth, has himself a somewhat romantic history. He is the adopted son of the sturdy yeoman whose

name he bears. Mr. and Mrs. Bolland were called to London thirteen years ago to attend the funeral of the farmer's brother. One evening while seeing the sights of the great metropolis they found themselves in Ludgate Hill. They were passing the end of St. Martin's Court, when a young woman named Martineau----"

The colonel laid aside his cigar and twisted his body sideways, so that the light of the billiard-room lamps should fall clearly on the paper yet leave his face in the shade.

"--a young woman named Martineau threw herself, with a baby in her arms, from the fourth story of a house in the court, and was killed by the fall. The baby's frock was caught by a projecting sign, and the child hung perilously in air. John Bolland, whose strong, stern face reveals a character difficult to surprise, impossible to daunt, jumped forward and caught the tiny mite as it dropped a second time. Mrs. Bolland still treasures a letter written by the infant's unhappy mother, and prizes to the utmost the fine boy whom she and her husband adopted from that hour. The old couple are childless, though with Martin calling them 'father' and 'mother,' they would scoff at the statement. This, then, is the well-knit, fearless youngster who fought the squire's son on that eventful night, and whose evidence is of the utmost importance in the police theory of crime, as opposed to accident."

Colonel Grant went steadily through the neat sentences on which the *Messenger* correspondent prided himself. He was a man of bronze; he showed no more emotion than a statue, though the facts staring from the printed page might well have produced external signs of the tempest which sprang into instant being in his soul.

He read each line of descriptive matter and report. For the sorrows of Betsy, the final daring of George Pickering, he had no eyes. It was the boy he sought in the living record: the boy who fought young Beckett-Smythe to rescue the thoughtless child--for so Angele figured in the text; the boy who repudiated with scorn the solicitor's suggestion that he formed part and parcel of the crowd of urchins gathered in the hotel yard; the farmer's adopted son, who spoke so fearlessly and bore himself so well that the newspaper noted his intelligence, his bright looks.

At last Colonel Grant laid down the sheet and lighted a fresh cigar. He smoked for a few minutes, watching the pool players, and declining an invitation to join in the game. He seemed to be planning some line of action; soon he went to the library and unrolled a large scale map of England. He found Nottonby--Elmsdale was too small a place to be denoted--and, after consulting a railway timetable, wrote a long telegram.

These things accomplished, he seized an opportunity to tell Lord Heronsdale that business of the utmost importance would take him away by the first train next morning.

Of course, his host was voluble in protestations, so the soldier explained matters.

"You asked me to-day," he said, "why I turned my back on town thirteen years ago. I meant telling you at a more convenient season. Will it suffice now to say that a kindred reason tears me away from your moor?"

"Gad, I hope there is nothing wrong. Can I help?"

"Yes; by letting me go. You will be here until October. May I return?"

"My dear Grant----"

So they settled it that way.

About three o'clock on the second day after the colonel's departure from Cairn-corrie he and an elderly man of unmistakably legal appearance walked from Elmsdale station to the village. The station master, forewarned, had procured a dogcart from the "Black Lion," but the visitors preferred dispatching their portmanteaux in the vehicle, and they followed on foot.

Thus it happened--as odd things do happen in life--that the two men met a boy walking rapidly from the village, and some trick of expression in his face caused the colonel to halt him with a question:

"Can you tell me where the 'Black Lion' inn is?"

"Yes, sir. On the left, just beyond the bend in the road."

"And the White House Farm?"

The village youth looked at the speaker with interest.

"On the right, sir; after you cross the green."

"Ah!"

The two men stood and stared at Martin, who was dressed in a neat blue serge suit, obtained by post from York, the wildcat having ruined its predecessor. The older man, who reminded the boy of Mr. Stockwell, owing to the searching clearness of his gaze, said not a word; but the tall, sparsely-built soldier continued--for Martin civilly awaited his pleasure--

"Is your name, by any chance, Martin Court Bolland?"

The boy smiled.

"It is, sir," he said.

"Are you--can you--that is, if you are not busy, you might show us the inn--and the farm?"

The gentleman seemed to have a slight difficulty in speaking, and his eyes dwelt on Martin with a queer look in them; but the answer came instantly:

"I'm sorry, sir; but I am going to the vicarage to tea, and you cannot possibly miss either place. The inn has a signpost by the side of the road, and the White House stands by itself on a small bank about a hundred and fifty yards farther down the village."

The older gentleman broke in:

"That will be our best course, Colonel. We can easily find our way--alone."

The hint in the words was intended for the ears that understood. Colonel Grant nodded, yet was loath to go.

"Is the vicar a friend of yours?" he said to Martin.

"Yes, sir. I like him very much."

"Does a Mrs. Saumarez live here?"

"Oh, yes. She is at the vicarage now, I expect."

"Indeed. You might tell her you met a Colonel Grant, who knew her husband in South Africa. You will not forget the name, eh--Grant?"

"Of course not, sir."

Martin surveyed the stranger with redoubled attention. A live colonel is a rare sight in a secluded village. The man, seizing any pretext to prolong the conversation, drew out a pocketbook.

"Here is my card," he said. "You need not give it to Mrs. Saumarez. She will probably recognize my name."

The boy glanced at the pasteboard. It read:

Lieut.-Col. Reginald Grant,
"Indian Staff Corps."

Now, it chanced that among Martin's most valued belongings was a certain monthly publication entitled "Recent British Battles," and he had read that identical name in the July number. As was his way, he remembered exactly the heroic deeds with which a gallant officer was credited, so he asked somewhat shyly:

"Are you Colonel Grant of Aliwal, sir?"

He pronounced the Indian word wrongly, with a short "a" instead of a long one, but never did misplaced accent convey sweeter sound to man's ears. The soldier was positively startled.

"My dear boy," he cried, "how can you possibly know me?"

"Everyone knows your name, sir. No fear of me forgetting it now."

The honest admiration in those brown eyes was a new form of flattery; for the first time in his life Colonel Grant hungered for more.

"You have astonished me more than I can tell," he said. "What have you read of the Aliwal campaign? All right, Dobson. We are in no hurry." This to his companion, who ventured on a mild remonstrance.

"I have a book, sir, which tells you all about Aliwal"--this time Martin pronounced the word correctly; no wonder the newspaper commented on his intelligence--"and it has pictures, too. There is a grand picture of you, riding through the gate of the fort, sword in hand. Do you mind me saying, sir, that I am very pleased to have met you?"

The man averted his eyes. He dared not look at Martin. He made pretense to bite the end off a cigar. He was compelled to do something to keep his lips from trembling.

"I hope we shall meet often again, Martin," he said slowly. "I'll tell you more than the book does, though I have not read it. Run off to your friends at the vicarage. Good-by!"

He held out his hand, which the boy shook diffidently. There was no doubt whatever in Martin's mind that Colonel Grant was an extraordinarily nice gentleman.

"My God, Dobson!" cried the soldier, turning again to look after the alert figure of the boy; "I have seen him, spoken to him--my own son! I would know him among a million."

"He certainly bears a marked resemblance to your own photograph at the same age," admitted the cautious solicitor.

"And what a fine youngster! By Jove, did you twig the way he caught on to the pronunciation of Aliwal? Bless that book! It shall be bound in the rarest leather, though I never rode through that gate--I ran, for dear life! I--I tell you what, Dobson, I'd sooner do it now than face these people, the Bollands, and explain my errand. I suppose they worship him."

"The position differs from my expectations," said the solicitor. "The boy does not talk like a farmer's son. And he is going to tea at the vicarage with a lady of good social position. Can the Bollands be of higher grade than we are led to believe?"

"The newspaper is my only authority. Ah, here is the 'Black Lion.'"

Mrs. Atkinson bustled forward to assure the gentlemen that she could accommodate them. Colonel Grant was allotted the room in which George Pickering died! It was the best in the hotel. He glanced for a moment through the window and took in the scene of the tragedy.

"That must be where the two young imps fought," he murmured, with a smile, as he looked into the yard. "Gad! as Heronsdale says, I'd like to have seen the battle. And my boy whipped the other chap, who was bigger and older, the paper said."

Soon the two men were climbing the slight acclivity on which stood the White House. The door stood hospitably open, as was ever the case about tea-time in fine weather. In the front kitchen was Martha, alone.

The colonel advanced.

"Is Mr. Bolland at home?" he asked, raising his hat.

"Noa, sir; he isn't. But he's on'y i' t' cow-byre. If it's owt important----"

He followed her meaning sufficiently.

"Will you oblige me by sending for him? And--er--is Mrs. Bolland here?"

"I'm Mrs. Bolland, sir."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. Of course, I did not know you."

He thought he would find a much younger woman. Martha, in the close-fitting sunbonnet, with its wide flaps, her sleeves rolled up, and her outer skirt pinned behind to keep it clear of the dirt during unceasing visits to dairy and hen-roosts, looked even older than she was, her real age being fifty-five.

"Will you kindly be seated, gentlemen?" she said. She was sure they were county folk come about the stock. Her husband's growing reputation as a breeder of prize cattle brought such visitors occasionally. She wondered why the taller stranger asked for her, but he said no more, taking a chair in silence.

She dispatched a maid to summon the master.

"Hev ye coom far?" she asked bluntly.

Colonel Grant looked around. His eyes were searching the roomy kitchen for tokens of its occupants' ways.

"We traveled from Darlington to Elmsdale," he said, "and walked here from the station."

"My goodness, ye'll be fair famished. Hev summat te eat. There's plenty o' tea an' cakes; an' if ye'd fancy some ham an' eggs----"

"Pray do not trouble, Mrs. Bolland," said the colonel when he had grasped the full extent of the invitation. "We wish to have a brief talk with you and your husband. Afterwards, if you ask us, we shall be most pleased to accept your hospitality."

He spoke so genially, with such utter absence of affectation, that Martha rather liked him. Yet, what could she have to do with the business in hand? Anyhow, here came John, crossing the road with heavy strides.

The farmer paused just within the threshold. His huge frame filled the doorway. He wore spectacles for reading only, and his deep-sunken eyes rested steadily, first on Colonel Grant, then on the solicitor. Then they went back to the colonel and did not leave him again.

"Good day, gentlemen," he said. "What can I dea for ye?"

The man who stormed forts on horseback--in pictures--quailed at the task before him. He nodded to the solicitor.

"Dobson," he said, "you know all the circumstances. Oblige me by stating them fully."

The solicitor, who seemed to expect this request, produced a bulky packet of papers and photographs. He prefaced his explanation by giving his companion's name and rank, and introduced himself as a member of the firm of Dobson, Son and Smith, Solicitors, of Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"Fifteen years ago," he went on, "Colonel Grant was a subaltern, a junior officer, in the Guards, stationed in London. A slight accident one day outside a railway station led him to make the acquaintance of a young lady. She was hurrying to catch a train, when she was knocked down by a frightened horse, and might have been injured seriously were it not for Lieutenant Grant's prompt assistance. He escorted her to her lodgings, and discovered that she was what is known in London as a daily governess--in other words, a poor, well-educated woman striving to earn a respectable living. The horse had trampled on her foot, and she required proper attention and rest; a brief interview with her landlady enabled Mr. Grant to make the requisite arrangements, unknown to the young lady herself. He called a week later and found that she was quite recovered. She was a very beautiful girl, of a lively disposition, only twenty years of age, and working hard in her spare time to perfect herself as a musician. She had no idea of the social rank of her new friend, or perhaps matters might have turned out differently. As it was, they met frequently, became engaged, and were married. I have here a copy of the marriage certificate."

He selected a long, narrow strip of blue paper from the documents he had placed before him on the kitchen table. He opened it and offered it to Bolland, as though he wished the farmer to examine it. John did not move. He was still looking intently at Colonel Grant.

Martha, all a-flutter, with an indefinite anxiety wrinkling the corners of her eyes, said quickly:

"What might t' young leddy's neam be, sir?"

"Margaret Ingram. She was of a Gloucestershire family, but her parents were dead, and she had no near relatives."

Martha cried, somewhat tartly:

"An' what hez all this te dea wi' us, sir?"

"Let be, wife. Bide i' patience. T' gentleman will tell us, nea doot."

John's voice was hard, almost dissonant. The solicitor gave him a rapid glance. That harsh tone boded ill for the smooth accomplishment of his mission. Martha wondered why her husband gazed so fixedly at the other man who spoke not. But she toyed nervously with her apron and held her peace. Mr. Dobson resumed:

"The young couple could not start housekeeping openly. Lieutenant Grant depended solely on the allowance made to him by his father, whose ideas of family pride were so extreme that such a marriage must unquestionably have led to a rupture. Moreover, a campaign in northern India was then threatening. It broke out exactly a year and two months after the marriage. Mr. Grant's regiment was ordered to the front, and when he sailed from Southampton he left his young wife and an infant, a boy, four months old, installed in a comfortable flat in Clarges Street, Piccadilly. It is important that the exact position of family affairs at this moment should be realized. General Grant, father of the young officer, had suffered from an apoplectic stroke soon after his son's marriage, and to acquaint him with it now meant risking his life. Young Grant's action was known to and approved by several trustworthy friends. He and his wife were very happy, and

Mrs. Grant was correspondingly depressed when the exigencies of the national service took her husband away from her. The parting between the young couple was a bitter trial, rendered all the more heartrending by reason of the concealment they had practiced. However, as matters had been allowed to drift thus far, no one will pretend that there was any special need to worry General Grant at the moment of his son's departure for a campaign. Lieutenant Grant hoped to return with a step in rank. Then, whatever the consequences, there must be a full explanation. He had not a great deal of money, but sufficient for his wife's needs. He left her two hundred pounds in notes and gold, and his bankers were empowered to pay her fifty pounds monthly. His own allowance from General Grant was seventy-five pounds a month, and it was with great difficulty that he maintained his position in such an expensive regiment as the Guards. The campaign eased the pressure, or he could not have kept it up for long."

"Are all these details quite necessary, Dobson?" said the colonel, for the steady glare of the farmer, the growing pallor of poor Martha, around whose heart an icy hand was taking sure grip, were exceedingly irksome.

"They are if I am to do you justice," replied the lawyer.

"Never mind me. Tell them of Margaret--and the boy."

"I will pass over the verification of my statement," went on Mr. Dobson, bending over the folded papers. "Seven months passed. Mrs. Grant expected soon to be delivered of another child. She heard regularly from her husband. His regiment was in the Khyber Pass, when one evening she was robbed of her small store of jewelry and a considerable sum of money by a trusted servant. The theft was reported in the papers, and General Grant read of his son's wife being a resident in Clarges Street. He went to the flat next day, saw the poor girl, behaved in a way that can only be ascribed to the folly of an old man broken by disease, and cut off supplies at once. Within a week Mrs. Grant found herself in poverty, and her husband at least a month's post distant. She did not lose her wits. She sold her furniture and raised money enough to support herself and her baby boy for some time. Of course, she was very much distressed, as General Grant wrote to her, called her an adventuress, and stated that he had disinherited his son on her account. This was only partly true. He tore up one will, but made no other, and forgot that there was a second copy in possession of my firm. Mrs. Grant then did a foolish thing. She concealed her troubles from her husband's friends, who would have helped her. She took cheap lodgings in another part of London, and changed her name. This seems to be accounted for by the fact that General Grant, in his insane suspicions, set private detectives to watch her. Moreover, the bankers wrote her a curt letter which added to her miseries. She rented rooms in St. Martin's Court, Ludgate Hill, and gave her name as Mrs. Martineau."

Martha sprang at the solicitor with an eerie screech:

"Hev ye coom to steal oor bairn, the bonny lad we've reared i' infancy an' childhood? Leave this house! John--husband--will ye let 'em drive me mad?"

John took her in his arms.

"Martha," he said, with a break in his voice that shook his hearers and stilled his wife's cries; "dinnat mak' oor burthen harder te bear. A man's heart deviseth his way, but the Lord directeth his steps!"

Servants, men and women, came running at their mistress's scream of terror. They stood, abashed, in the kitchen passage. None paid heed to them.

Colonel Grant rose and approached the trembling woman cowering at her husband's side. Her old eyes were streaming now; she gazed at him with the pitiful anguish of a stricken animal. He took her wrinkled hand and bent low before her.

"Madam," he said, "God forbid that my son should lose his mother a second time!"

He could say no other word. Even in her agony, Martha felt hot tears falling on her bare arm, and they were not her own.

"Eh, but it's a sad errand ye're on," she sobbed.

"Wife, wife!" cried John huskily, "if thou faint in the day of adversity thy strength is small. Colonel Grant is a true man. It's in his feace. He wean't rive Martin frae yer arms, an' no man can tak' him frae yer heart."

Colonel Grant drew himself up. He caught Bolland's shoulder.

"Bear with me," he said. "I have suffered much. I lost my wife and two children, one unborn. They were torn from me as though by a destroying tempest. One is given back, after thirteen long years of mourning. Can you not spare me a place in his affections?"

"Ay, ay," growled John. "We're nobbut owd folk at t' best, an' t' lad was leavin' oor roof for school in a little while. We can sattle things like sensible people, if on'y Martha here will gie ower greetin'. It troubles me sair to hear her lamentin'. We've had no sike deed i' thirty-fower years o' married life."

The man was covering his own distress by solicitude in his wife's behalf. She knew it. She wiped her eyes defiantly with her apron and made pretense to smile, though she had received a shock she would remember to her dying day. Some outlet was necessary for her surcharged feelings. She whisked around on the crowd of amazed domestics, dairymaids and farmhands, pressing on each other's heels in the passage.

"What are ye gapin' at?" she cried shrilly. "Is there nowt te dea? If tea's overed, git on wi' yer work, an' be sharp about it, or I'll side ye quick!"

The stampede that followed relieved the situation. The servants faded away under her fiery glance. Colonel Grant smiled.

"I am glad to see," he said, "that you maintain discipline in your regiment."

"They're all ears an' nea brains," she said. "My, but I'm that upset I hardly ken what I'm sayin'. Mebbe ye'll finish yer tale, sir. I'm grieved I med sike a dash at ye, but I couldn't bide----"

"There, there," said John, with his gruff soothing, "sit ye doon an' listen quietly. I guessed their business t' first minnit I set eyes on t' colonel. Why, Martha, look at him. He hez Martin's eyes and Martin's mouth. Noo, ye'd hev dark-brown hair, I reckon, when ye were a lad, sir?"

For answer, Colonel Grant stooped to the lawyer's papers and took from them a framed miniature.

"That is my portrait at the age of twelve," he said, placing it before them.

"Eh, but that caps owt!" cried Martha. "It's Martin hissell! Oh, my honey, how little did I think what was coomin' when I set yer shirt an' collar ready, an' med ye tidy te gan te tea wi' t' fine folk at t' vicarage. An' noo ye're a better bred 'un than ony of 'em. The Lord love ye! Here ye are, smilin' at me. They may mak' ye a colonel or a gin'ral, for owt I care: ye'll nivver forgit yer poor old muther, will ye, my baim!"

She kissed the miniature as if it were Martin's own presentment. The men left her to sob again in silence. Soon she calmed herself sufficiently to ask:

"But why i' t' wulld did that poor lass throw herself an' her little 'un inte t' street?"

Mr. Dobson took up his story once more:

"She explained her action in a pathetic letter to her husband. She was ill, lonely, and poverty-stricken. She brooded for days on General Grant's cruel words and still more cruel letter. They led her to believe that she was the unwitting cause of her husband's ruin. She resolved to free him absolutely and at the same time preserve his name from notoriety. Therefore she wrote him a full account of her change of name, and told him that her children would die with her."

"That was a mad thing te dea."

"Exactly. The doctor who knew her best told her husband six months later that Mrs. Grant was, in his opinion, suffering from an unrecognized attack of puerperal fever. It was latent in her system, and developed with the trouble so suddenly brought upon her."

"Yon was a wicked owd man----"

"The general was called to account by a higher power. Mrs. Grant wrote him also a statement of her intentions. Next morning he read of her death, and a second attack of apoplexy proved fatal. Her letter did not reach her husband until after a battle in which he was wounded. He cabled to us, and we made every inquiry, but it was remarkable how chance baffled our efforts. In the first instance, the policeman whom you encountered in Ludgate Hill and who knew you had adopted the child, had left the force and emigrated, owing to some unfortunate love affair. In the second, several newspapers reported the child as dead, though the records of the inquest soon corrected that error. Thirdly, someone named Bolland died in the hotel where you stayed and was buried at Highgate----"

"My brother," put in John.

"Yes; we know now. But conceive the barrier thus placed in our path when the dates of the two events were compared long afterwards."

The farmer looked puzzled. The solicitor went on:

"Of course, you wonder why there should have been any delay, but the Coroner's notes were lost in a fire. Nevertheless, we advertised in dozens of newspapers."

"We hardly ever see a paper, sir," said Martha.

"Yet, the wonder is that some of your friends did not see it and tell you. Finally, a sharp-witted clerk of ours solved the Highgate Cemetery mystery, and the advertisements were repeated. Colonel Grant was back in India by that time trying hard to leave his bones there, by all accounts, and perhaps we did not spend as much money on this second quest as if he were at home to authorize the expenditure."

"When was that, sir--t' second lot o' advertisements, I mean?" asked John.

"Quite a year after Mrs. Grant's death."

Bolland stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"I remember," he said, "a man at Malton fair sayin' summat about an inquiry for me. But yan o' t' hands rode twenty miles across counthry te tell me that Martin had gotten t' measles, an' I kem yam that neet."

"Naturally, I can give you every proof of my statements," said Mr. Dobson. "They are all here----"

"Mebbe ye'll know this writin'," interrupted Martha, laying down the miniature for the first time. She unlocked a drawer, took out a small tin box, and from its depths produced, among other articles, a crumbling sheet of note paper. On it was written:

"My name is not Martineau. I have killed myself and my boy. If he dies with his unhappy mother he will never know the miseries of this life."

It was unsigned, undated, a hurried scrawl in faded ink.

"Margaret's handwriting," said Colonel Grant, looking at the pathetic message with sorrow-laden eyes.

"It was found on t' poor leddy's dressin'-table, fastened wi' a hatpin. An' these are t' clothes Martin wore when he fell into John's arms. Nay, sir," she added, as Colonel Grant began examining the little frock, "she took good care, poor thing, that neabody should find oot whea she was. Ivvery mark hez bin picked off."

"Martin is his feyther's son, or I ken nowt about stock," cried John Bolland, making a fine effort to dispel the depression which again possessed the little gathering at sight of these mournful mementoes of the dead past. "Coom, gentlemen, sit ye doon an' hev some tea. Ye'll not be for takkin' Martin away by t' next train. Martha, what's t' matter wi' ye? I've nivver known folk be so lang i' t' hoose afore an' not be asked if they had a mooth."

"Ye're on t' wrang gait this time, John," she retorted. "I axed 'em afore ye kem in. By this time, sure-ly, ye'll be wantin' soom ham an' eggs?" she added to the visitors.

"By Jove! I believe I could eat some," laughed the colonel.

Martha smiled once more. She liked Martin's father. Each moment the first favorable impression was deepening. She was on the point of bustling away to the back kitchen, when they all heard the patter of feet, in desperate haste, approaching the front door. Elsie Herbert dashed in. She was hatless. Her long brown hair was floating in confusion over her shoulders and down her back. She was crying in great gulps and gasping for breath.

"Oh, Mr. Bolland!" she wailed. "Oh, Mrs. Bolland!--what shall I say? Martin is hurt. He fell off the swing. Angele did it! I'll kill her! I'll tear her face with my hands! Oh, come, someone, and help father. He is trying to bring back Martin's senses. What shall I do?--it was all on my account. Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

And she sank fainting to the floor.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SEVEN FULL YEARS

But Martin was not dead, nor even seriously injured. At first, the affair looked so ugly--its main features were so incomprehensible--that Mr. Herbert was startled into somewhat panic-stricken action. Here was Martin lying unconscious on the ground, with Elsie kneeling by his side, passionately beseeching him in one breath to speak to her, and in the next accusing Angele Saumarez of murder.

The vicar was not blameworthy, in that he failed to grasp either the nature of the accusation or its seeming unreasonableness.

The single rope of the gymnastic swing erected in the garden for Elsie's benefit had been cut deliberately with a sharp knife a few inches above the small bar on which the user's weight was supported by both hands. Of the cutting there could be no manner of doubt. The jagged edges of the few strands left by a devilish ingenuity--so that the swing must need be in violent motion before the rope snapped--were clearly visible at the point of severance. But who had done this thing, and with what deadly object in view? And why did Elsie pitch on Angele Saumarez so readily, glaring at her with such eyes of vengeance that the vicar was constrained to order, with the utmost sternness of which he was capable, that the torrent of words should cease. Indeed, he dispatched her to acquaint the Bollands with tidings of the disaster as a haphazard pretext to get her out of the way. Apart from sensing the accident's inexplicable motive, its history was simple enough.

Before tea was served, Martin and Elsie were using the swing alternately, vying with each other in the effort to touch with their toes the leaves of a tree nearly twenty feet distant from the vertical line of the rope. Angele, of course, took no part in this contest; she contented herself with a sarcastic incredulity when Elsie vowed that she had accomplished the feat twice already.

Martin, stronger, but less skilled in the trick of the swing than the girl, strove hard to excel her. Yet he, too, fell short by a few inches time after time. At last, Elsie vowed that when she was rested after tea she would prove her words, and threw a pebble at the branch which she claimed to have reached a week ago.

Neither Mrs. Saumarez nor the vicar attached any weight to the somewhat emphatic argument between the two girls. It was a splendid contest between Martin and Elsie. It interested the elders for conflicting reasons.

To see the graceful girl propelling herself through the air in a curve of nearly forty feet at each pendulum stroke of the swing was a pleasing sight to her father, but it caused Mrs. Saumarez to regret again that her daughter had not been taught to think more of athletic exercises and less of dress.

While the young people were following their seniors to the drawing-room, Angele said to Elsie:

"I think I could do that myself with a little practice."

"You are not tall enough," was the uncompromising answer, for Elsie's temper was ruffled by the simpering unbelief with which the other treated her assurances.

"Not so tall, no; but I can bend back like this, and you cannot."

Without a second's hesitation Angele twisted her head and shoulders around until her chin was in a line with her heels. Then she dropped lightly so that her hands rested on the grass of the lawn, straightening herself with equal ease. The contortion was performed so quickly that neither Mr. Herbert nor Mrs. Saumarez was aware of it. It was a display not suited to the conditions of ordinary costume, and it necessarily exhibited portions of the attire not usually in evidence.

Martin had eyes only for the girl's acrobatic agility, but Elsie blushed.

"I don't like that," she said.

"I can stand on my head and walk on my hands," cried Angele instantly. "Martin, some day I'll show you."

Conscious though she was that these things were said to annoy her, Elsie remembered that Angele was a guest.

"How did you learn?" she asked. "Were you taught in school?"

"School! Me! I have never been to school. Education is the curse of children's lives. I never leave mamma. One day in Nice I saw a circus girl doing tricks of that sort. I practiced in my bedroom."

"Does your mother wish that?"

"She doesn't know."

"I wonder you haven't broken your neck," said the practical Martin, who felt his bones creaking at the mere notion of such twisting.

Angele laughed.

"It is quite easy, when you are slim and elegant."

Her vanity amused the boy.

"You speak as though Elsie were as stiff as a board," he said. "If you had watched her carefully, Angele, you would have seen that she is quite as supple as you, only in a different way. And she is strong, too. I dare say she could swing with one hand and carry you in the other, if she had a mind to try."

This ready advocacy of a new-found divinity angered Angele beyond measure. Possibly she meant no greater harm than the disconcerting of a rival; but she slipped out of the room when Mr. Herbert sent Elsie to the library to bring a portfolio of old prints which he wished to show Mrs. Saumarez. Although it was never definitely proved against Angele, someone tampered with the rope before a move was made to the garden after tea. The cause, the effect, were equally clear; the human agent remained unknown.

"Now, I'll prove my words," cried Elsie, darting across the lawn in front of the others.

"Here, it's my turn," shouted the boy gleefully. "I'll race you."

"Martin! Martin! I want you!" shrieked Angele, running after him.

He paid no heed to her cries. Outstripping both girls in the race, he sprang at the swing, and was carried almost to the debated limit of the tree by the impetus of the rush. When he felt himself stopping he threw up his feet in a wild effort to touch the leaves so tantalizingly out of reach, and in that instant the rope broke.

He turned completely over and fell with a heavy thud on the back of his bent head. The screaming of the girls brought the vicar from his prints in great alarm, and his agitation increased when he discovered that the boy could neither move nor speak.

Elsie was halfway to the White House before Martin regained his breath. Once vitality returned, however, he was quickly on his feet again.

"What happened?" he asked, craning his head awkwardly. "I thought someone fired a gun!"

"You frightened us nearly out of our wits," cried the vicar. "And I was stupid enough to send Elsie flying to your people. Goodness knows what she will have said to them!"

Promptly the boy shook himself and tried to break into a run.

"I must--follow her," he gasped. But not yet was the masterful spirit able to control relaxed muscles; he collapsed again.

Mrs. Saumarez cried aloud in a new fear, but the vicar, accustomed to the minor accidents of the cricket field and gymnasium, was cooler now.

"He's all right--only needs a drink of water and a few minutes' rest," he explained.

He bade one of the maids go as quickly as possible to the Bolland's farm and say that the mischief to Martin was a mere nothing, and then busied himself in more scientific fashion with restoring his patient's animation.

Unfastening the boy's collar and the neckband of his shirt, Mr. Herbert satisfied himself that the clavicle was uninjured. There was a slight abrasion of the scalp, which was sore to the touch. In a minute, or less, Martin was again protesting that there was little the matter with him. He would not be satisfied until the vicar allowed him to start once more for the village, though at a more sedate pace.

Then Mrs. Saumarez, in a voice of deep distress, asked Mr. Herbert if the rope had really been cut.

"Yes," he said. "You can see yourself that there is no doubt about it."

"But your daughter charged Angele with this--this crime. My child denies it. She has no knife or implement of any sort in her pocket. I assure you I have satisfied myself on that point."

"The affair is a mystery, Mrs. Saumarez. It must be cleared up. Thank God, Martin escaped! He might be lying here dead at this moment."

"Are you sure it was not an accident?"

"What am I to say? Here is a stout hempen cord with nearly all its strands severed as if with a razor, and the other torn asunder. And, from what I can gather, it was Elsie, and not Martin, for whose benefit this diabolical outrage was planned."

The vicar spoke warmly, but the significance of the incident was dawning slowly on his perplexed mind. Providence alone had ordained that neither the boy nor the girl had been gravely, perhaps fatally, injured.

Mrs. Saumarez was haggard. She seemed to have aged in those few minutes.

"Angele!" she cried.

The girl, who was sobbing, came to her.

"Can it be possible," said the distracted mother, "that you interfered with the swing? Why did you leave the drawing-room during tea?"

"I only went to stroke a cat, mamma. Indeed, I never touched the swing. Why should I? And I could not cut it with my fingers."

"On second thoughts," said the vicar coldly, "I think that the matter may be allowed to rest where it is. Of course, one of my servants may be the culprit, or a mischievous village youth who had been watching the children at play. But the two girls do not seem to get on well together, Mrs. Saumarez. I fear they are endowed with widely different temperaments."

The hint could not be ignored. The lady smiled bitterly.

"It is well that I should have decided already to leave Elmsdale," she said. "It is a charming place, but my visit has not been altogether fortunate."

Mr. Herbert remembered the curious phrase in after years. He understood it then. At the moment he was candidly relieved when Mrs. Saumarez and Angele took their departure. He jammed on a hat and hastened to the White House to learn what sort of sensation Elsie had created.

A week later he made a discovery. He had a curious hobby--he was his own bootmaker, and Elsie's, having taught himself to be a craftsman in an art which might well claim higher rank than it holds. When next he rummaged among his implements for a shoemaker's knife it was missing. It was found in the garden next spring, jammed to the top of the hilt into the soft mold beneath a rhododendron. The tools were kept on a bench in the conservatory; so Angele might have accomplished her impish desire in a few seconds.

On reaching the White House he was mildly surprised at finding Martin propped against the knee of a tall, soldierly stranger, who was consoling the boy with a reminiscence of a far worse toss at polo, by which a hard *sola topi* was flattened on the iron surface of an Indian *maidan*. Elsie, white, but much interested, was sipping a glass of milk.

"Eh, Vicar," cried Mrs. Bolland, in whose face Mr. Herbert saw signs of recent excitement, "your lass gev us a rare start. She landed here like a mad thing, screamed oot that Martin was dead, an' dropped te t' flure half dead herself."

"The fault was mine, Mrs. Bolland. There was an accident. At first I thought Martin was badly hurt. I am, indeed, very sorry if Elsie alarmed you."

His words were meant to reassure the others, but his eyes were fixed on the girl's pallid face. John Bolland laughed in his dry way.

"Nay, Passon, dinnat fret about Elsie. She's none t' warse for a sudden stop. She was ower-excited. Where's yon lass o' Mrs. Saumarez's?"

"Gone home with her mother. I hear they are leaving Elmsdale."

"A good riddance!" said John heartily. He turned to Martin. "Ye'll be winded again, I reckon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I left my ash stick i' t' low yard. Mebbe you an' t' young leddy will fetch it. There's noa need te hurry."

This was an oblique instruction to the boy to make himself scarce for half an hour. With Elsie as a companion he needed no urging. They set off, happy as grigs.

"Noo, afore ye start te fill t' vicar wi' wunnerment," cried Martha, "I want te ax t' colonel a question."

"What is it, Mrs. Bolland?"

Colonel Grant was smiling at the vicar's puzzled air. These good people knew naught of formal introductions.

"How old is t' lad?"

"He was fourteen years old on the sixth of last June."

"Eh, but that's grand." She clapped her hands delightedly. "I guessed him tiv a week or two. We reckoned his birthday as a twel'month afore we found him, and that was June the eighteenth. And what's his right neam?"

"He was christened after me and after his mother's family. His name is Reginald Ingram Grant."

"May I ask who in the world you are talking about?" interposed the perplexed vicar.

"Whea? Why, oor Martin!" cried Martha. "He's a gentleman born, God bless him!"

"And, what is much more important, Mrs. Bolland, he is a gentleman bred," said the colonel.

The scene in the kitchen of the White House had been too dramatic that some hint of it should not reach the village that night. Soon all Elmsdale knew that the mystery of Martin's parentage had been solved, and great was the awe of the boy's playmates when they heard that his father was a "real live colonel i' t' army." A garbled version of the story came to Mr. Beckett-Smythe's ears, and he called on Colonel Grant at the "Black Lion" next day.

He arrived in state, in a new Mercedes car, handled by a chauffeur replica of Fritz Bauer. Beckett-Smythe had hardly mastered his surprise at the colonel's confirmation of that which he had regarded as "an incredible yarn" when Mrs. Saumarez drove up. She, too, recalling the message brought by Martin from her husband's comrade-in-arms, came to verify the strange tale told by the Misses Walker. Angele accompanied her, and the girl's eyes shot lightning at Martin, who was on the point of guiding his father to the moor when Mr. Beckett-Smythe put in an appearance.

The lawyer had departed for London by the morning train; the three older people and the two youngsters gathered in the room thus set at liberty, Mrs. Atkinson having remodeled it into a sitting-room for the colonel's use.

Mrs. Saumarez hailed the stranger effusively.

"It is delightful to run across anyone who knew my husband," she said. "In this remote part of Yorkshire none seems to have ever heard of him. Believe me, Colonel Grant, it is positively a relief to meet a man who recognizes my name."

She may have intended this for an oblique thrust at Beckett-Smythe, relations between the Hall and The Elms having been somewhat strained since the inquest. The Squire, a good fellow, who had no inkling of Angele's latest escapade, hastened to make amends.

"You two must want to chat over old times," he said breezily. "Why not come and dine with me to-night? I have only one other guest--an Admiralty man. He's prowling about the coast trying to select a suitable site for a wireless station."

Now, Mrs. Saumarez would have declined the invitation had Beckett-Smythe stopped short at the first sentence. As it was, she accepted instantly.

"Do come, Colonel Grant," she urged. "What between the Navy and the Intelligence Department it should be an interesting evening.... Oh, don't look so surprised," she went on, with an engaging smile. "I still read the *Gazette*, you know."

"And what of the kiddies?" said Beckett-Smythe. "They know my boys. Your chauffeur can bring them home at nine. By the way, the meal will be quite informal--come as you are."

"What do you say, Martin?" said the colonel.

"I shall be very pleased, sir; but may I--ask--my mother first?"

The boy reddened. His new place in the world was only twenty-four hours old, and his ideas were not yet adjusted to

an order of things so astounding that he thought every minute he would wake up and find he had been dreaming.

"Oh, certainly," and a kindly hand fell on his shoulder. "I am glad you spoke of it. Mrs. Bolland is worthy of all the respect due to the best of mothers."

"I'll go with you, Martin," announced Angele suddenly.

Martin hesitated. He was doubtful of the reception Mrs. Bolland might give the minx who had nearly caused him to break his neck, and, for his own part, he wanted to avoid Angele altogether. She was a disturbing influence. He feared her not at all as a spitfire. It was when she displayed her most engaging qualities that she was really dangerous, and he knew from experience that her mood had changed within the past five minutes. On alighting from the car she would like to have scratched his face. Now he would not be surprised if she elected to walk with him hand in hand through the village street.

His father came to the rescue.

"Let us all go and see Mrs. Bolland," he said. "It is only a few yards."

They went out into the roadway. Then Beckett-Smythe was struck by an afterthought.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll run along to the vicarage and ask Herbert and his daughter to join us," he said.

Mrs. Saumarez bit her lip.

"I think I'll leave Angele at home," she said in a low tone. "The child is delicate. During the past week I have insisted that she goes to bed at eight every evening."

Colonel Grant understood why the lady did not want the two girls to meet, but it was borne in on him that she herself was determined not to miss that impromptu dinner party. In a vague way he wondered what her motive could be.

"Ah, that's a pity," he heard Beckett-Smythe say. "She can be well wrapped up, and the weather is mild."

He moved a little ahead of the two. Martin, determined not to be left alone with Angele, hastened to greet his friend, Fritz. The two chauffeurs were conversing in German. Apparently, they were examining the engine of the new car.

"Martin," murmured Angele, "don't bother about Fritz. He'll snap your head off. He's furious because he lost a map the other day."

But Martin pressed on. No longer could Angele deceive him--"twiddle him around her little finger," as she would put it.

"Hello, Fritz!" he cried. "What map did you lose? Not the one I marked for you?"

Fritz turned. The new chauffeur closed the bonnet of the engine.

"No," he said, speaking slowly, and looking at Angele. "It was a small road map. You haf not seen it, I dink."

"Was it made of linen, with a red cover?"

"Yez," and the man's face became curiously stern.

"Oh, I saw you studying it one day at The Elms, but you didn't have it on the moor."

Fritz's scowl changed to an expression of disappointment.

"I haf mislaid it," he grunted, and again his glance dwelt on Angele, who met his gaze with a bland indifference that seemed to gall him.

Colonel Grant drew near. He had been eyeing the two spick-and-span chauffeurs.

"Who is your friend, Martin?" he said. He was interested in everything the boy did and in everyone whom he knew.

"Oh, this is Fritz Bauer, Mrs. Saumarez's chauffeur.... Fritz, this is Colonel Grant, of the Indian Army."

Instantly the two young Germans straightened as though some mechanism had stiffened their spines and thrown back their heads. The newcomer's heels clicked and his right hand was raised in a salute. Fritz, better schooled than his comrade by longer residence in England, barely prevented his heels from clicking, and managed to convert the salute into a raising of his cap. There could be no doubt that he was flustered, because he said not a word, and the open-air tan of his cheeks assumed a deeper tint.

Apparently, Colonel Grant saw nothing of this, or, if he noticed the man's confusion, attributed it to nervousness.

"Two Mercedes cars in one small village!" he exclaimed laughingly. "You Germans are certainly conquering England by peaceful penetration."

Mrs. Saumarez elected, after all, not to visit the White House that afternoon, so Angele, having said good-bye to the colonel and Martin in her prettiest manner, was whisked off in the car.

"By the way, Martin," said his father as the two walked to the farm. "Mrs. Saumarez is German by birth. Have you ever heard anything about her family?"

Martin had a good memory.

"Yes, sir," he said. "She is a baroness--the Baroness Irma von Edelstein."

The colonel was surprised at this glib answer.

"Who told you?" he inquired.

"Angele, sir. But Mrs. Saumarez did not wish people to use her title. She was vexed with Angele for even mentioning it."

Mrs. Saumarez sent her car to bring Colonel Grant and his son to the Hall. She was slightly ruffled when Fritz told her that they had gone already, Mr. Beckett-Smythe having collected his guests from both the inn and the vicarage.

She might have been positively indignant if she had overheard Grant's comments to the Admiralty official while the two strolled on the lawn before dinner.

"A couple of Prussian officers, if ever I saw the genuine article," said the colonel. "Real junkers--smart-looking fellows, too. Mrs. Saumarez is the widow of a British officer--a fine chap, but poor as a church mouse--and she belongs to a wealthy German family. *Verbum sap.*"

"Nuff said," grinned the sailor. "But what is one to do? No sooner is this outfit erected but it'll be added to the display of local picture postcards, and the next German bigwig who visits this part of the country will be invited to amuse himself by ringing up Bremen."

At any rate, Mrs. Saumarez was told that night that the Yorkshire coast was too highly magnetized to suit a wireless station. The sailor thought an inland town like York would provide an ideal site.

"You see," he explained politely, "when the German High Seas Fleet defeats the British Navy it can shell our coast towns all to smithereens."

She smiled.

"You fighting men invariably talk of war with Germany as an assured thing," she said. "Yet I, who know Germany, and have relatives there, am convinced that the notion is absurd."

"The Emperor has been twenty years on the throne and has never drawn sword except on parade," put in the vicar. "There may have been danger once or twice in his hot youth, but he has grown to like England, and I cannot conceive him plunging a great and thriving country into the morass of a doubtful campaign."

"Ninety-nine per cent of Englishmen like to think that way," said the Admiralty man. "In a multitude of counselors there is wisdom, so let's hope they're right."

When the young folk got together on the terrace, Frank Beckett-Smythe asked Martin why his neck was stiff.

"I took a toss off Elsie's swing yesterday," was the airy answer. Not a word did he or Elsie say as to Angele, and the Beckett-Smythes knew better than to introduce her name.

Mrs. Saumarez left for the South rather hurriedly. She paid no farewell visits. She and Angele traveled in the car; Francoise followed with the baggage. The Misses Walker were consoled for the loss of a valued lodger by receiving a less exacting one in the person of Martin's father.

The boy himself, when his mental poise was adjusted to the phenomenal change in his life, soon grew accustomed to a

new environment. Mr. Herbert undertook to direct his studies in preparation for a public school, and Martha Bolland became reconciled gradually to seeing him once or twice daily, instead of all day, for he, too, lived at The Elms.

Officially, as it were, he adopted his new name, but to the small world of Elmsdale he would ever be "Martin." Even his father fell into the habit.

The colonel drove him to the adjourned petty sessions at Nottonby when Betsy's case came on for hearing. Mr. Stockwell abandoned his critical attitude and concurred with the police that there was no need to bring Angele Saumarez from London to attend the trial. Mrs. Saumarez gave no thought to the fact that the girl might be needed to give evidence, but the authorities decided that there were witnesses in plenty as to the outcry raised in the garden after Pickering was wounded.

It was November before Betsy appeared at the county assizes. When she entered the dock, those who knew her were astonished by the improvement in her appearance. It was probable that the enforced rest, the regular exercise, the judicious diet of the prison had exercised a beneficial effect on her health.

Her demeanor was calm as ever, and the able barrister who defended her did not scruple to suggest that it would create a better effect with the jury if she adopted a less unemotional attitude.

Her reply silenced him.

"Do you think," she said, "that I will be permitted to atone for my wrongdoing by punishment? No. I live because my husband wished me to live. I will be called to account, but not by an earthly judge or jury."

She was right. The assize judge held the scales of justice impartially between the sworn testimony of George Pickering and Betsy's witnesses, on the one hand, and the evidence of Martin and the groom, backed by the scientists, on the other.

The jury gave her the benefit of the doubt and acquitted her, but it was noticed by many that his lordship contented himself with ordering her discharge from custody. He passed no opinion on the verdict.

So Betsy was installed as mistress of Wetherby Lodge, the trustees having decided that she was well fitted to manage the estate.

Tongues wagged in Elmsdale when Mr. Stockwell drove thither one day and solemnly handed over to Martin the sword and the double-barreled gun, and to John Bolland the pedigree cow bequeathed by George Pickering.

The farmer eyed the animal grimly.

"'Tis an unfortunate beast," he said. "Mebbe if I hadn't sold her te poor George he might nivver hae coom te Elmsdale just then."

"Do not think that," the solicitor assured him. "Pickering would most certainly have visited the fair. I know, as a matter of fact, that he wished to purchase one of your brood mares."

"Ay, ay. She went te Jarmany. Well, if I'm spared, I'll send a good calf to Wetherby."

The lawyer and he shook hands on the compact. Yet Pickering's odd bequest was destined to work out in a way that would have amazed the donor, could he but know it.

Martin was at Winchester--his father's old school--when he received a letter in Bolland's laborious handwriting. It read:

"MY DEAR LAD--Yours to hand, and this leaves your mother and self in good health. We were glad to hear that the box arrived all right and that your mates think well of Yorkshire cakes. You may learn a lot of useful things at school, but you will not often meet with a better cook than your mother. She is sore upset just now about a mishap we have had on the farm. I turned out nearly all my shorthorns to graze on the low pastures. The ground was a bit damp, and a strange cow broke in at night to join them. I don't rightly know what to blame, but next day they showed signs of rinderpest. I sent for the vet, and they had to be slaughtered--all but one two-year-old bull, Bainsesse Boy IV, and Mr. Pickering's cow, which were not with them in the meadow. It is a great loss, but I don't repine, now that you are provided for, and it is not quite like starting all over again, as I have my land and my Cleveland bays, and I am in no debt. In such matters I turn to the Lord for consolation. I have just read this verse to Martha: 'I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.' If you are minded to look it up, you will find it in the Thirty-seventh Psalm.

"I don't want to pretend that the blow has not been a hard one, but, God willing, there will be a hamper for you at Christmas, if Colonel Grant is too busy to bring you North. Your mother joins in much love.

"Your affect.,
"JOHN BOLLAND."

"P. S.--Maybe you will not have forgotten that Mrs. Saumarez said the land needed draining. She was a clever woman in some ways."

The boy's eyes filled with tears. He understood only too well the far-reaching misfortune which had befallen the farmer. The total value of the herd was PS5,000, and he remembered that experts valued the young surviving bull at PS300 as a yearling. In all, twenty-three animals had been slaughtered by the law's decree, and the compensation payable to Bolland would not cover a twentieth part of the actual loss.

Martin not only wrote a letter of warm sympathy to his adopted parents but sent Bolland's letter to his father, with an added commentary of his own. Colonel Grant obtained short leave and traveled to Elmsdale next day. It took some trouble to bring John round to his point of view, but the argument that the farm should be restocked in Martin's interests prevailed, and negotiations were opened with prominent breeders elsewhere which resulted in the purchase of a notable bull and eight heifers, for which Bolland and the colonel each found half the money. The farmer would listen to no other arrangement, though he promised that if he experienced any tightness for money he would not hesitate to apply for further help.

The need never made itself felt. The first animal to produce successful progeny was George Pickering's cow! No man in the North Riding was more pleased than John that day. Throughout the whole of his life the only person who ever brought a charge of unfair dealing against him was Pickering. The memory rankled, and its sting was none the less bitter because of a secret dread that he had perhaps been guilty of a piece of sharp practice. Now his character was cleared.

Pattison, his old crony, asked him, by way of a joke, how much "he'd tak' for t' cauf."

John blazed into unexpected anger.

"At what figger de you reckon yer own good neam, Mr. Pattison?"

"I don't knoa as I'd care te sell it at onny price, Mr. Bollan'."

"Then ye'll think as I do aboot yon cauf. Neyther it nor any other of its dam's produce will ivver leave my farm if I can help it."



CHAPTER XIX

OUT OF THE MISTS

This record of a Yorkshire village--a true chronicle of life among the canny folk who dwell on the "moor edge"--might well be left at the point it reached when one of its chief characters saw before him the smooth and sunlit road of a notable career.

But history, though romantic, is not writ as romance, and the story of Elmsdale is fact, not fiction. After eight years of somnolence the village awoke again. It was roused from sleep by the tumult of a world at war; mayhap the present generation shall pass away before the hamlet relapses into its humdrum ways.

Martin was twenty-two when his father and he journeyed north to attend the annual sale of the Elmsdale herd, which was fixed for the two opening days of July, 1914. Each year Colonel Grant brought his son to the village for six weeks prior to the twelfth of August; this year there was a well-founded rumor in the little community that the colonel meant to buy The Elms.

The announcement of Bolland's sale brought foreign agents from abroad and well-known stock-raisers from all parts of the Kingdom. No less than forty animals entered the auction ring. One bull, Bainesse Boy IV, realized PS800. Bainesse Boy IV held a species of levee in a special stall. He had grown into a wonder. On a table, over which Sergeant Benson mounted guard, were displayed five championship cups he had carried off, while fifteen cards, arranged in horseshoe pattern on the wall, each bore the magic words, "First Prize," awarded at Islington, Birmingham, the Royal, and wherever else in Britain shorthorns and their admirers most do congregate.

The village hummed with life; around the sale ring gathered a multitude of men arrayed in Melton cloth and leather leggings, whose general appearance betokened the wisdom of Dr. Johnson's sarcastic dictum: "Who drives fat oxen should himself be fat."

Martha and a cohort of maids boiled hams by the dozen and baked cakes in fabulous quantities. John graced the occasion by donning a new suit and new boots, in which the crooked giant was singularly ill at ease.

Mrs. Pickering drove over from Nottonby--Kitty was married two years before to a well-to-do farmer at Northallerton--and someone rallied her on "bein' ower good-lookin' te remain a widow all her days."

She laughed pleasantly.

"I'm far too busy at Wetherby to think of adding a husband to my cares," she said; but those who knew her best could have told that she had refused at least two excellent offers of matrimony and meant to remain Mrs. Pickering during the rest of her days.

At the close of the second day's sale, when the crowd was thinned by the departure of a fleet of cars and a local train at five o'clock, the White House was thronged by its habitués, who came to make a meal of the "high tea."

Colonel Grant and John had just concluded an amicable wrangle whereby it was decided that they should jointly provide the considerable sum needed to acquire The Elms and some adjoining land. The house and grounds were to be remodeled and the property would be deeded to Martin forthwith.

The young gentleman himself, as tall as his father now, and wearing riding breeches and boots, was standing at the front door, turning impatient eyes from a smart cob, held by a groom, to the bend in the road where it curved beyond the "Black Lion."

A smartly-dressed young lady passed, and although Martin lifted his hat with a ready smile his glance wandered from her along the road again. Evelyn Atkinson wondered who it was that thus distracted his attention.

A few yards farther on, Elsie Herbert, mounted on a steady old hunter, passed at a sharp trot. Evelyn's pretty face frowned slightly.

"If *she* is home again, of course, he has eyes for nobody else," she said to herself.

And, indeed, it was true. Elsie had been to Dresden for two years. She had returned to Elmsdale the previous day, and a scribbled note told Martin to look for her after tea.

The two set off together through the village, bound for the moor. Many a critical look followed them.

"Eh, but they're a bonny pair," cried Mrs. Summersgill, who became stouter each year. "Martin allus framed to be a fine

man, but I nivver thowt yon gawky lass o' t' vicar's 'ud grow into a beauty."

"This moor air is wonderful. Look at the effect it has on you, Mrs. Summersgill," said Colonel Grant with a twinkle in his eye.

"Oh, go on wi' ye, Colonel, pokin' fun at a poor owd body like me. But I dean't ho'd wi' skinny 'uns. Martha, what's become o' Mrs. Saumarez an' that flighty gell o' hers. What did they call her--Angel? My word!--a nice angel--not that she wasn't as thin as a sperrit."

"Miss Walker told me, last Christmas twel'month, they were i' France," said Martha.

"France? Ay, maist like; it's a God-forsaken place, I'll be boun'."

"Nay," interposed Bolland, "that's an unchristian description of onny counthry, ma'am. Ye'll find t' Lord iverywhere i' t' wide wulld, if ye seek Him. There's bin times when He might easy be i' France, for He seemed, iv His wisdom, to be far away frae Elmsdale."

Mrs. Summersgill snorted contempt for all "furriners," but Martha created a diversion.

"Goodness me!" she cried, "yer cup's empty. I nivver did see sike a woman. Ye talk an' eat nowt."

Martin, now in his third year at Oxford, was somewhat mystified by the change brought about in Elsie by two years of "languages and music" passed in the most attractive of German cities. Though not flippant, her manner nonplussed him. She was distinctly "smart," both in speech and style. She treated a young gentleman who had already taken his degree and was reading for honors in history with an easy nonchalance that was highly disconcerting. The last time they parted they had kissed each other, she with tears, and he with a lump in his throat. Now he dared no more offer a cousinly, or brotherly, or any other sort of salute in which kissing was essential, than if she were a royal princess.

"You've altered, old girl," he said by way of a conversational opening when their horses were content to walk, after a sharp canter along a moorland track.

"I should hope so, indeed," came the airy retort. "Surely, you didn't expect to find the Elmsdale label on me after two years of *kultur*?"

"Whatever the label, the vintage looks good," he said.

"You mean that as a compliment," she laughed. "And, now that I look at you carefully, I see signs of improvement. Of course, the Oxford swank is an abomination, but you'll lose it in time. Father told me last night that you were going in for the law and politics. Is that correct?"

Martin, masterful as ever, was not minded to endure such supercilious treatment at Elsie's hands. He had looked forward to this meeting with a longing that had almost interfered with his work; it was more than irritating to find his divinity modeling her behavior on the lines of the Girton "set" at the University.

They had reached a point of the high moor which overlooked Thor ghyll. Martin pulled up his cob and dismounted.

"Let's give the nags a breather here," he said. "Shall I help you?"

"No, thanks."

Elsie was out of the saddle promptly. She rode astride. In a well-fitting habit, with divided skirt and patent-leather boots, she looked wonderfully alluring, but her air of aloofness was carried almost to the verge of indifference.

She showed some surprise when Martin took her horse's reins and threw them over his left arm.

"Are you going to lecture me?" she said, arching her eyebrows. "It would be just like a fledgling B. A., who is doubtless a member of the Officers' Training Corps, to tell me that my German riding-master taught me to sit too stiffly."

"He did," said Martin, meeting the sarcastic blue eyes without flinching. "But a few days with the York and Ainsty and Lord Middleton's pack will put that right. You'll come a purler at your first stone wall if you ride with such long stirrup leathers. However, I want you to jump another variety of obstacle to-day. You asked me just now, Elsie, if I was going in for the law. Yes. But I'm going in for you first. You know I love you, dear. You know I have been your very humble but loyal knight ever since I won your recognition down there in the valley, when I was only a farmer's son and you were a girl of a higher social order. I have never forgotten that you didn't seem to heed class distinctions then, Elsie, and it hurts now to have you treat me with coldness."

Elsie, trying valiantly to appear partly indignant and even more amused at this direct attack, failed most lamentably.

First she flushed; then she paled.

She faced Martin's gaze confidently enough at the outset, but her eyes dropped and her lips quivered when she heard the words which no woman can hear without a thrill. Still, she made a brave attempt to rally her forces.

"I didn't--quite mean--what you say," she faltered, which was a schoolgirl form of protest for one who had achieved distinction in a course of English literature.

Martin took her by the shoulders. The two horses nosed each other. They, perforce, were dumb, but their wise eyes seemed to exchange the caustic comment: "What fools these mortals be! Why don't they hug, and settle the business?"

"I must know what you do mean," said Martin, almost fiercely. "I love you, Elsie. Will you marry me?"

She lifted her face. The blue eyes were dim with tears, but the adorable mouth trembled in a smile.

"Yes, dear," she murmured. "But what did you expect? Did you--think I would--throw my arms around you--in the village street?"

After that Martin had no reason to accuse Elsie of being either stiff or cold. When the vicar heard the news that night--for Martin and the colonel dined at the Vicarage--he stormed into mock dissent.

"God bless my soul," he cried, "my little girl has been away two whole years, and you come and steal her away from me before she has been home twenty-four hours!"

Then he produced a handkerchief and yielded, apparently, to a violent attack of hay fever. Yet it was a joyous company which gathered around the dinner table, for Elsie herself, casting off the veneer of Dresden, drove posthaste to summon the Bollands to the feast.

John was specially deputed by Colonel Grant to make a significant announcement.

"We're all main pleased you two hev sattled matters so soon," he said, peering alternately at Martin's attentive face and Elsie's blushing one. "Yer father an' me hev bowt The Elms, an' a tidy bit o' land besides, so ye'll hev a stake i' t' county if ivver ye're minded te run for Parlyment. The Miss Walkers (John pronounced the name "Wahker") are goin' te live in a small hoos i' Nottonby. They've gotten a fine lot o' Spanish mahogany an' owd oak which they're willin' te sell by vallyation; so the pair of ye can gan there i' t' mornin' an' pick an' choose what ye want."

Elsie looked at her father, but neither could utter a word. Martha Bolland put an arm around the girl's neck.

"Lord luv' ye, honey!" she said brokenly, "it'll be just like crossin' the road. May I be spared te see you happy and comfortable in yer new home, for you'll surely be one of the finest ladies i' Yorkshire."

No shadow darkened their joy in that cheerful hour. Even next day, when a grim specter flitted through Elmsdale, the ominous vision evoked only a passing notice. Colonel Grant and the vicar, each an expert in old furniture, accompanied the young people to The Elms and examined its antique dressers, sideboards, tables, and the rest. Many of the bedroom chests were of solid mahogany. The Misses Walker had cleared the drawers of the lumber of years, so that the prospective purchasers could note the interior finish.

Miss Emmy, not so tactful as her elder sister, brought in a name which the others present wished to forget.

"Mrs. Saumarez used this room as a dressing-room," she said, "and while turning out rubbish from a set of drawers I came across this."

She displayed a small red-covered folding road-map, such as cyclists and motorists use. Martin thought he recognized it.

"I believe that is the very map lost by Fritz Bauer, Mrs. Saumarez's chauffeur," he said.

"Probably, sir. He made a rare row with Miss Angele about it. I was half afraid he meant to shake her. No one knew what had become of it, but either Miss Angele or her mother must have hidden it. Why, I can't guess."

Elsie helped to smooth over an awkward incident. She took the map and began to open it.

"It couldn't have been such an important matter," she said. Then she shook apart the folded sheet, and they all saw that it bore a number of entries and signs in faded ink, black and red. The written words were in German, and Elsie scanned a few lines hurriedly. She looked puzzled, even a trifle perturbed, but recovered her smiling self-possession instantly.

"The poor man, being a foreigner, jotted down some notes for his guidance," she said. "May I have it?"

"With pleasure, miss," said the old lady.

It was not until the party had returned to the vicarage that Elsie explained her request. She spread the map on a table, and her smooth forehead wrinkled in doubt.

"This is serious," she said. "I have lived in Germany long enough to understand that one cannot mix with German girls in the intimacy of school and at their homes without knowing that an attack on England is simply an obsession of their menfolk, and even of the women. They regard it as a certainty in the near future, pretending that if they don't strike first England will crush them."

"I wish to Heaven she would!" broke in Colonel Grant emphatically. "In existing conditions this country resembles an unarmed policeman waiting for a burglar to fire at him out of the darkness."

Mr. Herbert, man of peace that he was, might have voiced a mild disclaimer, had not Elsie stayed him.

"Listen, father," she said seriously. "Here is proof positive. That chauffeur was a military spy. See what is written across the top of the map: 'Gutes Wasser; Futter in Fulle; Uberfluss von Vieh, Schafen und Pferden. Einzelheiten auf genauen Ortlichkeiten angegeben.' That means 'Good water; abundance of fodder; plenty of cattle, sheep, and horses. Details given on exact localities.' And, just look at the details! Could a child fail to interpret their meaning?"

Elsie's simile was not far-fetched, yet gray-headed statesmen, though they may have both known and understood, refused to believe. That little road-map, on a scale of one mile to an inch, contained all the information needed by the staff of an invading army.

The moor bore the legend:

"Platz fur Lager, leicht verschanzt; beherrscht Hauptstrassen von Whitby und Pickering nach York. Rote Kreise kennzeichnen reichlichen Wasservorrat fur Kavallerie und Artillerie." (Site for camp, easily entrenched. Commands main roads from Whitby and Pickering to York. Red circles show ample water supply for cavalry and artillery.)

Every road bore its classification for the use of troops, showing the width, quality of surface, and gradients. Each bridge was described as "stone" or "iron." Even cross-country trails were indicated when fordable streams rendered such passage not too difficult.

The little group gazed spellbound at the extraordinarily accurate synopsis of the facilities offered by the placid country of Yorkshire for the devilish purposes of war. Martin, in particular, devoured the entries relating to the moor. On Metcalf's farm he saw: "Six hundred sheep here," and at the Broad Ings, "Four hundred sheep, three horses, four cows." Well he knew who had given the spy those facts. His glowing eyes wandered to the village. A long entry distinguished the White House, and though he knew a good deal of German he was beaten by the opening technical word.

"What is that, Elsie?" he said, and even his father wondered at the hot anger in his utterance.

The girl read:

"Stammbaum Vieh hier; drei Stiere, achtzehn Kuhe und Farsen, nicht zum Schlachten, sehr wertvoll. Neben bei sechs Stuten, besten Types zur Zucht."

Then she translated:

"Pedigree cattle here; three bulls, eighteen cows and heifers, not to be slaughtered; very valuable. Also six brood mares of best type for stud."

"The infernal scoundrel!" blazed out Martin. "So the Bolland stock must be taken to the Fatherland, and not eaten or drafted into service! And to think that I gave him nearly all that information!"

"You, Martin?" cried Elsie.

"Yes. He pumped me dry. I even showed him the site of every pond on the moor."

"Don't blame the man," put in Colonel Grant. "I knew him as a Prussian officer at the first glance. But he was simply doing his duty. Blame our criminal carelessness. We cannot stop foreigners from prowling about the country, but we can and should make it impossible for any enemy to utilize such data as are contained in this map."

"But, consider," put in the perturbed vicar. "This evil work was done eight years ago, and what has all the talk of German preparation come to? Isn't it the bombast of militarism gone mad?"

"It comes to this," said the colonel. "We are just eight years nearer war. I am convinced that the break must occur before 1916--and for two reasons: Germany's financial state is dangerous, and in 1916 Russia will have completed on her western frontier certain strategic lines which will expedite mobilization. Germany won't wait till her prospective foes are ready. France knows it. That is why she has adopted the three years' service scheme."

"Then why won't you let me join the army, dad?" demanded Martin bluntly.

Colonel Grant spread his hands with the weary gesture of a man who would willingly shirk a vital decision.

"In peace the army is a poor career," he said. "The law and politics offer you a wider field. But not you only--every young man in the country should be trained to arms. As matters stand, we have neither the men nor the rifles. Our artillery, excellent of its type, is about sufficient for an army corps, and we have a fortnight's supply of ammunition. I am not an alarmist. We have enough regiments to repel a raid, supposing the enemy's transports dodged the fleet; but Heaven help us if we dream of sending an expeditionary force to France or Egypt, or any single one of a score of vulnerable points outside the British Isles!"

"Beckett-Smythe retained one of those German chauffeurs in his service for a whole year," said the vicar, on whom a new light had dawned with the discovery of the telltale map.

"Are there many of the brood in the district now?" inquired the colonel.

"I fancy not."

"There is no need, they have done their work," said Elsie. "Last winter I met a young officer in Dresden, and he told me he had taken a walking tour through this part of Yorkshire during the summer. He knew Elmsdale quite well. He remembered the vicarage, The Elms, and the White House. Yet he said he was here only a day!"

"Fritz Bauer's maps are the best of guides," commented Colonel Grant bitterly.

The vicar was literally awe-stricken. He stooped over the map.

"Is this sort of thing going on all over the country?" he gasped.

"More or less. Naturally, the east coast has been the chief hunting ground, as that must provide the terrain of any attack. Of course, so long as the political sky remains fairly clear, as it is at this moment, there is always a chance that humanity will escape Armageddon for another generation. The world is growing more rational and its interests are becoming ever more identical. Even the Junkers are feeling the pressure of public opinion, and the great masses of the people demand peace. That is why I want Martin to learn the power of voice and pen rather than of the sword. I have been a soldier all my life, and I hate war!"

The man who had so often faced death in his country's cause spoke with real feeling. He longed to make war impossible by making victory impossible for an aggressor. He claimed no rights for Britain that he would deny Germany or any other country in the comity of nations.

Suddenly he took the map off the table and folded it.

"I'll send this curio to Whitehall," he said with a smile. "It will form part of a queer collection. Now, let's talk of something else.... Martin, after the valuer has inspected that furniture, you might see to it that the whole lot is stored in the east bedrooms. The architect will not disturb that part of the house."

"Oh, when can we look at the plans?" chimed in Elsie.

These four people, who in their way fairly represented the forty millions of Great Britain, discussed the spy's map in the drawing-room of Elmsdale vicarage on July 6th, 1914. On the sixth of August, exactly one month later, two German army corps, with full artillery and commissariat trains, were loaded into transports and brought to the mouth of the Elbe. They hoped to avoid the British fleet, and their objective was the Yorkshire coast between Whitby and Filey. Once ashore, they meant entrenching a camp on the Elmsdale moor. Obviously, they did not dream of conquering England by one daring foray. Their purpose was to keep the small army of Britain fully occupied until France was humbled to the dust. They would lose the whole hundred thousand men. But what of that? German soldiers are regarded as cannon fodder by their rulers, and the price in human lives would not be too costly if it retained British troops at home.

It was an audacious scheme, and audacity is the first principle of successful war. Its very spine and marrow was the knowledge of the North and East Ridings gained in time of peace by the officers who would lead the invading host.

That it failed was due to England's sailors, the men who broke Napoleon, and were destined, by God's good grace, to break the robber empire of Germany.



CHAPTER XX

THE RIGOR OF THE GAME

Elmsdale at war is very like Elmsdale in peace. At least, that was Martin's first impression when he and General Grant motored to the village from York on a day in September, 1915. Father and son had passed unscathed through the hellfire of Loos, General Grant in command of a brigade, and Martin a captain in a Kitchener battalion. They were in England on leave now, the middle-aged general for five days, and the youthful captain for ten, and the purpose of this joint home-coming was Martin's marriage.

When it became evident that the world struggle would last years rather than months, General Grant and the vicar put their heads together, metaphorically speaking, since the connecting link was the field post-office, and arranged a war wedding. Why should the young people wait? they argued. Every consideration pointed the other way. With Martin wedded to Elsie, legal formalities as to Bolland's and the general's estate could be completed, and if Heaven blessed the union with children the continuity of two old families would be assured.

So, to Martin's intense surprise, he was called to the telephone one Saturday morning in the trenches and told that he had better hand over his company to the senior subaltern as speedily as might be, since his ten days' leave began on the Monday, such being the amiable device by which commanding officers permit juniors to reach Blighty before an all-too-brief respite from the business of killing Germans begins officially.

He met his father at Boulogne, and there learnt that which he had only suspected hitherto: he and Elsie were booked for an immediate honeymoon on a Scottish moor--at Cairn-corrie, to be exact. By chance the two travelers ran into Frank Beckett-Smythe, a gunner lieutenant in London, and he undertook to rush north that night to act as "best man." Father and son caught a train early on Sunday and hired a car at York, Elmsdale having no railway facilities on the day of rest.

They arrived in time to attend the evening service at the parish church, to which, *mirabile dictu*, John and Martha Bolland accompanied them. The war has broken down many barriers, but few things have crumbled to ruin more speedily than the walls of prejudice and sectarian futilities which separated the many phases of religious thought in Britain.

The church, with its small graveyard, stood in the center of the village, and the Grants had to wring scores of friendly hands before they and the others walked to the vicarage for supper. Martin and Elsie contrived to extricate themselves from the crowd slightly in advance of the older people. They felt absurdly shy. They were wandering in dreamland.

Early next morning Martin strolled into the village. He wanted to stir the sluggish current of enlistment, for England was then making a final effort to maintain her army on a voluntary basis. Elmsdale was so unchanged outwardly that he marveled. He hardly realized that it could not well be otherwise. He had seen so many French hamlets torn by war that the snug content of this sheltered nook in rural Yorkshire was almost uncanny by contrast. The very familiarity of the scene formed its strangest element. Its sights, its sounds, its homely voices, were novel to the senses of one whose normal surroundings were the abominations of war. Here were trim houses and well-filled stockyards, smiling orchards and cattle grazing in green pastures. Everywhere was peace. He was the only man in uniform, until Sergeant Benson appeared in the doorway of a cottage and saluted. The village had its own liveries--the corduroys of the carpenter, redolent of oil and turpentine, the tied-up trouser legs of the laborer, the blacksmith's leather apron, ragged and burnt, a true Vulcan's robe, the shoemaker's, shiny with the stropping of knives and seamed with cobbler's wax. The panoply of Mars looked singularly out of place in this Sleepy Hollow.

But, by degrees, he began to miss things. There were no young men in the fields. All the horses had gone, save the yearlings and those too old for the hard work of artillery and transport. He questioned Benson and found that little Elmsdale had not escaped the levy laid on the rest of Europe. Jim Bates was in the Yorkshire Regiment. Tommy Beadlam's white head was resting forever in a destroyed trench at Ypres. Tom Chandler had fallen at Gallipoli. Evelyn Atkinson was a nurse, and her two sisters were "in munitions" at Leeds. Yes, there were some shirkers, but not many. For the most part, they were hidden in the moorland farms. "T' captain" would remember Georgie Jackson? Well, he was one of the stand-backs--wouldn't go till he was fetched. The village girls made his life a misery, so he "hired" at the Broad Ings, miles away in the depths of the moor. One night about a month ago one of those "d--d Zeppelines" dropped a bomb on the heather, which caught fire. A second, following a murder trail to Newcastle, saw the resultant blaze and dropped twelve bombs. A third, believing that real damage was being done, flung out its whole cargo of twenty-nine bombs.

"So, now, sir," grinned Benson, "there's a fine lot o' pot-holes i' t' moor. Georgie was badly scairt. He saw the three Zepps, an' t' bombs fell all over t' farm. Next mornin' he fund three sheep banged te bits. An' what d'ye think? He went

straight te Whitby an' 'listed. He hez a bunch o' singed wool in his pocket, an' sweers he'll mak' some Jarman eat it."

So Martin only recruited a wife that day, and evidently secured a sensible one, for Elsie, taking thought, on hearing certain vivid descriptions of trench life on the Sunday evening, vetoed the wedding trip to Scotland, and persuaded her husband to "go the limit" in London, where plenty of society and a round of theaters acted as a wholesome tonic after the monotony of high-explosive existence in a dugout.

In February, 1917, Martin was "in billets" at Armentieres. He had been promoted to the staff, and had fairly earned this coveted recognition by a series of daring excursions into "No Man's Land" every night for a week, which enabled him to plan an attack on the German lines at Chapelle d'Armentieres. Never thinking of any personal gain, he drew up a memorandum, which he submitted to his colonel. The latter sent the document to Divisional Headquarters; the scheme was approved. Fritz was pushed forcibly half a mile nearer Lille, and "Captain Reginald Ingram Grant" was informed, in the dry language of the *Gazette*, that in future he would wear a red band around his field service cap and little red tabs on the shoulders of his tunic.

That was a great day for him, but his elation was as nothing compared with the joy of Elmsdale when the *Messenger* reprinted the announcement. Elsie, of course, imagined that her husband was now comparatively safe for the rest of the war, and he has never undeceived her. As a matter of fact, his first real "job" was to carry out a fresh series of observations at a point south of Armentieres along the road to Arras. This might involve another six days of lurking in dugouts at the front and six nights of crawling through and under German barbed wire.

His companion was a sapper sergeant named Mason. They suspected that the German position was heavily mined in anticipation of an attack at that very point, and it was part of their business at the outset to ascertain whether or not this was the case.

The enemy's lines were about one hundred and fifty yards away, and all observers agree that the chief difficulty experienced in the pitch-black darkness of a cloudy, moonless night is to estimate the distance covered. Crawling over shell-torn ground, slow work at the best, is rendered slower by the frequent waits necessary while rockets flare overhead and Verrey lights describe brilliant parabolas in unexpected directions. Martin, up to every trick and dodge of the "listening post," surveyed the field of operations through a periscope, and noticed that one of the ditches which mark boundaries in northern France ran almost in a straight line from the British trenches to the German, and had at one time been reinforced by posts and rails. The fence was destroyed, but many of the posts remained, some intact, others mere jagged stumps. He estimated that the nineteenth was not more than a couple of yards from the enemy's wire, and knew of old that it was in just such an irregular hollow he might expect to find a weak place in the entanglement.

Mason agreed with him.

"We can save a lot of time by following that trail, sir," he said. "There's only one drawback----"

"That Fritz may have hit on the same scheme," laughed Martin. "Possible; but we must chance it."

Mason and he were old associates. They had perfected a code of signals, by touch, that enabled them to work in absolute silence. Thus, a slight hold meant "Halt"; a slight push, "Advance"; a slight pull, "Retire." Each carried a trench knife and a revolver, the latter for use as a last resource only. They were not going out for fighting but for observation. If enemy patrols were encountered, they must be avoided. Germans are not phlegmatic, but, on the contrary, highly nervous. Continuous raids by British bombing parties had put sentries "on the jump," and the least noise which was not explained by a whispered password attracted a heavy spray of machine-gun fire. Especially was this the case during the hour before dawn. By hurrying out immediately after darkness set in, the two counted on nearing the German front-line trench at a time when reliefs were being posted and fatigue parties were plodding to the "dump" for the next day's rations.

"What time will you be back?" inquired the subaltern in charge of the platoon holding that part of the British trench. It was his duty to warn sentries to be on the lookout for the return of scouting parties.

Martin glanced at the luminous watch on his wrist. It was then seven o'clock, and the night promised to be dark and quiet. The evening "strafe" had just ended, and the German guns would reopen fire on the trenches about five in the morning. During the intervening hours the artillery would indulge in groups of long shots, hoping to catch the commissariat or a regiment marching on the *pave* in column of fours.

"About twelve," said Martin.

"Well, so long, sir! I'll have some coffee ready."

"So long!" And Martin led the way up a trench ladder.

No man wishes another "Good luck!" in these enterprises. By a curious inversion of meaning, "Good luck!" implies a ninety per cent chance of getting killed!

The two advanced rapidly for the first hundred yards. Then they separated, each crawling out into the open for about twenty yards to right and left. Snuggling into a convenient shell hole, they would listen intently, with an ear to the ground, their object being to detect the rhythmic beat of a pick, if a mining party was busy. Each remained exactly ten minutes. Then they met and compared notes, always by signal. If necessary, they would visit a suspected locality together and endeavor to locate the line of the tunnel.

It was essential that the British side of "No Man's Land" should not be too quiet. Every few minutes a rocket or a Verrey light would soar over that torn Golgotha. But there was method in the seeming madness. The first and second glare would illuminate an area well removed from Martin's territory. The third might be right over him or Mason, but they were then so well hidden that the sharpest eye could not discern their presence.

By nine o'clock they had covered more than a hundred yards of the enemy's front, skirting his trip-wire throughout the whole distance. They had heard no fewer than six mining parties. Each had advanced some thirty yards. In effect, if the German trench was to be taken at all, the attack must be made next day, and the artillery preparation should commence at dawn. Instead of returning to the subaltern's dugout at midnight, Martin wanted to reach the telephone not later than ten, and hurry back to headquarters. The staff would have another sleepless night, but a British battalion would not be blown up while its successive "waves" were crossing "No Man's Land."

Mason and he crept like lizards to the sunk fence. All they needed now was a close scrutiny of the German parapet in that section. It was a likely site for a machine-gun emplacement and, in that case, would receive special attention from a battery of 4.7s.

They reached the ditch shortly before a rocket was due overhead. Making assurance doubly sure, they flattened against the outer slope of a shell hole, took off their caps, and each sought a tuft of grass through which to peer.

Simultaneously, by two short taps, both conveyed a warning. They had heard a slight rustling directly in front. A Verrey light, and not a rocket, flamed through the darkness. Its brilliancy was intense. But the Verrey light has a peculiar property: far more effective than the rocket when it reveals troops in motion, it is rendered practically useless if men remain still. Working parties and scouts counteract its vivid beams by absolute rigidity. The uplifted pick or hammer, the advanced foot, the raised arm, must be kept in statuesque repose, and the reward is complete safety. A rocket, on the other hand, though not half so deadly in exposing an attack, demands that every man within its periphery shall endeavor forthwith to blend with the earth, or he will surely be seen and shot at.

The two Britons, looking through stalks of withered herbage, found themselves gazing into the eyes of a couple of Germans crouching on the level barely six feet away. It seemed literally impossible that the enemy observers should not see them. But strange things happen in war. The Germans were scanning all the visible ground; the Englishmen happened to be on the alert for a recognized danger in that identical spot. So the one party, watching space, saw nothing; the other, prepared for a specific discovery, made it. What was more, when the light failed, the Germans were assured of comparative safety, while their opponents had measured the extent of an instant peril and got ready to face it.

They knew, too, that the Germans must be killed or captured. One was a major, the other a noncommissioned officer, and men of such rank were seldom deputed by the enemy to roam at large through the strip of debated land which British endeavor, drawn by its sporting uncertainties, had rendered most unhealthy for human "game" of the Hun species.

A dark night in that part of French Flanders becomes palpably black during a few seconds after a flare. The Englishmen squatted back on their heels. Neither drew his revolver, but each right hand clutched a trench knife, a peculiarly murderous-looking implement with an oval handle, and shaped like a corkscrew, except that the screw is replaced by a short, flat, dagger-pointed blade. No signal was needed. Each knew exactly what to do. The accident of position allotted the major to Martin.

The Germans came on stealthily. They had noted the shell-hole, and sat on its crumbling edge, meaning to slide down and creep out on the other side. Martin's left hand gripped a stout boot by the ankle. In the fifth of a second he had a heavy body twisted violently and flung face down in the loose earth at the bottom of the hole. A knee was planted in the small of the prisoner's back, the point of the knife was under his right ear, and Martin was saying, in quite

understandable German:

"If you move or speak, I'll cut your throat!"

The words have a brutal sound, but it does not pay to be squeamish on such occasions, and the German language adapts itself naturally to phrases of the kind.

Sergeant Mason had to solve his own problem by a different method. The quarry chanced to be leaning forward at the moment a vicious tug accelerated his progress. As a result, he fell on top of the hunter, and there was nothing for it but the knife. A ghastly squeal was barely stifled by the Englishman's hand over the victim's mouth. At thirty yards, or thereabouts, and coming from a deep hole, the noise might have been a grunt. Nevertheless, it reached the German trench.

"Wer da?" hissed a voice, and Martin heard the click of a machine-gun as it swung on its tripod.

He did not fear the gun, which only meant a period of waiting while its bullets cracked overhead. What he did dread was a search party, as German majors are valuable birds, and must be safeguarded. The situation called for the desperate measure he took. The point of the knife entered his captive's neck, and he whispered:

"Tell your men they must keep quiet, or you die now!"

He allowed the almost choking man to raise his head. The German knew that his life was forfeit if he did not obey the order. A certain gurgling, ever growing weaker, showed that his companion would soon be a corpse.

"Shut up, sheep's head!" he growled.

It sufficed. That is the way German majors talk to their inferiors.

The engineer sergeant wriggled nearer.

"Couldn't help it, sir," he breathed. "I had to give him one!"

"Go through him for papers and bring me his belt."

Within a minute the officer's hands were fastened behind his back. Then he was permitted to rise and, after being duly warned, told to accompany Mason. Martin followed, and the three began the return journey. A German rocket bothered them once, but the German was quick as they to fall flat. Evidently he was not minded to offer a target for marksmen on either side.

Soon Mason was sent forward to warn the sentries. Quarter of an hour after the episode in the shell hole Martin, having come from the telephone, was examining his prisoner by the light of an electric torch in a dugout.

"What is your name?" he inquired.

"Freiherr Georg von Struben, major of artillery," was the somewhat grandiloquent answer.

"Do you speak English?"

"Nod mooch."

Some long dormant chord of memory vibrated in Martin's brain. He held the torch closer. Von Struben was a tall, well-built Prussian. He smiled, meaning probably to make the best of a bad business. His face was soiled with clay and perspiration. A streak of blood had run from a slight cut over an eyebrow. But the white scar of an old saber wound, the outcome of a duelling bout in some university *burschenschaft*, creased down its center when he smiled. Then Martin knew.

"Fritz Bauer!" he cried.

The German started, though he recovered his self-control promptly.

"You haf nod unterstant," he said. "I dell you my nem----"

"That's all right, Fritz," laughed Martin. "You spoke good English when you were in Elmsdale. You could fool me then into giving you valuable information for your precious scheme of invading England. Now it's my turn! Have you forgotten Martin Bolland?"

Blank incredulity yielded to evident fear in the other man's eyes. With obvious effort, he stiffened.

"I was acting under orders, Captain Bolland," he said.

"Not Bolland, but Grant," laughed Martin. "I, too, have changed my name, but for a more honorable reason."

The words seemed to irritate von Struben.

"I did noding dishonorable," he protested. "I was dere by command. If it wasn't for your d--d fleet, I would have lodged once more in de Elms eighdeen monds ago."

"I know," said Martin. "We found your map, the map which Angele stole because you wouldn't take her in the car the day we went on the moor."

In all likelihood the prisoner's nerves were on edge. He had gone through a good deal since being hauled into the shell hole, and was by no means prepared for this display of intimate knowledge of his past career by the youthful looking Briton who had manhandled him so effectually. Be that as it may, he was so disconcerted by the mere allusion to Angele that a fantastic notion gripped Martin. He pursued it at once.

"We English are not quite such idiots as you like to imagine us, major," he went on, and so ready was his speech that the pause was hardly perceptible. "Mrs. Saumarez--or, describing her by her other name, the Baroness von Edelstein--was a far more dangerous person than you. It took time to run her to earth--you know what that means? when a fox is chased to a burrow by hounds--but our Intelligence Department sized her up correctly at last."

Now this was nothing more than the wildest guessing, a product of many a long talk with Elsie, the vicar, and General Grant during the early days of the war. But von Struben was manifestly so ill at ease that he had to cover his discomfiture under a frown.

"I have not seen de lady for ten years," he said.

This disclaimer was needless. He had been wiser to have cursed Angele for purloining his map.

"Perhaps not. She avoided Berlin. But you have heard of her."

Again was the former spy guilty of stupidity. He set his lips like a steel trap. Doubtful what to say, he said nothing.

Martin nodded to Sergeant Mason.

"Just go through the major's pockets," he said. "You know what we want."

Mason's knowledge was precise. He left the prisoner his money, watch, pipe, and handkerchief. The remainder of his belongings were made up into a bundle. Highly valuable treasure-trove was contained therein, the major having in his possession a detailed list of all arms in the Fifty-seventh Brandenburg Division and a sketch of the trench system which it occupied. A glance showed Martin that the Fifty-seventh Division lay directly in front.

He turned to the subaltern whose dugout he was using and who had witnessed the foregoing scene in silence.

"Can you send a corporal's guard to D.H.Q. in charge of the prisoner?" he asked.

"Certainly," said the other. "By the way, come outside and have a cigarette."

Cigarettes are not lighted in front-line communication trenches after nightfall--not by officers, at any rate--nor do second lieutenants address staff captains so flippantly. Martin read something more into the invitation than appeared on the surface. He was right.

"About this Mrs. Saumarez you spoke of just now," said the subaltern when they were beyond the closed door of the dugout. "Is she the widow of one of our fellows, a Hussar colonel?"

"Yes."

"Do you know she is living in Paris?"

"Well, I heard some few years since that she was residing there."

"She's there now. She runs a sort of hostel for youngsters on short leave. She's supposed to charge a small fee, but doesn't. And there's drinks galore for all comers. She's extraordinarily popular, of course, but I--er--well, one hates saying it. Still, you made me sit up and take notice when you mentioned the Intelligence Department. Mrs. Saumarez has a wonderful acquaintance with the British front. She tells you things--don't you know--and one is led on to talk--sort of reciprocity, eh?"

Martin drew a deep breath. He almost dreaded putting the inevitable question.

"Is her daughter with her--a girl of twenty-one, named Angele?"

"No. Never heard Mrs. Saumarez so much as mention her."

"Thanks. We've done a good night's work, I fancy. And--this for yourself only--there may be a scrap to-morrow afternoon."

"Fine! I want to stretch my legs. Been in this bally hole nine days. Well, here's your corporal. Good-night, sir."

"Good-night!"

And Martin trudged through the mud with Sergeant Mason behind von Struben and the escort.

CHAPTER XXI

NEARING THE END

Sixty hours elapsed before Martin was able to unwrap the puttees from off his stiff legs and cut the laces of boots so caked with mud that he was too weary to untie them. In that time, as the official report put it, "enemy trenches extending from Rue du Bois to Houplines, over a front of nearly three miles, were occupied to an average depth of one thousand yards, and our troops are now consolidating the new territory."

A bald announcement, indeed! Martin was one of the few who knew what it really meant. He had helped to organize the victory; he could sum up its costs. But this record is not a history of the war, nor even of one young soldier's share in it. Martin himself has developed a literary style noteworthy for its simple directness. Some day, if he survives, he may tell his own story.

When the last of twelve hundred prisoners had been mustered in the Grande Place of Armentieres, when the attacking battalions had been relieved and the reserve artillery was shelling Fritz's hastily formed gun positions, when the last ambulance wagon of the "special" division had sped over the *pave* to the base hospital at Bailleul, Martin thought he was free to go to bed.

As a matter of fact, he was not. Utterly spent, he had thrown himself on a cot and had slept the sleep of complete exhaustion for half an hour, when a brigade major discovered that "Captain Grant" was at liberty, and detailed him for an immediate inquiry. The facts were set forth on Army Form 122: "On the night of the 10th inst. a barrel of rum, delivered at Brigade Dump No. 35, was stolen or mislaid. It was last seen in trench 77. For investigation and report to D.A.Q.M.G. 50th Div." That barrel of rum will never be seen again, though it was destined to roll through reams of variously numbered army forms during many a week.

But it did not disturb Martin's slumbers. A brigadier general happened to hear his name given to an orderly.

"Who's that?" he inquired sharply. "Grant, did you say?"

"Yes, sir," answered the brigade major.

"Don't be such a Heaven-condemned idiot!" said the general, or, rather, he used words to that effect. "Grant was all through that push. Find some other fellow."

Brigade majors are necessarily inhuman. It is nothing to them what a man may have done--they think only of the next job. They are steeled alike to pity and reproach. This one was no exception among the tribe. He merely thumbed a list and said to the orderly:

"Give that chit to Mr. Fortescue."

So a subaltern began the chase. He smelt the rum through a whole company of Gordons, but the barrel lies hid a fathom deep in the mud of Flanders.

That same afternoon Martin woke up, refreshed in mind and body. He secured a hot bath, "dolloed up" in clean clothes, and strolled out to buy some socks from "Madame," the famous Frenchwoman who has kept her shop open in Armentieres throughout three years of shell fire.

A Yorkshire battalion was "standing at ease" in the street while their officers and color sergeants engaged in a wrangle about billets. The regiment had taken part in the "push" and bore the outward and visible signs of that inward grace which had carried them beyond the third line German trench. A lance corporal was playing "Tipperary" on a mouth-organ.

Someone shouted: "Give us 'Home Fires,' Jim"--and "Jim" ran a preliminary flourish before Martin recognized the musician.

"Why, if it isn't Jim Bates!" he cried, advancing with outstretched hand.

The lance corporal drew himself up and saluted. His brown skin reddened as he shook hands, for it is not every day that a staff captain greets one of the rank and file in such democratic fashion.

"I'm main glad te see you, sir," he said. "I read of your promotion in t' *Messenger*, an' we boys of t' owd spot were real pleased. We were, an' all."

"You're keeping fit, I see," and Martin's eye fell to a *pickelhaube* tied to the sling of Bates's rifle.

"Pretty well, sir," grinned Bates. "I nearly had a relapse yesterday when that mine went up. Did ye hear of it?"

"If you mean the one they touched off at L'Epinette Farm, I saw it," said Martin. "I was at the crossroads at the moment."

"Well, fancy that, sir! I couldn't ha' bin twenty yards from you."

"Queer things happen in war. Do you remember Mrs. Saumarez's German chauffeur, a man named Fritz Bauer?"

"Quite well, sir."

"We caught him in 'No Man's Land' three nights ago. He is a major now."

Jim was so astonished that his mouth opened, just as it would have done ten years earlier.

"By gum!" he cried. "That takes it! An' it's hardly a month since I saw Miss Angele in Amiens."

Martin's pulse quickened. The mouth-organ in Bates's hand brought him back at a bound to the night when he had forbidden Jim to play for Angele's dancing. And with that memory came another thought. Mrs. Saumarez in Paris--her daughter in Amiens--why this devotion to such nerve centers of the war?

"Are you sure?" he said. "You would hardly recognize her. She is ten years older--a woman, not a child."

Bates laughed. He dropped his voice.

"She was always a bit owd-fashioned, sir. I'm not mistakken. It kem about this way. It was her, right enough. Our colonel's shover fell sick, so I took on the car for a week. One day I was waitin' outside the Hotel dew Nord at Amiens when a French Red Cross auto drove up, an' out stepped Miss Angele. I twigged her at once. I'd know them eyes of hers anywheres. She hopped into the hotel, walkin' like a ballet-dancer. Hooiver, I goes up to her shover an' sez: 'Pardonnay moy, but ain't that Mees Angele Saumarez?' He talked a lot--these Frenchies always do--but I med out he didn't understand. So I parlay-voood some more, and soon I got the hang of things. She's married now, an' I have her new name an' address in my kit-bag. But I remember 'em, all right. I can't pronounce 'em, but I can spell 'em."

And Lance Corporal Bates spelled: "La Comtesse Barthelemi de Saint-Ivoy, 2 bis, Impasse Fautet, Rue Blanche, Paris."

"It looks funny," went on Jim anxiously, "but it's just as her shover wrote it."

Martin affected to treat this information lightly.

"I'm exceedingly glad I came across you," he said. "How would you like to be a sergeant, Jim?"

Bates grinned widely.

"It's a lot more work, but it does mean better grub, sir," he confided.

"Very well. Don't mention it to anyone, and I'll see what can be done. It shouldn't be difficult, since you've earned the first stripe already."

Martin found his brigadier at the mess. A few minutes' conversation with the great man led him to a greater in the person of the divisional general. Yet a few more minutes of earnest talk, and he was in a car, bound for General Grant's headquarters, which he reached late that night. It was long after midnight when the two retired, and the son's face was almost as worn and care-lined as the father's ere the discussion ended.

Few problems have been so baffling and none more dangerous to the Allied armies in France than the German spy system. It was so perfect before the war, every possible combination of circumstances had been foreseen and provided against so fully, that the most thorough hunting out and ruthless punishment of enemy agents has failed to crush the organization. The snake has been scotched, but not killed. Its venom is still potent. Every officer on the staff and many senior regimental officers have been astounded time and again by the completeness and up-to-date nature of the information possessed by the Germans. Surprise attacks planned with the utmost secrecy have found enemy trenches held by packed reserves and swarming with additional machine-guns. Newly established ammunition depots, carefully screened, have been bombed next day by aeroplanes and subjected to high-angle fire. Troop movements by rail over long distances have become known, and their effect discounted. Flanders, in particular, is a plague-spot of espionage which has cost Britain an untold sacrifice of life and an almost immeasurable waste of effort.

Small wonder, then, that Martin's forehead should be seamed with foreboding. If his suspicions, which his father shared, were justified, the French Intelligence Department would quickly determine the truth, and no power on earth could save Angele and her mother from a firing party. France knows her peril and stamps it out unflinchingly. Of late,

too, the British authorities adopt the same rigorous measures. The spy, man or woman, is shown no mercy.

And now the whirligig of events had placed in Martin's hands the question of life or death for Mrs. Saumarez and Angele. It was a loathsome burden. He rebelled against it. During the long run to Paris his very soul writhed at the thought that fate was making him their executioner. He tried to steel his resolution by dwelling on the mischief they might have caused by thinking rather of the gallant comrades laid forever in the soil of France because of their murderous duplicity than of the woman who was once his friend, of the girl whose kisses had once thrilled him to the core. Worst of all, both General Grant and he himself felt some measure of responsibility for their failure to institute a searching inquiry as to Mrs. Saumarez's whereabouts when war broke out.

But he was distraught and miserable. He had a notion--a well-founded one, as it transpired--that an approving general had recommended him for the Military Cross; but from all appearance he might have expected a letter from the War Office announcing his dismissal from the service.

At last, after a struggle which left him so broken that at a cordon near Paris he was detained several minutes while a *sous-officier* who did not like his looks communicated with a superior potentate, he made up his mind. Whate'er befell, he would give Angele and her mother one chance. If they decided to take it, well and good. If not, they must face the cold-eyed inquisition of the Quai d'Orsay.

Luckily, as matters turned out, he elected to call on Mrs. Saumarez first. For one thing, her house in the Rue Henri was not far from a hotel on the Champs Elysees where he was known to the management; for another, he wished to run no risk of being outwitted by Angele. If she and her mother were guilty of the ineffable infamy of betraying both the country of their nationality and that which sheltered them they must be trapped so effectually as to leave no room for doubt.

He was also fortunate in the fact that his soldier chauffeur, when given the choice, decided to wait and drive him to the Rue Henri. The man was candid as to his own plans for the evening.

"When I put the car up I'll have a hot bath and go to bed, sir," he said. "I've not had five hours' sleep straight on end during the past three weeks, an' I know wot'll happen if I start hittin' it up around these bullyvards. Me for the feathers at nine o'clock! So, if you don't mind, sir----"

Martin knew what the man meant. He wanted to be kept busy. One hour of enforced liberty implied the risk of meeting some hilarious comrades. Even in Paris, strict as the police regulations may be, Britons from the front are able to sit up late, and the parties are seldom "dry."

So officer and man removed some of the marks of a long journey, ate a good meal, and about eight o'clock arrived at Mrs. Saumarez's house. Life might be convivial enough inside, but the place looked deserted, almost forbidding, externally.

Indeed, Martin hesitated before pressing an electric bell and consulted a notebook to verify the street and number given him by the subaltern on the night von Struben was captured. But he had not erred. His memory never failed. There could be no doubt but that his special gift in this direction had been responsible for a rapid promotion, since military training, on the mental side, depends largely on a letter-perfect accuracy of recollection.

When he rang, however, the door opened at once. A bareheaded man in civilian attire, but looking most unlike a domestic, held aside a pair of heavy curtains which shut out the least ray of light from the hall.

"*Entrez, monsieur,*" he said in reply to Martin, after a sharp glance at the car and its driver.

Martin heard a latch click behind him. He passed on, to find himself before a sergeant of police seated at a table. Three policemen stood near.

"Your name and rank, monsieur?" said this official.

Martin, though surprised, almost startled, by these preliminaries, answered promptly. The sergeant nodded to one of his aides.

"Take this gentleman upstairs," he said.

"Is there any mistake?" inquired Martin. "I have come here to visit Mrs. Saumarez."

"No mistake," said the sergeant. "Follow that man, monsieur."

Assured now that some dramatic and wholly unexpected development had taken place, Martin tried to gather his wits as he mounted to the first floor. There, in a shuttered drawing-room, he confronted a shrewd-looking man in mufti, to

whom his guide handed a written slip sent by the sergeant. Evidently, this was an official of some importance.

"Shall I speak English, Captain Grant?" he said, thrusting aside a pile of documents and clearing a space on the table at which he was busy.

"Well," said Martin, smiling, "I imagine that your English is better than my French."

He sat on a chair indicated by the Frenchman. He put no questions. He guessed he was in the presence of a tragedy.

"Is Mrs. Saumarez a friend of yours?" began the stranger.

"Yes, in a sense."

"Have you seen her recently?"

"Not for ten years."

Obviously, this answer was disconcerting. It was evident, too, that Martin's name was not on a typed list which the other man had scanned with a quick eye. Martin determined to clear up an involved situation.

"I take it that you are connected with the police department?" he said. "Well, I have come from the British front at Armentieres to inquire into the uses to which this house has been put. A number of British officers have been entertained here. Our people want to know why."

He left it at that for the time being, but the Frenchman's manner became perceptibly more friendly.

"May I examine your papers?" he said.

Martin handed over the bundle of "permis de voyage," which everyone without exception must possess in order to move about the roads of western France in wartime.

"Ah!" said the official, his air changing now to one of marked relief, "this helps matters greatly. My name is Duchesne, Captain Grant--Gustave Duchesne. I belong to the Bureau de l'Interieur. So you people also have had your suspicions? There can be no doubt about it--the Baroness von Edelstein was a spy of the worst kind. The mischief that woman did was incalculable. Of course, it was hopeless to look for any real preventive work in England before the war; but we were caught napping here. You see, the widow of a British officer, a lady who had the best of credentials, and whose means were ample, hardly came under review. She kept open house, and had lived in Paris so long that her German origin was completely forgotten. In fact, the merest accident brought about her downfall."

One of the policemen came in with a written memorandum, which M. Duchesne read.

"Your chauffeur does not give information willingly," smiled the latter. "The sergeant had to threaten him with arrest before he would describe your journey to-day."

It was clear that the authorities were taking nothing for granted where Mrs. Saumarez and her visitors were concerned. Martin felt that he had stumbled to the lip of an abyss. At any rate, events were out of his hands now, and for that dispensation he was profoundly thankful.

"I think I ought to tell you what I know of Mrs. Saumarez," he said. "I don't wish to do the unfortunate woman an injustice, and my facts are so nebulous----"

"One moment, Captain Grant," interposed the Frenchman. "You may feel less constraint if you hear that the Baroness died this morning."

"Good Heavens!" was Martin's involuntary cry. "Was she executed?"

"No," said the other. "She forestalled justice by a couple of hours. The cause of death was heart failure. She was--intemperate. Her daughter was with her at the end."

"Madame Barthelemi de Saint-Ivoy!"

"You know her, then?"

"I met her in a Yorkshire village at the same time as her mother. The other day, by chance, I ascertained her name and address from one of our village lads who recognized her in Amiens about a month ago."

"Well, you were about to say----"

Martin had to put forth a physical effort to regain self-control. He plunged at once into the story of those early years.

There was little to tell with regard to Mrs. Saumarez and Angele. "Fritz Bauer" was the chief personage, and he was now well on his way to a prison camp in England.

Monsieur Duchesne was amused by the map episode in its latest phase.

"And you were so blind that you took no action?" he commented dryly.

"No. We saw, but were invincibly confident. My father sent the map to the Intelligence Department, with which he was connected until 1912, when he was given a command in the North. He and I believe now that someone in Whitehall overlooked the connection between Mrs. Saumarez and an admitted spy. She had left England, and there was so much to do when war broke out."

"Ah! If only those people in London had written us!"

"Is the affair really so bad?"

"Bad! This wretched creature showed an ingenuity that was devilish. She deceived her own daughter. That is perfectly clear. The girl married a French officer after the Battle of the Marne, and, as we have every reason to believe, thought she had persuaded her mother to break off relations with her German friends. We know now that the baroness, left to her own devices, adopted a method of conveying information to the Boches which almost defied detection. Owing to her knowledge of the British army she was able to chat with your men on a plane of intimacy which no ordinary woman could command. She found out where certain brigades were stationed and what regiments composed them. She heard to what extent battalions were decimated. She knew what types of guns were in use and what improvements were coming along in caliber and range. She was told when men were suddenly recalled from leave, and where they were going. Need I say what deductions the German Staff could make from such facts?"

"But how on earth could she convey the information in time to be of value?"

"Quite easily. There is one weak spot on our frontier--south of the German line. She wrote to an agent in Pontarlier, and this man transmitted her notes across the Swiss frontier. The rest was simple. She was caught by fate, not by us. Years ago she employed a woman from Tinchebrai as a nurse----"

"Francoise!" broke in Martin.

"Exactly--Francoise Dupont. Well, Madame Dupont died in 1913. But she had spoken of her former mistress to a nephew, and this man, a cripple, is now a Paris postman. He is a sharp-witted peasant, and, as he grew in experience, was promoted gradually to more important districts. Just a week ago he took on this very street, and when he saw the name recalled her aunt's statements about Mrs. Saumarez. He informed the Surete at once. Even then she gave us some trouble. Her letters were printed, not written, and she could post them in out-of-the-way places. However, we trapped her within forty-eight hours. Have you a battery of four 9.2's hidden in a wood three hundred meters north-west of Pont Ballot?"

Martin was so flabbergasted that he stammered.

"That--is the sort of thing--we don't discuss--anywhere," he said.

"Naturally. It happens to be also the sort of thing which Mrs. Saumarez drew out of some too-talkative lieutenant of artillery. Luckily, the fact has not crossed the border. We have the lady's notepaper and her secret signs, so are taking the liberty to supply the Boches with intelligence more useful to us."

"Then you haven't grabbed the Pontarlier man?"

"Not yet. We give him ten days. He has six left. When his time is up, the Germans will have discovered that the wire has been tapped."

Martin forced the next question.

"What of Madame de Saint-Ivoy?"

"Her case is under consideration. She is working for the Croix Rouge. That is why she was in Amiens. Her husband has been recalled from Verdun. He, by the way, is devoted to her, and she professes to hate all Germans. Thus far her record is clean."

Martin was glad to get out into the night air, though he had a strange notion that the quietude of the darkened Paris streets was unreal--that the only reality lay yonder where the shells crashed and men burrowed like moles in the earth. His chauffeur saluted.

"Glad to see you, sir," said the man. "Those blighters wanted to run me in."

"No. It's all right. The police are doing good work. Take me to the hotel. I'll follow your example and go to bed."

Martin's voice was weary. He was grateful to Providence that he had been spared the ordeal which faced him when he entered the city. But the strain was heavier than he counted on, and he craved rest, even from tumultuous memories. Before retiring, however, he wrote to Elsie--guardedly, of course--but in sufficient detail that she should understand.

Next morning, making an early start, he guided the car up the Rue Blanche, as the north road could be reached by a slight detour. He saw the Impasse Fautet, and glanced at the drawn blinds of Numero 2 bis. In one of those rooms, he supposed, Angele was lying. He had resolved not to seek her out. When the war was over, and he and his wife visited Paris, they could inquire for her. Was she wholly innocent? He hoped so. Somehow, he could not picture her as a spy. She was a disturbing influence, but her nature was not mean. At any rate, her mother's death would scare her effectually.

It was a fine morning, clear, and not too cold. His spirits rose as the car sped along a good road, after the suburban traffic was left behind. The day's news was cheering. Verdun was safe, the Armentieres "push" was an admitted gain, and the United States had reached the breaking point with Germany. Thank God, all would yet be well, and humanity would arise, blood-stained but triumphant, from the rack of torment on which it had been stretched by Teuton oppression!

"Hit her up!" he said when the car had passed through Cruel, and the next cordon was twenty miles ahead. The chauffeur stepped on the gas, and the pleasant panorama of France flew by like a land glimpsed in dreams.

Every day in far-off Elmsdale Elsie would walk to the White House, or John and Martha would visit the vicarage. If there was no letter, some crumb of comfort could be drawn from its absence. Each morning, in both households, the first haunted glance was at the casualty lists in the newspapers. But none ever spoke of that, and Elsie knew what she never told the old couple--that the thing really to be dreaded was a long white envelope from the War Office, with "O.H.M.S." stamped across it, for the relatives of fallen officers are warned before the last sad item is printed.

Elsie lived at the vicarage. The Elms was too roomy for herself and her baby boy, another Martin Bolland--such were the names given him at the christening font. So it came to pass that she and the vicar, accompanied by a nurse wheeling a perambulator, came to the White House with Martin's letter. And, heinous as were Mrs. Saumarez's faults, unforgivable though her crime, they grieved for her, since her memory in the village had been, for the most part, one of a gracious and dignified woman.

Martha wiped her spectacles after reading the letter. The word "hotel" had a comforting sound.

"It must ha' bin nice for t' lad te find hisself in a decent bed for a night," she said.

Then Elsie's eyes filled with tears.

"I only wish I had known he was there," she murmured.

"Why, honey?"

"Because, God help me, on one night, at least, I could have fallen asleep with the consciousness that he was safe!"

She averted her face, and her slight, graceful body shook with an uncontrollable emotion. The vicar was so taken aback by this unlooked-for distress on Elsie's part that his lips quivered and he dared not speak. But John Bolland's huge hand rested lightly on the young wife's shoulder.

"Dinnat fret, lass," he said. "I feel it i' me bones that Martin will come back te us. England needs such men, the whole wuld needs 'em, an' the Lord, in His goodness, will see to it that they're spared. Sometimes, when things are blackest, I liken mesen unto Job; for Job was a farmer an' bred stock, an' he was afflicted more than most. An' then I remember that the Lord blessed the latter end of Job, who died old and full of days; yet I shall die a broken man if Martin is taken. O Lord, my God, in Thee do I put my trust!"

THE END