

Trevena John

A Drake by George!



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CHAPTER I SOMETHING ABOUT THE FAMILY

Rumour, introducing the newcomer as a celebrity, began to fly about immediately Captain Drake appeared upon the scene and distinguished himself not only by blocking the single narrow street of Highfield with a presence weighing two hundred and fifty pounds, but by addressing passing men, women, and children in a voice which sounded from the church at the top of the hill to the post office at the bottom; top, middle, and bottom being comparative terms when applied to the great hills of Highfield. Rumour provoked excitement when it suggested legal influences were at work about a couple of old semi-detached cottages belonging to an absentee landlord. The man who found it necessary, on account of his bulk and stentorian voice, to acquire two cottages would have plenty of money; and wealth was much the shortest cut to fame that Highfield knew of. Rumour passed into a condition almost hysterical when builders arrived, demolished the two old cottages, erected a gabled villa of suburban type, and set up against the street a massive noticeboard, which looked as if it had been designed for some important railway station; but instead of yielding such information as "Mazeworthy Junction. Change for the Asylum," it bore the inscription, "Windward House. Captain Francis Drake, Master."

Finally, three vanloads of furniture were dragged up the hill, and the family arrived to take possession of the parish; for it became at once evident that Captain Drake regarded himself as "old man" of the place, the vicar as his sky pilot, and the male inhabitants as crushers, jollies, flatfeet, and shellbacks, all of whom were amenable to his discipline.

In any case the Captain was respected by everybody, whether they had the privilege of knowing him or not – he was one of those men who had to be known thoroughly and at once – when those vanloads of furniture drew up alongside Windward House. Such fumed oak had never been seen before in Highfield. There were vases from China, ivory images from India, living trees of the forest in flower-pots from Japan, with curiosities from all corners of the earth. There was also a large cage full of cats, another cage of monkeys, yet another of parrots, and a giant tortoise, its carapace completely covered with newspaper cuttings relating to the numerous voyages of the old sailor who, in hours of leisure, had committed to the Press columns of adventures wherein fiction was once more proved to be far more interesting and instructive than truth. Birds and beasts are not usually classed as furniture, but they were announced as such in "the inventory of my possessions" duly posted upon the noticeboard by the worthy Captain whose capacity for self-advertisement was much too great for a little country parish.

The first visitor to step aboard Windward House was the Dismal Gibcat, and he came as usual with a scowl and a grievance. The Dismal Gibcat occupied a house about a mile from the village in the company of a wife who was more dismal than himself; he called himself a gentleman in reduced circumstances, and could spell the word embarrassed with ease; he ruled the parish with his scowl, and spent all the money he could get in enjoying lawsuits with his neighbours. This gentleman inquired for Mister Drake with a fearful emphasis, and received the information that the Admiral was shaving. But a door at the top of the stairs stood open, and a moment later the master himself appeared in a state of fury, half clothed and shouting tremendously, "Captain, you rascal! Captain Francis Drake, late of the Mercantile Marine, descendant of the immortal Admiral, author of 'Tortoises: and how to treat them,' 'Comments on Cats,' part owner of the sailing ship *Topper*,

now unfortunately lying at the bottom of the Persian Gulf. Captain Francis Drake, always at the service of the Admiralty, but never at the beck and call of geese and asses."

"Willie, dear, you knew your name never was really Francis," called the troubled voice of Mrs. Drake from somewhere in the parlour.

"Stand off the bridge, Maria. Don't argue with your superior officer," roared the Captain.

He carried a shaving brush which might have been mistaken for a mop; and, as he brandished it, flakes of lather fell around like surf from a tidal wave. His immense face resembled the Bay of Biscay in a gale; dark and lowering above, masses of foam below. Removing the field of stubble was a tempestuous operation at the best of times: members of the crew kept apart from the quarterdeck, where the Captain gasped and struggled, scattering lather upon pictures, cats, and furniture. The Dismal Gibcat could not have pronounced his insult at a more unfavourable moment.

"I have called to tell you that board must be removed," he said rather nervously; for he had begun to realize that his scowl was directed against an individual who was not going to be reduced by it.

"You give sailing orders to me – tell me to hoist Blue Peter on my board! How long have you been harbour-master?" the Captain shouted as he crashed downstairs.

"We are proud of our scenery," continued the Dismal Gibcat. "That board is an eyesore. It can be seen a mile away. It completely destroys the local amenities, and, in my capacity as Chairman of the Parish Council, I advise you to remove it at once."

"Local amenities are pretty little things, but they aren't half as good as Englishmen's rights. It's a pity you didn't make a few inquiries about Captain Francis Drake, at places where's he's known, before you started on this little voyage of piracy. If you had found out something about him, and his way with mutineers, you might ha' tossed up, heads I don't go, tails I stay away. It's no use trying to scare me with rocks what aren't marked upon the chart. I've cast anchor here, I've paid my harbour dues. I've got notions about landscape what perhaps don't agree with yours; but I reckon most passengers would rather find a moorage opposite my signal station than sail half a knot with a face like yours. You can drop overboard, Mister Jolly Roger – and take my local amenity with you!"

So saying the Captain plunged his shaving brush full into the face of the Dismal Gibcat and drove him discomfited from the premises. The same evening he posted the following notice:

"Captain Francis Drake will be pleased to receive the names of all parishioners who desire him to remove this board, in order that he may attend to each grievance personally. He begs to notify friends and neighbours that the parrots are shedding their feathers just now, also that he possesses a barrel of tar. *Verbum sap.*, and God save the King!" The hint was sufficient, for the Dismal Gibcat had been seen upon the road with his scowl so thoroughly lathered that it looked almost like a grin. Not a complaint was received. Indeed the vicar went so far as to declare the noticeboard was a distinct acquisition to Highfield.

Such was the beginning of the absolute monarchy of Captain William Drake. He dethroned the Dismal Gibcat from his chairmanship and converted the Parish Council into a monologue. He became vicar's churchwarden, and kept the key of the church in his pocket. He introduced a flower show, at which only vegetables were shown, judged the exhibits himself with a tape measure, and awarded prizes according to length and circumference. He collected money for the building of a Parish Hall, where the inhabitants might assemble upon winter evenings, to drink gassy liquors and listen to his yarns. His voice stormed continually. Even when darkness had fallen, a muffled roar sounded from Windward House, where Captain Drake would be reading the newspaper aloud, denouncing every form of government, and declaring that nothing sailed between the British Empire and disaster except the ships of the mercantile marine. And during the night his snores sounded like distant traffic, except when unable to sleep; and then he would sit up in bed

and sing hymns for those at sea, until cattle ran about the fields, and cocks began to crow, and dogs set up a howl in every farmyard.

His untruthfulness, which harmed nobody, was due entirely to a powerful imagination. Voice and body, alike tremendous, made him conceited to such an extent that, had he been ushered into the presence of any sovereign, except the King of England – whom he regarded as an equal – he would perhaps have given Majesty permission to be seated, and might even have encouraged him to speak with a certain amount of familiarity. After having commanded a ship for a number of years, he was intolerant of even the mildest form of opposition; while the knowledge that he had succeeded in this life supplied him with an extra personality of self-confidence.

His tyranny was quite a good thing for Highfield. It caused the inhabitants to remember – and some to discover – there were other places on the map no less important. It was responsible for certain improvements, such as the introduction of telegrams and an evening post. But it did not succeed in impressing upon the people the fairly obvious fact that some other country would in time become so jealous of their territory as to lay siege to the church, general store, and post office, with the idea of breaking open poor-box and till, and escaping with loose cash and stamps; for Highfield, being in the middle of Devonshire, therefore at the centre of the universe, evinced a fine contempt for foreign countries. Captain Drake was fond of his joke, but he simply made a braying ass of himself when he declared other countries beside England possessed a mighty army, although the same listeners were well able to accept the statement that he had once adopted a mermaid.

On this single matter the Captain was a pessimist; and, as he believed in appealing to the eye when the appeal to the ear failed, he prepared and set up another noticeboard, upon which he had painted in large letters with his own hand, "The enemy will be in Highfield tomorrow;" and he whipped small boys who threw stones at it; and, when their parents grumbled, he threatened to whip them too. The mild vicar entirely lost his temper upon this occasion, and told the Captain plainly he was stirring up evil passions in the parish and corrupting the morals of the young.

"That board may tell a lie for a good many years; but it will speak the truth at last," came the answer.

The family at Windward House consisted of the Captain and his wife, their nephew George, with the two servants, Kezia and Bessie. Mrs. Drake was a lady of substance, having spent by far the greater part of her life in a position which, when not recumbent, had been sedentary: when travelling with her husband the compartment they occupied had a singularly crowded appearance. She and the Captain were devoted to each other, in spite of the fact that he had not fallen in love with her until he had made sure she did possess a comfortable income, even though it was derived from trust funds in which she enjoyed a life interest only.

"You commenced, my love, as the loadstone of my career," remarked the Captain upon the occasion of their silver wedding, "and have continued as the pole star of my existence."

Having no children, they adopted the son of the Captain's younger brother, who had died at an early age, after having attempted almost every form of livelihood, and trying none which did not make him poorer. George was apparently making it his business in life to defeat this record. He had occupied thirty years in seeking to discover the most restful method of leaning against a wall, and the least embarrassing manner of keeping the hands at ease within his trouser pockets. He had been sent to school, but ran away. He had been exiled to Canada, but had returned as a stowaway. He had been placed in business, but dismissed at the end of a week. Mrs. Drake often wondered why George had been created. Most human pegs can find a hole somewhere, but George was neither square nor round; and shapeless holes are somehow not provided.

Kezia had entered Mrs. Drake's service at a very early age, and was determined upon remaining with the family until the end. She knew nothing about herself, except that she was a respectable person and belonged to the Church of England. She did not know her age, but believed she had been born in Exeter since the building of the cathedral; for she recalled, as her earliest

experience, falling upon her face beside the west front of that building on a cold winter's day, and being picked up by no less a person than the Dean, who had made a joke about the ungodly and slippery places, which was published in a local paper, quoted in the Press of the country as a witticism of the Duke of Wellington, and translated into most of the European languages in consequence. At all events, Kezia had belonged to the Church of England ever since. She was not sure of her Christian name, but felt certain it was Biblical, and rather fancied, "'twur one of Job's young ladies;" and she did not oppose Mrs. Drake's preference for Kezia. Nor did she know her surname, but had an idea her father had been called Tom by his wives, of whom he had two; and, as she could remember two Mrs. Toms, it seemed probable that the first had been her mother. She had always got along very nicely without a surname, which was not nearly so necessary to a woman as to a man: she really did not want one, unless the man who belonged to it had a voice and figure like her dear admiral. She had looked with enthusiasm upon that massive form, and had listened in admiration to that mighty voice, until she felt that an ordinary man with a normal voice would quickly make her dull and peevish.

Bessie had not yet become a person of importance. She was quite young, fairly good looking, and still growing, which was alarming since she was already out of proportion with the doors of Windward House. Neither she nor her master made a dignified entry into the parlour; for Bessie had to stoop, while the Captain was forced to turn sideways. Mrs. Drake just fitted when nobody flustered her. Bessie knew the whole history of herself and family; and was proud of the fact that her father owned a fishing smack, while both her brothers would have entered the Navy had they not suffered from an incurable tendency to reject rations at the first rolling of the ship.

Now that the Captain was settled in the haven of Highfield, he had solved all his difficulties except the one problem of finding a place in the world for George. About twice a week he created a thunderstorm about his nephew, who remained in the attitude of an admiring listener until the tempest of tangled metaphor concerning starvation ahead, rudderless vessels, and vagabonds begging their bread, had died away along the village street; and then the cunning rascal would either place a trembling hand to his forehead declaring he had not much longer to live, or shuffle towards the door with the announcement that it might just as well happen at once, and drowning was the best way he could think of, as he could not afford to purchase fire-arms or poison; besides, a watery grave was the proper ending for a Drake. He generally added it was the man whom he venerated, the man who was content to remain in a humble position when he should have been First Lord of the Admiralty, the man who was the British Empire's principal asset – his uncle – who had driven him to this. Then the Captain, who was a soft-hearted old simpleton where his family was concerned, would take George by the shoulders, press him into a chair, give him money to buy tobacco which might ease his nerves, beg for his forgiveness, and behave like a beneficent Providence until wind and weather were favourable for the next thunderstorm.

As a matter of fact, the Captain loved his nephew, who supported his opinions and flattered him continually. Besides, George was fond of cats, and respected the monkeys, and would frequently take the tortoise for a stroll. Mrs. Drake, on the other hand, made no secret of her contempt for an able-bodied man who seemed to regard Windward House as an hotel where he could receive board and lodging without payment. She reminded George constantly she had no money to leave, and when she was gone he would find himself dependent upon charity; but George would beg her not to worry, as he had no intention of outliving anyone who was so good to him. Mrs. Drake then stated that, in her opinion, he would in a future state of existence be separated from his uncle and herself, and for that alone he ought to feel ashamed. And George admitted he was ashamed, but even an ever present sense of shame was better, he thought, than a separation from his uncle and aunt in this life.

Mrs. Drake had a good reason for not insisting upon George's departure. Doctors had warned her that the Captain's immense size was not a healthy symptom: upon his last voyage he had been

discovered unconscious in his cabin; and although he declared subsequently this was nothing more than a fit of exhaustion easily to be explained by his first mate's habit of answering back, it was nevertheless accepted as a danger signal which made retirement necessary. Even the unprofitable George might be of service should a similar fit of exhaustion seize upon the Captain in his house.

CHAPTER II

EXHIBITION DAY AT WINDWARD HOUSE

"Mansion and grounds will be thrown open to the public on Sunday afternoon, between the hours of three and five, for the inspection of the rare and costly antiquities collected during his numerous voyages by Captain Francis Drake, who will personally conduct parties. As the hall carpet is of inestimable value, having formerly covered a floor in the Yildiz Palace, visitors are earnestly requested to wipe their boots."

"I think you have forgotten, William," said Mrs. Drake, when her husband had posted this notice, "how you bought that strip of carpet at an auction sale for eighteen pence. The piece you bought from Turkey is in Bessie's bedroom."

"Ah, yes, my dear, but it might just as well be in the hall, and for the purpose of exhibition we can quite easily imagine it *is* there," replied the most capable showman.

By twenty minutes past three, which was punctual for Highfield, a respectable number of villagers had gathered beside the noticeboard as though awaiting an excursion train: old men and young, women and children, stood huddled together like so many prisoners of war, all very solemn and anxious. One little boy was sobbing bitterly because a report had reached him concerning another little boy who had been invited beyond that gate and introduced to the giant tortoise, which had displayed since then a singularly well-nourished appearance. Therefore he was vastly relieved when the Captain announced that, owing to the size of the crowd, which was adopting a closer formation every moment, children would not be admitted that afternoon, but a separate day would be arranged for the little ones, when they could play in the garden and feed the animals; an ominous invitation which made the little boy cry yet louder.

The Yellow Leaf, who wore a coat not much younger than himself, as the father of the people, and related to everybody within a ten mile radius, stepped first into the house. He was, however, better dressed than the Wallower in Wealth, who was believed to own a mattress so well stuffed with gold and silver pieces that it could not be turned without the aid of crowbars. The Gentle Shepherd paused on the threshold to scrape the soles of his boots with a knife. The Dumpy Philosopher nervously unfastened a collar which was borrowed. The ladies wore all the finery they possessed.

"You are now, ladies and gentlemen, standing in the hall of Windward House, upon the priceless carpet used by a former Sultan of Turkey as a praying mat," began the Captain.

"Must ha' been a religious gentleman," said the Yellow Leaf approvingly, as he tapped his stick upon the threadbare patches.

"And fond of a quiet smoke," added Squinting Jack, pointing to some holes obviously caused by cigar ends.

"What size of a place would this Yildiz Parish be?" inquired the Gentle Shepherd.

"Palace, my dear old fellow. It's the Windsor Castle of Turkey, where the Sultan prays and smokes, and signs death sentences of his Christian subjects."

"Amazing small rooms," remarked the Dumpy Philosopher curtly.

"The Turks don't cover the whole of their floors like we do," explained the Captain. "When the Sultan wants to pray, they spread a mat like this before the throne, and he comes down on it. When he's done praying, they roll up the mat and chuck it out of the window, for the Sultan never uses the same bit of carpet twice. I happened to be passing underneath his window when this particular mat was thrown out, so I picked it up and nipped off with it, though Christians are forbidden by the law of Turkey to touch anything the Sultan has even looked at."

"Didn't 'em try to stop ye?" asked a lady.

"They did," said the Captain grimly. "Though boasting isn't much in my line, they did try to stop me – officers of the army, ministers of state, officials of the court, men in the street – but Turks have enormous noses, while I own an uncommon big fist; and when one big thing, my dear, aims at another big thing, they are bound to meet. You can see the bloodstains on the carpet yet," declared the Captain, indicating a corner where Bessie had upset the furniture polish.

"I do wish poor dear William wouldn't read so many newspapers," sighed Mrs. Drake in the background.

"Now, my dear friends and neighbours," continued the showman, warming to his work, "although fully conscious of my own unworthiness, I beg to draw your attention to this pedigree of my family, framed in English oak, and most beautifully decorated in the national colours by one of our leading artists. It commences, you see, with the name of my illustrious ancestor, Sir Francis Drake, the mighty admiral who, almost unaided, sent the Spanish *Armada* to the bottom of the Irish Sea. The head of the family has been honoured with the name of Francis ever since: the same name, ladies and gentlemen, and the same undaunted spirit. Boasting is painful to any member of the Drake family, yet I would say – give me the Irish Sea and some English ships; give me a hostile Navy, such as was faced by my immortal propogand ... my imperishable protogent ... my eternal prognosticator – that's the word, dear people – and if you think I'm boasting, I am very sorry for your opinion of Devonshire manliness and courage."

"You ha' forgot to mention what you might do to the hostile Navy," reminded Squinting Jack.

"Send it to the bottom," roared the Captain.

"I can't bear to listen when he gets near the pedigree," murmured Mrs. Drake. "He will not remember he made it all up. And he has made me promise to put Francis on the gravestone."

"Wur Queen Elizabeth one of your descendants too?" inquired the Gentle Shepherd in great awe.

"Not exactly: she was not, what you would describe as one of my forefathers," explained the Captain. "Her illustrious name is here inserted within brackets as an indication that the Drakes do not claim to be of the blood royal; but, as you will remember, Queen Elizabeth knighted Sir Francis, and there is a pleasant tradition in the family that she once flirted with him."

"Ain't that wonderful!" gasped one of the ladies.

They entered the parlour, where George was crushing flies with a cork against the windows. It was his habit to display some form of activity when his uncle was about.

"The pictures," resumed the Captain, "are chiefly good examples of the oleographic school; with here and there a choice engraving taken from the illustrated press: marine landscapes, depicting sea breaking upon rocks, being a prominent feature. The young lady picking sunflowers was painted by my wife at the age of seventeen, and is the only example of that period which survives."

"The flowers are dahlias," Mrs. Drake corrected somewhat sharply.

"My dear, anybody acquainted with our simple wayside plants could tell that at a glance. I am afraid, ladies and gentlemen, the only flowers I can name with absolute certainty are sea anemones and jellyfish. The grandfather clock is unique," hurried on the Captain. "It strikes the hours upon a gong, chimes them upon bells, and is also provided with a Burmese instrument which discourses sweet music at the quarters. A clock like this relieves the unnatural stillness of midnight, and gets the servants up early. A barometer is affixed to the case; this wind gauge records the velocity of the draught between door and window; while the burning glass registers the amount of sunshine received in this portion of the room daily. Twice during the twenty-four hours this wooden figure winds up an iron weight which, becoming detached at a certain point, falls upon a detonating substance contained in this iron vessel. The explosion occurs at noon and midnight."

"Ah, now I knows it ain't always cats," muttered the Dumpy Philosopher, who lived about a hundred yards away.

"About four hours behind, ain't it, Captain?" remarked Squinting Jack.

"It does not profess to be a timekeeper," replied the Captain. "Any ordinary clock will tell you the time. This does more – it instructs and entertains. It keeps us alive at nights. I like a clock that announces itself. Last Sunday evening, when in church, I distinctly heard the explosion, the clock being then seven hours slow, and it seemed to me a very homely sound."

"I hope Mrs. Drake ain't nervous," said one of the ladies.

"No, indeed," came the reply. "I lived for ten years next door to one of the trade union halls. I find it very quiet here."

"I reckon this would be another clock," said the Gentle Shepherd, staring at a grandfatherly shape in the corner.

"No, my friend, that is an Egyptian mummy."

"One o' they what used to go about on Christmas Eve in the gude old days what be gone vor ever!" exclaimed the Yellow Leaf with great interest.

"Not a mummer, but a body, a corpse – dried up and withered," explained the Captain.

"Same as I be nearly," murmured the Yellow Leaf; while some of the women screamed and some giggled, one hoping the creature was quite dead, another dreadfully afraid there had been a murder, and a third trusting she wouldn't have to adorn some parlour when she was took.

"Can he do anything, Captain – sing and dance, or tell ye what the weather's going to be?" asked Squinting Jack.

"'Tis a matter of taste, but I couldn't fancy corpses as furniture," observed the Dumpy Philosopher.

"What I ses is this," commented the Wallower in Wealth, "if I wur to dig bodies out of churchyard, and sell 'em to folk as genuine antiquities, I would have the policeman calling on me."

"You mustn't dig up Christians – that's blasphemy," said the Captain. "This chap was a heathen king, one of the Pharaohs you read of in the Bible, and he died thousands of years ago. He may have known Jacob and Joseph – and I bought him for five bob."

"Ain't that wonderful!" exclaimed a lady.

"It do make they Children of Israel seem amazing real," admitted the Gentle Shepherd.

"The remarkable object occupying the centre of the mantelpiece is a Russian Ikon. It used to hang upon the quarterdeck of a battleship which was lost in the Baltic," continued the Captain.

"I suppose 'tis useful vor navigating purposes," suggested the Dumpy Philosopher.

"It is what the Russians call a holy picture. They say their prayers to such things," shouted the Captain angrily.

"A queer lot of old stuff here along," said the Gentle Shepherd.

"A few articles are priceless," declared the proprietor. "These two vases, for instance. They were looted from the royal palace at Pekin by an English sailor lad who had intended them as a present for his sweetheart; but, as he couldn't carry them about, he sold them to me for ten shillings. An American gentleman offered me a hundred pounds for the pair, but I wouldn't part with them for five times that amount. These blue dragons are covered with a lustre known as glaze, which is now a lost art. This portfolio of pictures also comes from China: there are more than fifty, and each represents one of the various kinds of torture commonly practised by Chinese magistrates upon people who are brought before them, charged with such offences as forgetting to pay local rates or being polite to foreigners. Here is the usual punishment for omitting to lick the dust when a big-pot passes – being impaled upon three stakes above a slow fire without the option of a fine."

"Nice pictures to look at on a Sunday evening," said Squinting Jack.

"The curiously twisted spike, which bears a close resemblance to iron, and is indeed almost as heavy as that metal, was given me by an Egyptian fellah, who said he had discovered it in the Assyrian desert," resumed the Captain with somewhat less confidence. "It is supposed to be a horn of that extinct animal the unicorn, but I don't guarantee it. According to a mate who sailed with

me once – a chap who knew a lot about animals, and had taken prizes at dog shows – the unicorn had a hollow horn, and this, you see, is solid."

"The Egyptian fellow had you, Captain. It is iron, and there's a mark upon it that looks to me like a crown," declared the Wallower in Wealth, who had commenced prosperity as a wheelwright.

"Don't that go to show it is genuine? Ain't the lion and unicorn the – the motto of the crown of England?" demanded the Yellow Leaf.

"The beast wouldn't have a crown stamped on its horn when he drew breath," said Squinting Jack.

"I b'ain't so certain. I ha' seen rummy marks on a ram's horn," answered the Gentle Shepherd.

"There are wonderful things in Nature," said the Captain. "When I was off the coast of South Africa, I watched a big fish flap out of the water, climb a tree, stuff itself with fruit, and then return to its native element. It may be the unicorn was adopted as one of the supporters of the Royal Arms, because it had this mark of a crown upon the base of its horn."

"Some volk ses there never wur no unicorns," remarked the Dumpy Philosopher.

"Plenty believe creation started after they were born," retorted the Captain sharply. "The lion and the unicorn are the royal beasts of England – any child knows that – and when all the lions have been shot, lots of people will say there never were such creatures. If unicorns never existed, how is it we possess pictures of the beast? How do we know what 'twas like? How do we know its name, and how do we know it had only one horn bang in the middle of its forehead?"

"That's the way to talk to unbelievers," chuckled the Yellow Leaf. "I make no manner of doubt there wur plenty of unicorns; aye, and lions and four footed tigers, and alligators too, in this here parish of Highfield, though I don't seem to able call any of 'em to mind."

"'Tis an iron spike sure enough, and 'twur made in Birmingham," whispered the Wallower in Wealth to his nearest neighbour.

"The little creature in this glass case is a stuffed mermaid, supposed to be about three months old," the Captain continued, indicating a cleverly faked object, composed of the upper part of a monkey and the tail of a hake. "I did not see it alive myself, but was told by the inhabitant of Sumatra, from whom I bought it, he had found it upon a rock at low tide crying piteously for its mother. He took it home, and tried to rear it upon ass's milk, but the poor little thing did not live many days. It was too young to show any intelligence."

"The ass's milk might ha' made it feel a bit silly like," suggested Squinting Jack.

"Don't it seem a bit like slavery to ha' bought it?" asked a tender-hearted matron.

"And a bit blasphemous to ha' stuffed the poor mite?" complained another.

"Oh no, my dear ladies. These creatures do not possess immortal souls," replied the Captain.

"How be us to tell?" inquired the Dumpy Philosopher.

"Only creatures who can pray possess immortal souls," declared the Captain piously. "When we pray we kneel. Mermaids cannot kneel because they have no legs."

"There used to be a picture in the schuleroom of a camel on his knees," began Squinting Jack; but the Captain hurried off to the next object of interest, which was a snuffbox composed of various woods inlaid with mother of pearl.

"A tragic and mysterious relic of the French Revolution, found in the hand of a Duke while his body was being removed for burial," he said in his most impressive manner. "This box is supposed to possess a most remarkable history, but it has not been opened since the original owner's death."

"Will ye please to go on and tell us all about it," requested the Yellow Leaf.

"It is the mystery of this box that nobody knows its history," came the answer.

"Why don't ye open it, Captain?"

"The second mystery of this box is that the secret of opening it is lost. It is alike on both sides, so that you cannot tell which is top and which bottom."

"I'd open 'en quick enough," said the Wallower in Wealth.

"And smash they lovely pearls all to pieces!" cried a lady indignantly.

"'Twould be a pity to spoil a couple of mysteries," said Squinting Jack.

"That's how I feel about it. As it is, this snuffbox is a genuinely romantic antique; but if we discovered its history – which I was assured by some gentleman in Paris is most astounding, although entirely unknown – it might lose a considerable part of its value. I have charged my wife to present this box to the President of the French Republic after I am taken from her. She is not bound to present it personally, but may either entrust it to the registered post, or hand it to his Excellency the French Ambassador at his official residence by appointment, whichever course may be most pleasing to her," said the Captain handsomely.

A number of curiosities sealed up in bottles were exhibited, and then the Wallower in Wealth delivered a little speech he had prepared beforehand. He began by mentioning that his cottage stood near the garden of Windward House, and went on to explain how, upon certain evenings, when shadows were lengthening, his soul had been soothed by distant strains of sweetest music. His wife, who had no ear for harmony, ventured to attribute these sounds to the rival choirs of cats on the roof and owls in the trees; his mother-in-law, who was superstitious, gave all credit to the pixies; his daughter, who was sentimental, had gone so far as to suggest angelic visitors. But he was convinced the sounds proceeded from Windward House. And he concluded by imploring the Captain to entertain the company by a few selections upon his gramophone.

Captain Drake replied that nothing so commonplace had ever disturbed the silence of his abode. "Oriental music of the most classical description is played here," he said, approaching a large black case upon gilded legs and throwing back the lid. "This, ladies and gentlemen, is the musical box, formerly in the possession of an Indian potentate, and bestowed upon me in return for services which I could not mention without appearing to glory in my sterling nobility of character, which was one of the phrases employed during the ceremony of presentation. The Maharajah offered me the choice of three gifts – a young lady, an elephant, and this musical box. Being already married, and having no room in my ship for a bulky pet, I – somewhat to the astonishment of my generous benefactor – selected the musical box. There are only two others like it in this world; one being in the possession of the Dalai Lama of Tibet, while the other unfortunately reposes at the bottom of the Atlantic. The small figures dressed as Chinamen – these boxes were made in China, but the art is now lost – play upon various instruments after the fashion of a military band. In a small room such as this the music is somewhat harsh; but when heard from the garden it is, as our friend here has said, exquisitely beautiful; the more so when the parrots sing in unison."

"I thought parrots was like women; they just talked," said the Dumpy Philosopher.

"They don't sing like nightingales," the Captain admitted. "But their notes blend very pleasantly with instrumental music. Before we go outside I will wind up the box; but here is one more interesting relic I must show you. This Star beneath the glass case, although its rays are now sadly tarnished, adorned at one time the coat of His Majesty King George the First. Its history is fully set out upon the parchment beneath. The thing does look worth twopence, I admit, but then you must remember it was made in Germany, where they have always been fond of cheap decorations, which could be worn at Court, and then hung upon Christmas trees to amuse the children. According to this parchment, which supplies us with documentary evidence – the writing is somewhat blurred, as I was forced to use an uncommonly bad pen – this Star was worn by His Majesty upon his arrival in England. The maid of honour, whose duty it was to rub up the royal decorations, took the wrong bottle one day, and used her own matchless preparation for the skin instead of the usual cleaning mixture; and when all the pretty things turned black she passed them on to a Jew, and told the king she was very sorry, but she had accidentally dropped all his Hanoverian decorations down the sink. What he said with the usual month's notice I can't tell you, but probably he didn't care much, as he could buy stars and crosses and eagles by the gross from the toymakers of the Black Forest cheap for cash."

"This particular Star was cleaned by a patent process and sold to a tailor, who stitched it on to a magnificent coat he had made for a young Duke who had just stepped into the title; and he, after a time, passed on coat and Star to his valet, who parted with them to a quack doctor, well known as the discoverer of a certain cure for cataract. He had already made about a score of people totally blind when he was called in to attend a lady of quality; and when this lady's sight was destroyed, her relatives invited the quack either to have his own eyes forcibly treated with his ointment, or to clear out of the country. He soon made up his mind, sold the coat and Star to a pedlar, and returned to Germany, where he entered the diplomatic service and blinded a lot more folk.

"The pedlar made his way up to Scotland and, meeting a very shabby old fellow upon the road, sold him the coat and Star after the hardest bit of bargaining he had ever known in his life. This old chap turned out to be the first Duke in all Scotland, and he was driven to buy the finery as he had been commanded to appear at Court. When he got to London in his ramshackle old coach, he rubbed up the Star, put on the coat, inked the seams a bit, then went to the Palace, where he found the King playing dominoes with one of the English Dukes. 'Gott in Himmel!' cried his Majesty, 'His Grace has got my old Star. I know it's mine, for 'twas made in dear old Sharmany.' The Scot was trying to explain that the Star had been made to order by his village blacksmith, when the English Duke chimed in, 'And he's wearing one of my cast-off coats!' At this point the manuscript breaks off abruptly.

"That's the true English history of this old Star, which I purchased for sixpence from a sailor in whose family it had been an heirloom for the last two hundred years."

"Ain't that wonderful!" exclaimed a lady.

"It do seem to make they old kings and Druid volk wonderful clear avore us," murmured the Yellow Leaf.

The Captain led his guests into the garden, while George, after laboriously collecting a handful of dead flies, followed, ready to support his uncle if necessary, but still more anxious to support himself.

"My cats are famous," said the Captain, approaching a building which had been once a stable, and was now divided into two compartments; one with a wired front for use in summer; the other closed and kept warm for winter quarters. "I have now succeeded in obtaining a highly scientific animal, combining the sleek beauty of the pure Persian with the aggressive agility of the British species. For the last twenty years I have supplied cats to the ships of the mercantile marine, and by so doing have saved much of the commerce of this country; for a single rat will destroy five shillings' worth of perishable cargo in one day; while a single cat of my variety will readily account for fifty rats, not to mention mice innumerable, during the same period. If you will reckon sixty cats, let us say, supplied by me annually, each cat accounting for fifty rats, again not reckoning mice innumerable, every day; if you will add a dozen cats supplied, again by me, to dockyards and custom houses swarming with vermin of every description, each rat doing damage to the extent of some shillings daily, with smaller vermin doing the same according to size and jaw power; if you will add sixty ships to twelve dockyards, and add, let us say, twenty cats supplied from my stock to foreign countries, reckoning in such cases in francs or dollars instead of shillings, and making due allowance for the different tonnage of vessels or dimensions of dockyards, if you will remember I have also supplied most of the cats at present commissioned to kill rats and mice upon the ships of the Royal Navy; and if you will include in your estimate the Grimalkins I have sold, or given, to millers, warehousemen, wholesale grocers, and provision merchants..."

"I reckon, Captain, that will come to about quarter of a million pounds a year, not taking into account shillings and pence," broke in Squinting Jack to free the Captain from his obvious difficulty.

"That is a moderate estimate; still I will accept it. Quarter of a million pounds annually for twenty years, friends and neighbour! Have I not done my part in liquidating the national debt?"

"Cats aren't what you might call nearly extinct animals same as they unicorns. Us ha' got more home than us knows what to do with," remarked a lady timidly.

"Us drowns 'em mostly," observed a matron who looked capable of doing it.

"Not cats like these – the latest triumph of scientific inbreeding," the Captain shouted.

"Oh no, sir! Ours be bred all nohow," said the timid lady.

"Don't the monkeys tease 'em, Captain?" asked the Gentle Shepherd.

"The simians have sufficient intelligence to understand that my felidæ are famous for the claws. Beneath that tree," continued the Captain, "about three paces from the side of my nephew, you see the giant tortoise, which is the greatest antiquity that I possess – next, of course, to the Egyptian mummy. That tortoise, my friends, has lived in this world during the last five hundred years."

"Ain't that wonderful!" gasped a lady.

"I captured it upon the beach of one of the Galapagos Islands, where it had just succeeded in laying an egg."

"Him lay eggs! Then all I can say is he'm the funniest old bird I ever did set eyes on," cried a lady who was famous for her poultry.

"How did you manage to get hold of his birth certificate, Captain?" asked Squinting Jack.

"Tortoises live for ever, if you let 'em alone – that's a proverbial fact," stammered the Captain, somewhat taken aback. "You can tell his age by – by merely glancing at his shell. This tortoise has his shell covered with tarpaulin to prevent the newspaper cuttings from being washed off by rain; but if it was removed you would see that the shell is yellow. It is a well known scientific fact that the shell of a tortoise is black during the first century of its life; takes on a bluish tinge for the next two hundred years; and becomes mottled with yellow when it approaches the enormous age of five hundred years."

"Same as me," said the Yellow Leaf sadly.

CHAPTER III

THE CAPTAIN MAKES HISTORY

One day George entered the churchyard and set his face towards a big sycamore, with the resolution of setting his back against it. He had been tempted by the wide trunk and smooth bark for a long time; but his attempt to reach the tree failed entirely because it stood upon the unfrequented side of the churchyard, and was surrounded by an entanglement of brambles and nettles some yards in depth.

Determined to reach that sycamore somehow, George complained to his uncle about the abominable condition of the churchyard; and Captain Drake reprimanded the vicar for "allowing the resting places of our historic dead to become a trackless jungle;" and the vicar once more implored the sexton to give up the public-house; and the sexton declared there were no such blackberries in all the parish as could be gathered from those brambles.

The matter would have ended there had it not been for Captain Drake, who visited the territory, explored to within fifteen feet of the sycamore, then called a meeting of parishioners and, with the aid of diagrams, showed how the foremost line of nettles was advancing so rapidly in a north-westerly direction as to threaten the main approach to the vestry; while a screen of brambles had already reached a nameless altar tomb whereon the youth of the place by traditional right recorded their initials.

The seriousness of the weed peril had not been realised until then; as the Dumpy Philosopher remarked, they had all been asleep and thus had been taken unprepared; but, when the parishioners did realise it, an army of offence was raised quickly; the nettles were eradicated and the brambles uprooted; that portion of the churchyard was thrown open to the public; and George attained his resting place beside the sycamore.

He had lounged against it several times before his eyes fell upon an inscription which appeared familiar, although obscured by moss and yellow lichen. As the tombstone was not more than three yards away, he was able to reach it without much difficulty. Reclining upon the turf, he summoned up energy to open his pocketknife and to scrape away the lichen until the full meaning of the discovery burst upon him.

Later in the day the Yellow Leaf met Squinting Jack, and said, "I saw Mr. Drake running like wildfire down the street this forenoon. If I hadn't seen 'en wi' my own eyes, I wouldn't ha' believed it."

"I saw 'en too wi' my own eyes," replied Squinting Jack. "And still I don't believe it."

Captain Drake would have run too had there been less of him. George had never been a liar – the poor fellow had no imagination and rarely picked up a newspaper – still his story sounded too impossible to be true. They reached the newly discovered tombstone; the Captain read the inscription; and in a voice trembling with emotion murmured, "Amelia Drake, of Black Anchor Farm, in this parish."

The portion of stone which bore the date of her departure had sunk into the ground.

"George, my lad," cried the Captain, "this is the grave of my long-lost great-grandmother."

"The missing link," added the nephew, with the joyous certainty of one about to negotiate a loan.

"Our pedigree is now complete. I am certain my father used to speak of a rumour which insisted that his grandmother's name was Amelia; and now we have discovered she lived in this parish, at Black Anchor Farm, which no doubt had passed to her husband – who is down on the pedigree as having been probably lost at sea – from the lineal descendant of the great Founder himself. The name of the farm proves that. You see, George, the reference is to a black anchor, a

new freshly tarred anchor, not to an old rusty red one. I must have the stone cleaned. And we will show our respect by planting roses here."

"If it hadn't been for me, this grave would never have been discovered," said George, ready to produce a statement of his bankruptcy.

"That's true, my lad. It's the best day's work you have ever done in your life."

"Skilled labour, too," reminded George, still advertising.

"I won't forget," his uncle promised.

Black Anchor Farm was situated about two miles from the centre of the village. It was not a place to covet, consisting of a mean little thatched house; stable and barn of cob walls propped up by pieces of timber; and half a dozen fields which brought forth furze and bracken in great abundance. People named Slack occupied the place; the man was a lame dwarf who tried to work sometimes, but honestly preferred poaching; the woman went about in rags and begged; while the children were little savages, kept from school by their father, and trained to steal by their mother.

The Captain refused to be discouraged when he visited the home of his ancestors and discovered a hovel; but wrote to the owner for information, interviewed the vicar, turned up the registers, and consulted the Yellow Leaf.

The letter was answered by a solicitor, who expressed his sorrow at never having heard of the family of Drake. The vicar mentioned that the name Anchor occurred frequently in the neighbourhood, and was undoubtedly a corruption of Anchoret, which signified a person who sought righteousness by retiring from a world of sin. He considered it probable that the site had been occupied formerly by the cell of a hermit who had distinguished himself by wearing a black cloak.

Although the Captain gave days and nights to the registers, he could find no entry concerning his family, of whom most, he was convinced, had been lost at sea, apart from the funeral of Amelia Drake. The Yellow Leaf, after remaining some days in a state of meditation, distinctly recalled a tradition concerning a lady (the Captain thanked him for the lady) who had lived alone at Black Anchor Farm for a number of years, receiving no visitors, and leaving the place only to obtain fresh supplies of liquid consolation. The end of her history was so unpleasant he did not care to dwell upon it, but apparently this lady was discovered at last ready for her funeral, and according to report it was a pity she had not been discovered earlier.

Still the Captain refused to be discouraged. His nobility of character would not permit him to disown the memory of his great-grandmother, although he thought it terribly sad she should have sunk so low. If she, during recurring fits of temporary insanity, had disgraced the great name, he had added lustre to it. If the former country residence of Sir Francis Drake had fallen into a ruinous condition, it should be his privilege to restore it with a few magic touches of the pen. He resolved to devote the remaining years of his life to the writing of *A History of the Parish of Highfield*.

"The vicar was not altogether mistaken, my love," he remarked to Mrs. Drake. "He associates the name of Black Anchor with a hermit who wore a dark coloured vestment of some description, and no doubt he is right. My unfortunate great-grandmother did live there entirely alone, and would naturally be regarded as a hermit by the superstitious people of this parish. And we need not be surprised to discover that she always wore black – silk or velvet, I presume – the last poor remnants of her former greatness. It is an established fact, I believe, that elderly ladies generally wear black."

As a compiler of history the Captain was in many ways well equipped. He wrote rapidly, which was of great importance, because the least relevant chapter in the life of a parish required a vast number of words. He possessed a gift of making the past real because he owned a powerful imagination. While confidence in his own abilities freed him from a slavish adherence to facts which could serve no useful purpose. Realising the importance of concentrating upon some particular feature, in order that the narrative might be made continuous, he had not the slightest difficulty in selecting that feature. The keynote of the entire work was sounded by the opening sentence:

"Although the Parish of Highfield is but little known to Englishmen, and occupies an extremely small portion of the map, being entirely excluded from the standard Atlas used in schools – in our opinion unjustifiably – it must nevertheless remain for ever famous on account of its associations with the sublime name of Drake."

The opening chapter dealt with the destruction of the Spanish *Armada*. The second gave an account of the arrival of Sir Francis Drake in Highfield parish, fully describing his purchase of a site and the erection of a stately manor house, of which unfortunately nothing remained except a few fragments "fraught with sweet Elizabethan memories." The site was still known as Black Anchor, which was undoubtedly the name conferred by the great Admiral upon his country residence, because he regarded it as a place to which he could retire from the world, where he could muse amid the solitude of nature, where he could rest, or, in the phrase of the seaman, "cast his anchor." It was here that Queen Elizabeth visited him, and, according to some authorities who seemed to deserve serious attention, it was here, and not in London, that the Queen conferred the honour of knighthood upon this magnificent bulwark of her throne.

The third chapter was devoted entirely to the royal visit, concerning which tradition was happily not silent. It was indeed a simple matter to follow the Queen's progress towards its culminating point, which was unquestionably Highfield Manor, as Black Anchor Farm was known in those days, through the adjoining parishes, all possessing manors of which some had survived to the present time, but most had fallen down, at each of which the royal lady had enjoyed a few hours' slumber.

Several pages were allotted to this habit of Elizabeth, who was apparently unable to travel more than five miles without going to bed; and in these the author sought to prove the existence of some malady, a kind of travelling sickness, no doubt exaggerated by the roughness of the roads and constant jolting of the coach, so that the physician in attendance felt himself compelled to advise his royal mistress to sleep at every village through which she passed.

The peculiarities of monarchs, remarked the author, are more conspicuous than the virtues or vices of ordinary people. The nervousness of King Charles the Second was no less remarkable than Queen Elizabeth's recurring fits of somnolence: he was continually retiring into cupboards, standing behind doors, or climbing into oak trees, owing to a morbid dread of being looked at. King Charles had secreted himself inside a cupboard within the boundaries of Highfield parish, but this was not to be regarded as a coincidence, for a patient inquiry into local traditions elicited the fact that, wherever Queen Elizabeth had slept in the best bed of the manor house, King Charles had climbed a tree (usually the common oak, *Quercus robur*) in the garden. As the writer was dealing with the parish of Highfield only, it would be outside the scope of his work to give a list of villages, in Devonshire alone, which claimed to possess pillows upon which Elizabeth had deigned to rest her weary head; but he was satisfied that the Highfield pillow had been stored away in precisely the same cupboard used by Charles during one of his secretive moments. Both these interesting relics had been destroyed, as was customary, by fire.

The fourth chapter flourished the Drake pedigree, copied from the original document in the author's possession; and went on to give a pathetic account of Amelia, the lonely and eccentric lady who was the last representative of the famous family to reside at Highfield Manor. Three facts concerning her could be stated with certainty: she was of a singularly retiring nature, she was accustomed to wear a black silk dress upon all occasions, and she was murdered by some unknown ruffian for the sake of certain valuable heirlooms she was known to possess. It appeared probable that she was a poetess as, according to local tradition, she could frequently be heard singing; while her fondness for cats, a weakness which had descended to her great-grandson, was a clearly marked feature of her character.

The fifth chapter was a triumph of literary and artistic handiwork. Even Mrs. Drake, who did not approve of the undertaking because she had to meet the expenses of publication, felt bound to

admit that, if William had not chosen to become a great sea-captain, a certain other William, who had written plays for a living, might conceivably have been toppled from his eminence; for nothing could have been more thrilling than the story of a family vault, "filled with the bones and memories of the greatest centuries in British history," becoming first neglected, then forgotten, and finally overgrown by brambles and nettles: a vault, let the reader remember, not containing rude forefathers of the hamlet, but members of the family of Drake; a vault, not situated in the Ethiopian desert, nor abandoned within some Abyssinian jungle, but built beneath the turf of an English churchyard hard by a simple country Bethel. This vault became entirely lost! Summer followed spring, autumn preceded winter, year after year, while the nettles increased, and the brambles encroached yet more upon the consecrated ground, until the very site of the famous vault was lost to sight – this sentence being the one literary flaw upon an otherwise perfect chapter – and the oldest inhabitant had ceased to tell of its existence.

Here the *History of the Parish of Highfield* was interrupted by some chapters dealing with the birth, education, early struggles, voyages, adventures, success, and retirement of Captain Francis Drake; together with an account of Mrs. Drake and her relations; with a flattering notice of George Drake, Esquire, who was later to win renown as the explorer of Highfield churchyard and the discoverer of the long-missing vault. It was shown also how the Captain had been guided by Providence to the village, formerly the home of his ancestors, and how "the lure of the place had been nothing but the silver cord of an hereditary attraction stretched through the centuries to reach the golden bowl of his soul." Mrs. Drake objected to this sentence, and the printer made still stranger stuff of it; but George upheld his uncle's contention that poetical prose could not be out of place in a work dealing with the origin and progress of a wayside village.

At this point the author interpolated, by means of footnotes, a few remarks, which he owned were unconnected with the purport of his work: Domesday Book alluded to Highfield in one deplorably curt sentence; the church contained nothing of interest; an oak tree, which had formerly shaded the village green, no longer existed; the views were local, charming, and full of variety; the streams contained fish; botanists would discover furze and heather upon the adjacent moorland; the name of the place was derived probably from two Anglo-Saxon words which signified a field standing in a high place.

The author arrived at that fateful day when George, led by his interest in arboriculture to inspect a magnificent specimen of sycamore upon the south side of the churchyard, found his progress checked by tangled growths which, to the eternal disgrace of the parish, had been permitted to conceal "the precious memorial and cradle of British supremacy upon the main." Mrs. Drake opposed this sentence still more strongly, but the Captain pleaded inspiration and retained it.

There followed a stirring account of "the wave of indignation that burnt with its hot iron the souls of the villagers, when their attention had been drawn to a state of neglect which threatened to deprive them of the obvious benefits of their own burying ground, and was rapidly making it impossible for the mourner to drop the scalding tear or the fragrant flower upon the sepulchre of some dear lost one." A vivid page described the destruction of brambles and nettles, the removal of five cart loads, the subsequent bonfire in which "these emblems of Thor and Woden melted into flame and were dissipated into diaphanous smoke clouds."

The style unfortunately became confused when the author dealt at length with the actual Discovery, and represented himself as head of the family kneeling in humble thankfulness beside the mouldering stone marking the hallowed spot where Drakes lay buried.

The work included with an account of Windward House, a description of the furniture, a complete list of the antiquities, among which, owing to a printer's error, appeared the names of Kezia and Bessie; with a reference to the cats, monkeys, parrots, and giant tortoise. Then Captain Drake lay down his pen, put aside the well-thumbed dictionary, and, calling wife and nephew, informed them solemnly, "The last words are written. I have rounded off my existence with a book."

Nothing much was said for some minutes. The author was obviously struggling with emotion; Mrs. Drake put her handkerchief to her eyes; George smiled in a nervous fashion and trifled with the coppers in both pockets. Kezia and Bessie were called in and the news was broken to them: the Parish of Highfield now possessed a history.

"This," said the Captain gently, "is one of the great moments in the thrilling record of a most distinguished family. I feel as the sublime founder must have done while standing with wooden bowl in his hand gazing across the sparkling sea." Then he murmured brokenly, "Heaven bless you all," and stumbled from the room.

When the publisher sent in his estimate, Mrs. Drake was quite unable to understand how a newspaper could be sold for one halfpenny. The leading item, which was a charge for sufficient paper to print one thousand copies, came as a revelation to her; for she had always supposed that paper, like string and pins, could be had for nothing. As the publisher pressed strongly for a few illustrations of local scenery, the Captain was compelled to sacrifice, for economical reasons, three chapters of his voyages, together with the whole of his valuable footnotes. When George suggested that the history of the parish itself did not appear to be treated with that fullness the Captain was capable of giving it, the old gentleman replied, "What we lose in the letterpress we'll make up by the pictures. I quite agree with the printer, my lad: the beauty and dignity of my work will be enhanced considerably by the addition of a few engravings."

Six photographs were therefore taken exclusively for this volume, by the son of the postmistress who was an expert with the camera; and reproduced by the usual special process upon a particularly valuable kind of Oriental paper. The frontispiece represented Captain Francis Drake in a characteristic attitude. The five other illustrations depicted Windward House from the southeast; present day aspect of Black Anchor Farm; George Drake, Esquire, discoverer of the missing vault; stone marking site of vault and bearing the name of Amelia Drake; and finally, Captain Francis Drake in another characteristic attitude, with Mrs. Drake in the background. The lady, having shifted behind her husband during the moment of exposure, has disappeared entirely.

Two copies were sold. The vicar bought one out of a sense of duty, while the Dismal Gibcat purchased the other, to discover whether there was anything in it which would justify him in bringing an action for libel. Both were disappointed.

CHAPTER IV

CHANGES IN THE ESTABLISHMENT

One doctor had promised Captain Drake eighteen more months of life; another, less generous, refused to allow him more than twelve; he presented himself with ten years, and then he did not die from natural causes. The Dismal Gibcat had his revenge at last. He murdered Captain Drake before the eyes of the village, in the full light of two oil lamps; and, instead of being hanged for it, he stepped into the dead man's place, and ruled the parish with his scowl as he had done in the good old days when a pair of old cottages had occupied the site whereon Windward House now stood; although he had the decency to attend his victim's funeral, and to declare he had always respected the Captain, who undoubtedly belonged to that class of mortals, none of whom are ever likely to be seen again.

War for a right of way led up to the murder. The Dismal Gibcat owned a field, across which people had walked since the world began, according to the testimony of the Yellow Leaf, who was the final court of appeal in all such matters. When a stone coffin was disinterred, or a few Roman coins were turned up, the Yellow Leaf was invariably summoned to decide the question of ownership. He might confess that the stone coffin had been made before his time, although he would give the name of the mason, and narrate a few anecdotes concerning the eccentric parishioner who had preferred this method of burial. While he would possess a clear recollection of the thriftless farmer who had dropped the money while ploughing through a hole in his pocket. The Yellow Leaf declared he had crossed that field thousands of times when he was a mere bud, and went on to state that, if the people allowed the Dismal Gibcat to triumph over them, they would find themselves back in the dark ages, bereft of all the privileges which Magna Charta, the post office, and Captain Drake had obtained for them.

The Dismal Gibcat began by ploughing the field and planting it with potatoes. Then he lay in wait for the first trespasser, who chanced to be the vicar on his way to baptise a sick baby. Undismayed by the importance of his capture, the Dismal Gibcat informed the vicar he was committing an unfriendly act by trespassing across his vested property.

The vicar, with some warmth, asserted there was a path. The Dismal Gibcat, with exceeding dullness, replied that a man who had received his education at a public school and an ancient university ought to be able to distinguish between tilled land and thoroughfare.

The vicar declared that, if there was at the moment no path, it could only be because the Dismal Gibcat had maliciously removed it, although he did not use the word maliciously in an offensive manner. The Dismal Gibcat replied that, as there was no path, the vicar could not walk along it; and, as he was obviously trying to make one – with a pair of boots quite suitable for the purpose – he was committing an act of trespass, and by the law of England a trespasser might be removed by force.

The vicar explained that he could not stay to argue the matter lest, while they were quarrelling, the poor little baby should become an unbaptised spirit. The Dismal Gibcat declared that his vested rights were more to him than baptised babies, and ordered the vicar to get off his potatoes by the way he had come.

Finally the vicar abandoned a portion of his Christianity and threatened to hit the Dismal Gibcat upon the head with his toy font.

Civil war having thus broken out, the entire population of military age, headed by Captain Drake and the Yellow Leaf, promenaded across the field and trampled out a new pathway. The Dismal Gibcat replied by putting up barbed wire entanglements.

Then the Captain called a meeting of the Parish Council, to be held at seven-thirty in the schoolroom; little dreaming, when he set out a few minutes after eight to take the chair, that he was about to perform his last public duty.

The Dismal Gibcat attended the meeting without any idea of doing murder: he brought no weapon except his scowl, which was possibly a birthmark, and a tongue which disagreed with everybody out of principle. He presented his case to the meeting and asked for justice. The chairman promised he should have it, and went on to inquire whether the Dismal Gibcat would give an undertaking to remove the entanglements and allow the public to make free use of the pathway.

The Dismal Gibcat replied that, by so doing, he would be committing an injustice which must fall most heavily upon all those of his dismal blood who might come after him.

"Then, sir," the chairman cried in his most tremendous voice, "the matter must pass from our hands into those of a higher tribunal. We shall appeal to the District Council, and that body will, if necessary, carry the case further, even to the Court of County Council itself."

Silence followed, during which every parishioner save one in that crowded schoolroom felt thankful Highfield had a leader capable of carrying their grievances to the foot of the Throne if necessary. About the District Council little was known, beyond the fact that it had never yet interfered in any parochial affairs; while the Dumpy Philosopher seemed to be the only person primed with information concerning the County Council.

"It make roads and builds asylums," he explained. "The gentlemen what belong to it are called Esquire; and they'm mostly in Parliament."

The Dismal Gibcat had the wickedness to declare that he defied all Councils. There never had been a right of way across his field, and there never should be. Out of simple goodness of heart he had refrained from interfering with the homeward progress of a few weary labourers, although they had not asked permission to trample down his pasture; and now he was to be rewarded for this mistaken kindness by having a strip of territory snatched from him by a person – a fat, vulgar person – one he was sorry to call an Englishman – whom they had been foolish enough to elect as their chairman – a man who had written a book about himself – a common creature who claimed to be a descendant of Sir Francis Drake – a man who styled himself Captain because he had once stolen a fishing boat – a coarse bullying brute of a gasbag.

The chairman had been struggling to find breath for some moments. At last he found it, and released such thunders as had never been heard before. Even the Dismal Gibcat quailed before the volume of that tempest, while a few nervous parishioners left the schoolroom with a dazed look upon their faces. George detached himself from the wall and implored his uncle to be calm, but his words of warning were lost in that great tumult. The shocking nature of the scene was considerably enhanced by the fact that the Dismal Gibcat, for the first time within living memory, actually tried to smile.

"A right of way has existed time out of mind across that field. Sir Francis Drake and Queen Elizabeth walked there arm in arm," the Captain shouted, magnanimously ignoring the insults, and fighting for the people to his last gasp.

"Path warn't hardly wide enough, Captain," piped the Yellow Leaf, who was for accuracy at any price.

"I tell the chairman to his face he's a liar. He has never spoken a word of truth since he came to Highfield," cried the Dismal Gibcat.

Again the Captain opened his mouth, but no sounds came. He stretched out an arm, tried to leave the chair, then gasped, fell against George, and bore him to the floor. The leader of the people, the great reformer, the defender of liberty, lay motionless beneath the map of the British Empire like Cæsar at the foot of Pompey's statue; murdered by the Dismal Gibcat's smile in the village schoolroom, upon the fifth of April, in the seventy-fourth year of his age.

At the inquest it was shown by one of the discredited doctors that his heart had really given way a long time ago, and nothing but indomitable courage had preserved him in a state of nominal existence: he sought to impress it upon the jury that the Captain, from a medical point of view, had been a dead man for the last ten years; but, as everybody knew, this statement was made by an arrangement with the coroner to prevent a verdict of wilful murder against the Gibcat.

"'Tis like this right o' way business," commented Squinting Jack. "He ploughs up the path and ses us can't walk there because there arn't no path. And doctor ses as how the Captain wur a corpse when he come to the meeting, and you can't kill a man what be dead and gone already."

The Dismal Gibcat did all that was possible to atone for his crime. He sent a wreath; he did not smile again; and in the handsomest possible manner he removed the barbed wire entanglements, and dedicated a right of way across his field to the public for ever, as a memorial to the late Captain, whose life would remain as an example to them of truth, and modesty, and childlike gentleness.

Highfield ceased to progress when the Captain had departed. The historian would have found no deed to chronicle, although he could hardly have omitted the brilliant epigram, attributed to the Dumpy Philosopher, "Captain put us on the map, and now we'm blotted out." Local improvements were no longer spoken of. Mrs. Drake continued to live in Highfield, although she took no part in public affairs, and immediately removed the notice boards which she had never much approved of. George resumed his disgraceful habits of loafing in fine weather, and keeping the house clear of flies when it rained. His aunt disowned him once a week, but he bore up bravely. She threatened to turn him out of the house every month, but the courageous fellow declared he should not be ashamed to beg hospitality of the vicar who had loved and revered his dear uncle. George explained that he was leading a singularly industrious career, but it had always been his way to work unobtrusively: he fed the giant tortoise, controlled the monkeys, taught the parrots to open their beaks in proverbs; he attended all meetings of the Parish Council; sometimes he sneered at the Dismal Gibcat. Above all, he managed the cat breeding industry, although it was true he had at the present time no more than six cats in stock.

"That's because you have been too lazy to look after them," Mrs. Drake interrupted. "You let them out to roam all over the place; dozens have been shot or trapped; while the others have made friends with common village cats. You know how particular your uncle was about the company they kept."

"I'm expecting kittens soon, and I'll take great care of them," George promised.

"Your uncle used to make a lot out of his cats before we came here. You do nothing except ask for money to buy them food, which you don't give them. If it wasn't for Kezia the poor creatures would be starved," said Mrs. Drake.

She realised that the only way of ridding herself of George would be to regard him as a lost soul haunting Windward House, and to destroy the place utterly; as she could not afford to do that, an idea occurred of inviting an elderly maiden sister to share her home. Miss Yard replied that the plan would suit her admirably. So Mrs. Drake broke the news to Kezia, who had become a person of consequence, accustomed to a seat in the parlour; and Kezia told Bessie she was going to allow Mrs. Drake's sister to live in the house for a time; and Bessie went to her mistress and gave notice.

"You don't mean it," stammered the astonished lady. "Why, Bessie, you have been with me fifteen years."

"Kezia ses Miss Yard's coming here, so I made up my mind all to once."

"I don't know what I shall do without you, Bessie."

"You can't do without me, mum. I'm not going exactly ever to leave you. I'll just change my name, and go across the road, and drop in when I'm wanted."

"You are going to be married!" cried Mrs. Drake.

"That's right, mum. May as well do it now as wait."

"I hope you have stopped growing," said the lady absently.

"I don't seem to be making any progress now, mum. Six foot two, and Robert's five foot three, and has taken the cottage opposite. Robert Mudge, the baker's assistant, mum. He makes the doughnuts master wur so fond of vor his tea."

"I remember the doughnuts," said Mrs. Drake softly. "I used to put out two, but the dear Captain would not content himself with less than half a dozen."

"He told Bob to exhibit his doughnuts. Master said he would get a gold medal vor 'em. But he can't find out where the exhibition is."

"I hope Robert Mudge is worthy of you, Bessie."

"He ses he is, mum. He goes to chapel in the morning, and church in the evening, and he never touches a drop of anything. And he keeps bees, mum."

"It all sounds very nice. I hope you will be as happy as I have been," said Mrs. Drake.

"Thankye, mum. I wouldn't get married if it meant leaving you; but now that Miss Yard's coming here I may as well go to Robert. Just across the road, mum. If you ring a bell at the window I'll be over in no time – if I b'ain't here already, mum."

"You have always been a handy girl, Bessie. The dear Captain had a very high opinion of you, but he was so afraid you might not be able to stop growing."

"Thankye, mum. Bob ses 'tis his one ambition to get great like the Captain; not quite so big, mum, but like him in heart; at least, mum, as gude in heart. I don't know, mum, whether you would be thinking of giving me a wedding present?"

"Of course I shall give you a present, Bessie."

"Well, mum, me and Robert think, if 'tis convenient to you, furniture would be most useful to us."

"You shall have some of Captain Drake's furniture; and you shall have more when I am gone," the old lady promised.

Bessie married Robert Mudge a month later. Mrs. Drake furnished the cottage; George presented the bride with a kitten; while Miss Yard, who had not yet completed her preparations for departure, sent a postal order for five shillings, together with a Bible, a cookery book, and pair of bedsocks. Kezia gave the wedding breakfast, and Mrs. Drake paid for it. The honeymoon, which lasted from Saturday to Monday, was spent somewhere by the sea. Then Bessie settled down to her new life, which meant sleeping upon the one side of the road and taking her meals upon the other.

Miss Yard was a gentle old creature who knew nothing whatever about a world she had never really lived in. For nearly half a century she occupied a little house just outside the little town of Drivelford; during weekdays she would scratch about in a little garden, and twice each Sunday attend a little church, and about four times in the course of the year would give a little tea party to ladies much engrossed in charity. Sometimes she would go for a little walk, but the big world worried her, and she was glad to get back into her garden. It must have been rather a mazy garden, as she was continually getting lost in it; having very little memory she could not easily hit upon the right pathway to the house, and would circle round the gooseberry bushes until a servant discovered her. One awful day she lost her servant, luggage, memory, and herself at a railway junction; and was finally consigned to the station-master, who was not an intelligent individual; for, when Miss Yard assured him she was on her way to the seaside, he was quite unable to direct her. Nobody knew how that adventure ended, because Miss Yard could not remember.

She accepted her sister's invitation gladly, because a letter came frequently from the bank to inform her she had overdrawn her account. Miss Yard did not know much about wickedness, therefore when a servant told her it was time for a cheque she always smiled and signed one. She could not understand why no servant would stay with her more than a few years; but, being a kind-hearted old soul, she was delighted to know one was going to marry a gentleman, another to open a drapery, and a third to retire altogether. It was not until she engaged a rather shy little orphan, whose name of Nellie Blisland was good enough to tempt anybody, as a lady-servant-companion-

housekeeper, that the bank stopped writing to her; and then Miss Yard, who comprehended a passbook with some assistance, wondered who had been leaving her money; and at last arrived at the conclusion that Nellie was a niece who was living with her and sharing expenses. But this discovery was not made until Mrs. Drake's invitation had been accepted.

Miss Yard's memory underwent all manner of shocks, when she found herself installed in the parlour of Windward House. She perceived her sister clearly enough, but where was Nellie, and what was George? She had completely forgotten Captain Drake until she turned her spectacles towards the Egyptian mummy; and then she asked questions which caused Mrs. Drake to use her smelling salts.

"This is George, our nephew. He does nothing for a living," said the widow severely.

"Our nephew," repeated Miss Yard, in her earnest fashion. "His name is Percy, and he came to see me last year, but he seems to have altered a great deal. What is it he does for a living?"

"Nothing whatever," said Mrs. Drake.

"I've got a weak back," George mumbled.

"He's got a weak back, Maria. He must try red flannel and peppermint plasters," said Miss Yard with barbaric simplicity.

"Stuff and nonsense! He's got the back of a whale, if he'd only use it. This is not Percy, our real nephew, who for some reason never comes near me, but my nephew by marriage. He's not your nephew really."

"I'm sorry for that. I like nephews, because they visit me sometimes. What's the name of this place, Maria?"

"Highfield, and it's eight hundred feet above the sea," said George, in a great hurry to change the subject.

"I hope it's somewhere in the south of England. The doctor told me I was not to go near Yorkshire," said Miss Yard.

"You are in Devonshire, just upon the edge of Dartmoor," George explained.

"That sounds as if it ought to suit me. I can't explain it, but I was so afraid this might be Yorkshire. Where is Nellie? I do hope she wasn't lost at that dreadful railway station."

"Nellie is upstairs," Mrs. Drake replied.

"I wish somebody would go and bring her. I don't know what she can be doing upstairs. My memory is getting so troublesome, Maria. Before Nellie came to live with me I had quite forgotten she was Percy's sister."

"But she isn't," said Mrs. Drake. "Percy's only sister died as a child."

"Did she!" exclaimed Miss Yard. "I wonder how long I shall remember that. How many children did my brother Peter have?"

"He never married," replied Mrs. Drake.

"Then Nellie must be poor dear Louisa's daughter."

"That would make her Percy's sister. Nellie is your companion. She is not even so much related to you as George."

"Now I have quite forgotten who George was," said Miss Yard.

At this moment Nellie herself appeared with a load of luxuries, such as footstool, shawl, wool slippers, and various bottles to sniff at, which she had just unpacked. Miss Yard fondled the girl's hands, and told her that somebody – she could not remember who – had been trying to make trouble between them by spreading a malicious story about Nellie's birth and parentage; but she was too muddled to know what it meant.

Mrs. Drake had been aware that her sister's intelligence was not high, but was dismayed at discovering her mental condition was so low; and she quickly repented of the new arrangement, which could not be altered now that Miss Yard had disposed of her house and most of her

belongings; bringing just sufficient furniture to equip a sitting room and bedroom, and to replace those articles which Mrs. Drake had bestowed upon Bessie.

Her sister's furniture soon became a source of anxiety to Mrs. Drake, as she did not like to have things in the house which did not belong to her, and she also foresaw difficulties should the partnership be dissolved at any time by the death of either her sister or herself. So she took a sheet of notepaper and wrote upon it, "If I depart before Sophy, all my things are to belong to her for her lifetime;" and this document she placed within a sandalwood box standing upon the chest of drawers in her bedroom.

Then she took another sheet of notepaper and commanded her sister to write upon it, "If I die before Maria, all my things are to belong to her." Miss Yard obeyed, but when this piece of paper had been stored away within the Japanese cabinet standing upon the chest of drawers in her bedroom, she took a sheet of notepaper upon her own account, and wrote, "When I am gone, all my things are to belong to Nellie;" and this was stored away in the bottom drawer of her davonport, as she had already forgotten the existence of the other hiding place.

And this was the beginning of the extraordinary will-making which was destined to stir up strife among the beneficiaries.

CHAPTER V

GEORGE TACKLES THE LABOUR PROBLEM

The following summer Percy Taverner visited his aunts. This gentleman, who was younger than George, would in due course inherit the money left by the late Mr. Yard to his sons and daughters, of whom the two ladies of Highfield were now the sole survivors. Therefore Percy had nothing to lose by being uncivil, although as a matter of fact he had only neglected Mrs. Drake because he disliked her husband. His Aunt Sophy he loved with good reason, for he made a living by mortgaging his fruit farm, and when the borrowed money was spent he had only to explain matters to Miss Yard, and she would pay off the mortgage and immediately forget all about it. Percy was not an idler like George, but he possessed little business capacity, and had selected a form of occupation about which he knew nothing whatever; and as he would be quite a rich man when his aunts departed, he did not take the trouble to learn. Nor did he care to consider such examples of longevity as the giant tortoise and the Yellow Leaf.

Miss Yard was delighted to see Percy, but greatly distressed when he declined to kiss his own sister; at least he was willing, but Nellie positively refused. The usual explanations were gone through, and the good lady tried hard to understand.

"Of course you are right not to kiss Nellie as she's your cousin. Young people who can marry must not get into the habit of kissing each other," she said.

Mrs. Drake was inclined to be chilly towards Percy, but thawed quickly when he revealed himself as an attentive and obliging young man. She was quite sorry he had to sleep across the road in Bessie's cottage because there was no spare room in Windward House; and was almost indignant when Percy declared upon the second day he could not stay until the end of the week, as he dared not neglect his tomato plants.

"Your foreman can look after them," she said. "I have not seen you for years, and after all there's nothing like one's own relations. It's a pleasure to have some one to talk to, for your poor Aunt Sophy is getting so stupid, and George is no company at all. What do you think of George?" she asked suddenly.

"Not much," replied Percy with a laugh.

"I want to speak to you about George," Mrs. Drake continued. "You're the head of my family, so I should like your advice about the good-for-nothing creature. He is getting on for forty, and has never done a day's work in his life. He sleeps here, and takes his meals, and grumbles, and begs money – and, my dear Percy, he has been seen coming out of the public house. He does nothing whatever. He won't even dig up the potatoes."

"He knows you can't leave him anything?" asked Percy.

"Of course he knows it. He will have the furniture and all the curiosities collected by the Captain; I think that's only right, and besides, I promised my husband he should have them. But the things won't be of much use if he hasn't got a home."

"He can sell them," said Percy.

"Second-hand furniture goes for next to nothing," replied Mrs. Drake.

"That depends," said Percy. Then he pointed to the mantelpiece and continued, "If I were you, Aunt, I should wrap those two Chinese vases in cotton-wool, and put them away."

"Are they really valuable? My dear husband thought they were, but I'm afraid he didn't know much about such things, and he would exaggerate sometimes. He used to say they were worth a hundred pounds apiece."

"He was under the mark," said Percy. "I'm not an expert, but I know more about Chinese vases than I do about tomatoes, as a friend of mine deals in the things, and I've picked up a lot from him. I believe those vases are worth a heap of money."

"Well, that is a surprise!" cried Mrs. Drake. "I shall take your advice and pack them away. Don't mention it to George."

"Certainly not," said Percy, somewhat indignantly.

"And now what can you suggest?" Mrs. Drake continued, waddling to the mantelpiece and flicking a disreputable blowfly from one of the vases. "I have told George plainly a hundred times he must do something for a living, but he won't take a hint. I suppose you wouldn't care to give him employment? He ought to know something about fruit, as he spends half his time leaning against an apple tree."

"He wouldn't work under me. Besides, I'm doing a losing business as it is. It's a jolly difficult problem, Aunt."

"Will you open his eyes to his folly and wickedness? If you can't make him ashamed, you may be able to frighten him. Tell him, if he works, I will help him; but, if he won't work, I'll do nothing more for him."

"All right, Aunt. I'll shift the beggar," said Percy cheerfully; and he went out to search for his victim.

George was reclining upon a seat which his uncle had dedicated to the public for ever, to commemorate the return of the Drakes to Highfield. When he saw the enemy approaching he closed his eyes; for his cunning nature suggested that Percy would respect his slumbers unless he came as a special messenger. When the footsteps ceased, and the ferrule of a stick was pressed gently against his ribs, George realised that a certain amount of trouble awaited him.

"I was sound asleep. It's a tiring day, and I've been a long walk," he explained amiably. "Sit down, old chap, and look at the view; but if you want to admire the sunset, I should advise you to go higher up."

"I don't want to admire the sunset," replied Percy. "I've been having a talk with Aunt Maria –"

"And I've been to Black Anchor," broke in George. "I don't suppose you've read my uncle's history of the parish. It's a classic, and there are nine hundred copies at home. People called Slack were living there when we came; a regular bad lot and a disgrace to the village."

"Friends of yours?" asked Percy.

"Not likely! They were no better than savages. The man hobbled off one day and has never been seen since, and the woman was sent to prison for stealing, and the children were taken into a Home. The farm has been without a tenant for the last two years, and now an old man named Brock has taken it."

"Perhaps he would give you a job," suggested Percy.

"That's a good idea. I'm sorry I forgot to ask him when I went over this afternoon," said the amiable George, perfectly well aware in which direction the wind was blowing. "Unluckily the old chap hasn't any money. He cooks the grub while his grandson drains the bogs. Everybody's talking about it; they can't get over the idea of two men running a farm without a woman. Sidney, the young chap, wants to go into the Navy, but he sacrifices his future to help his grandfather. Funny idea that! Now if my uncle had been alive he would have got young Brock on a training ship, I warrant."

"Funny idea he should want to do some good for his grandfather?"

"No; but it's queer that a chap who wants to go into the Navy should come to Black Anchor with all its associations of us Drakes," said George loftily. Then he added, "I'm rested now, so I'll take a stroll."

"Just as you like. We'll sit here and talk, or we'll stroll and talk," said the pestilential Percy.

"Go on then," said George sourly.

So Percy in his capacity of ambassador delivered the ultimatum: Aunt Maria had borne with her husband's nephew for a great number of years, postponing vigorous action out of a mistaken kindness, but she was now firmly resolved upon the act of expulsion. "It's for your sake entirely," he continued. "Naturally Aunt wants to see you settled in some business, as she knows she can't leave you anything."

"Except the furniture," remarked George indifferently.

"That's not exactly a fortune," replied Percy, wondering how much his cousin knew about Chinese vases.

"My uncle promised I should have the furniture," said the monotonous George.

"Every man should work," observed Percy virtuously.

"I could manage tomatoes," retorted George.

"I shall be a rich man when the aunts die, while you will have nothing. I don't require to build up a business. Don't you want a home of your own, wife and children, and all that sort of thing?"

"No," said George.

"What do you want then?"

"Board and lodging, and some one to look after me," replied the candid cousin.

"Aunt Maria has said her last word. She won't keep you in idleness any longer. And I'm going to stay here until you leave the place."

"They never brought me up to do anything," argued George for the defence.

"They did their best, but you wouldn't work."

"They ought to have made me. I was young then, and it was their duty to make me submit to discipline. Now I'm middle-aged."

"Thirty-eight is still young."

"With some men; not with me. My habits are formed."

"When you find something to do –"

"That's just what Aunt Maria says," George interrupted bitterly. "She never suggested anything but once, and then she said I might have gone abroad as a missionary if I hadn't been unfit for the job. It's all very well to talk about doing something in this beastly overcrowded world, but what can a middle-aged bachelor do except put his trust in Providence? My uncle was at least practical: he did suggest I should turn pilot or harbour-master, although he knew the very sight of the sea puts my liver out of order."

"You might open a shop to sell fruit and flowers; and I'll supply you."

"I don't understand buying and selling, and I can't do accounts. You would take the profit, and I should have the losses."

"You must make up your mind. Aunt is perfectly serious," declared Percy.

"I don't want to offend her, and of course I couldn't abuse her kindness," said George slowly; "but just suppose I did refuse to leave home – suppose I insisted upon staying here and leading the sort of life that suits my health – what could she do?"

"If you were rotten enough for that, I suppose she could appeal to the magistrates for an ejectment order," replied Percy hazily.

"She is much too kind for that. Besides, I am her nephew."

"Only by marriage. You are not a blood relation; you can't claim to be dependent on her."

"I was thinking what a scandal it would make in the parish. Aunt and I don't get on well together, but I'm sure she would never turn me out."

"You ought to have heard her just now. I had no idea Aunt Maria could be so determined. She will give you money – she will help you – but go you must."

"Did she say where?"

"That's for you to decide. Isn't there any sort of job that takes your fancy?"

"I like railways. I always feel at home in a big railway station," George admitted.

"Station-master, – or traffic-manager – might suit you."

"Do you know I really believe it would," said George brightly.

"Now we've found it!" exclaimed Percy. "I'm going the day after tomorrow, and you had better come with me. We will travel up to Waterloo, and you can see the directors there about getting a job as station-master. I don't know if there's a premium, but, if there is, Aunt will pay it. You might get a small suburban station to start with. We'll go on Friday – that's a bargain, George?"

"Right, old chap! It's a long time since I had a holiday," came the ominous reply.

Mrs. Drake opened her heart and purse when she discovered George was about to accept a position as station-master. Miss Yard said she was sorry to hear he was giving up tomatoes, then in the same breath implored Percy to keep away from junctions where people were lost and trains collided with distressing frequency. Kezia mended linen, packed, and uttered many a dark saying about men who left their homes on Friday in the pride of life and were not heard of again. Percy assured his aunts they might always rely upon him to settle any difficulty. While George basked in popularity, like a sleek cat upon a windowsill, and took all that he could get in the way of cash, clothing, and compliments.

"You must come here sometimes. I expect you won't be able to get away for a year or two; but when you do get leave remember this is always your home," said Mrs. Drake warmly.

"I feel sure we shall soon meet again," said George hopefully.

"A year anyhow: you cannot expect a holiday before then. I'm sure the railway will be lucky to get such a fine looking man, though it's a pity you stoop, and I wish you were not quite so stout. Perhaps the King will get out at your station some day; and you will have the honour of putting flower-pots on the platform and laying down the red carpet. You may be knighted, George, or at the very least get a medal for distinguished service."

George was not thinking about honours much; for he had glanced towards the mantelpiece and discovered that the pair of vases were missing.

"I have put them away," explained Mrs. Drake. "They are wrapped up safely in a box underneath my bed."

"I was afraid Percy might have taken them," said George cautiously.

"He did advise me to put them away, as he thought perhaps we ought to take care of them," Mrs. Drake admitted.

"I hate the chap," muttered George.

"I was afraid Aunt Sophy might break them. She is always knocking things over. She takes an ornament from the mantelpiece, and when she tries to put it back she misjudges the distance. It's the same with tables and teacups. She has broken such a lot of crockery."

"Uncle said I was to have the vases and everything else that belonged to him," said George firmly.

"Oh, you needn't worry," Mrs. Drake replied. "Now that you are really going to work for your living, I will let you into a little secret. When I married your uncle he insisted upon going to a lawyer and making his will leaving everything to me, although the dear fellow had nothing to leave except his odds and ends. So then of course I made a will leaving everything to him, although I thought I had nothing to leave; but the lawyer explained that any money I should have in the bank, together with the proportion of income reckoned up to the day of my death, would go to him. Then we adopted you, so I went to the lawyer again, and he put on something called a codicil, which said that, in the event of uncle dying first, everything that I left would go to you."

"Then there is no reason why I should work for my living," said George cheerfully.

"How are you going to live upon the interest of two or three hundred pounds?"

"A man of simple tastes can do with very little," declared the nephew.

Fruit grower and prospective railway magnate went off together on Friday morning, but the only despatch to reach Windward House came from Percy, who announced he had reached his

mortgaged premises in perfect safety, after leaving George upon the platform of Waterloo station surrounded by officials. This might have signified anything. Mrs. Drake supposed it meant that all the great men of the railway had assembled to greet their new colleague upon his arrival. What it did mean was that Percy had freed himself of responsibility at the earliest possible moment, abandoning his cousin to a knot of porters who claimed the honour and distinction of dealing with his baggage, which probably they supposed was the property of a gentleman about to penetrate into one of the unexplored corners of the earth.

Not a postcard came from George. He disappeared completely; but Mrs. Drake was delighted to think he was attending to his new duties so strenuously as to be unable to write; while Miss Yard remembered him only once, and then remarked in a reverential whisper that she would very much like to visit his grave.

It was the fourteenth day after the flight of George into the realm of labour; and during the afternoon Mrs. Drake set out upon her weekly pilgrimage to the churchyard, accompanied by Kezia, who carried a basket of flowers, and Bessie with a watering pot. Nellie had settled Miss Yard in her easy chair with the latest report of the Society for Improving the Morals of the Andaman Islanders, and had then retired to her bedroom to do some sewing. The giant tortoise was clearing the kitchen garden of young lettuces; the monkeys were collecting entomological specimens. One of the intelligent parrots exclaimed, "Gone for a walk;" a still more intelligent bird answered, "Here we are again!" Then George passed out of the sunshine and entered the cool parlour.

"Oh dear! I'm afraid I had nearly gone to sleep," said Miss Yard, rising to receive the visitor, and wondering whoever he could be, until she remembered the churchwarden had promised to call for a subscription to the organ fund.

"Do please sit down," she continued and tried to set the example; but she missed the chair by a few inches and descended somewhat heavily upon the footstool. The visitor helped her to rise, and was much thanked. "You will stay to tea? My sister will be here presently," Miss Yard continued, while she fumbled in her reticule, and at last produced a sovereign. "You see I had it all ready for you. I remembered I had promised it," she said triumphantly.

George pocketed the coin, and thanked her heartily. He mentioned that it was very dusty walking, and he was weary, having travelled a considerable distance since the morning. Then he proposed to leave Miss Yard, who shook hands, and said how sorry her sister would be not to have seen him; and went to his bedroom, which he was considerably annoyed to find had been converted into a place for lumber.

"Maria, you have missed the vicar!" cried Miss Yard excitedly, the moment her sister returned. "I gave him a sovereign for the Andaman Islanders, and he told me what a lot of sleeping sickness there is in the village."

"What are you talking about? The vicar can't have been here, for we saw him in the churchyard, and he never mentioned any sickness in the village."

"Perhaps I was thinking of something I had just read about. One gets muddled sometimes. But the vicar – or somebody – has been, and there was nearly a dreadful accident. He caught his foot in the hearth rug, but luckily my footstool broke his fall."

At that moment footsteps descended the stairs. With a feeling that the sounds were horribly familiar, Mrs. Drake hurried into the hall, there to discover her nephew, who appeared delighted to be home again upon a thoroughly well earned holiday. "George, I have prayed that you wouldn't do this," she cried.

"It's all right, Aunt," came the cheery answer. "Though perhaps it *was* rather silly of me to start work upon a Friday. The railway profession is very much overcrowded just now, and there's not a single vacancy for station-master anywhere. They have put my name on the waiting list, and as soon as there's a job going, they will write and let me know. I am quite content to wait, and I may just as well do it here as in expensive lodgings."

"How long do you expect to wait?"

"Can't tell. It may be a slow business, but it's sure. A station-master told me you may have to wait year after year, but promotion is bound to come at last – if you live long enough."

"Then you may do nothing for years."

"I'm not going to take anything; I owe it to my uncle's memory to occupy a respectable position. Still, if I can't get a terminus after a few months' waiting, I'll put up with a small junction. Rather than not work at all, I would condescend to act as a mere Inspector," said George with dignity.

"I wish the vicar would shave off his moustache," Miss Yard murmured.

CHAPTER VI

HONOURABLE INTENTIONS

Every evening at nine Mrs. Drake drank a cup of coffee. This was a custom of some historical importance, and it originated after the following manner:

Captain Drake had a great liking for a small glass of whisky and water after his evening pipe; but, during the first few weeks of married life, refrained from divulging this weakness to his wife, who could not understand why he became so restless at the same time every evening. The Captain explained that, when he had finished smoking, he suffered from an incurable longing to arise and walk about the house. Mrs. Drake advised him to take exercise by all means, and the Captain did so, wandering towards the dining room at nine o'clock, and returning about ten minutes later in a thoroughly satisfied state of mind. But one evening the lady heard him whisper to the servant, "Water, my child! Water!" – the Captain never could whisper properly – and upon another evening she distinguished the creak of a corkscrew, while every evening she was able to detect a subtle aroma which could not have been introduced as one of the ordinary results of walking about the house.

"So you are fond of whisky," she said sharply.

"Well, not exactly fond of it, my dear," stammered the Captain. "Really I don't care for whisky, but I like the feeling it gives me."

"I don't like hypocrisy, and I dislike still more the feeling it gives me. In future we will drink together. When you take your glass of whisky, I will have a cup of coffee," she replied.

After the arrival of Miss Yard at Windward House, she too was offered the cup, but declined, as she abhorred coffee.

"But it's cocoa," explained Kezia.

"Why do you call it coffee then?" asked Miss Yard, who had quite enough to perplex her poor brain without this unnecessary difficulty.

"Mrs. Drake used to have coffee once, but, as she never cared for it much, she took to cocoa. She has drunk cocoa for twenty years, but we always call it coffee."

Bessie and Robert stayed every evening to drink coffee, which was generally cocoa, but sometimes beer. One evening Nellie was so late that Kezia declared she should wait for her no longer. It was Thursday, and Nellie, who sang in the choir, had gone out to attend the weekly practice. Suddenly Robert withdrew his head from a steaming bowl and declared he heard voices in the garden. All listened, and presently Nellie's laughter passed in at the back door, which stood open as the night was warm, but Nellie did not accompany it.

Robert made a signal to the others, and they tiptoed out like so many conspirators, to discover the young lady enjoying a confidential conversation with somebody else who sang in the choir, and whose voice had been described by the schoolmaster-organist as a promising baritone. It looked as if it was promising then.

A few minutes later Kezia and Bessie appeared in the parlour, and asked Mrs. Drake if she had any objection to Sidney Brock drinking a cup of coffee.

"Who is Sidney Brock?" demanded Mrs. Drake, like a learned judge of the King's Bench.

"He'm the grandson of Eli Brock, and he sings in the choir."

Mrs. Drake expressed her approval, but required to know more about the family before she could issue a permit to Sidney entitling him to drink coffee.

"They'm the new folk to Black Anchor," explained Bessie. "Mr. Brock used to keep a post office, they ses, but it failed, and now he'm farming wi' Sidney, and they ha' got no woman, and

they took Black Anchor because 'twas to be had vor nothing nearly, and 'tis wonderful, Robert ses, what a lot they ha' done already."

"The post office failed!" exclaimed Miss Yard, who had been listening intently with a hand behind her ear. "What a pity! Now I shan't be able to write any more letters."

"Mr. Brock's post office, miss," cried Bessie. "It was a shop as well, but it didn't pay."

"How much does he want?" asked Miss Yard, searching for her reticule.

"Nothing, miss."

"What's he come for then? I hope he hasn't brought a telegram."

"He's one of the choirmen, Sophy," exclaimed Mrs. Drake, adding, "But I don't know why he should come here."

"He's just brought your Nellie home," said Kezia.

"Oh, I am so thankful!" cried Miss Yard. "I knew Nellie would be lost, going out these dreadful dark nights."

"She only went to choir practice, miss. Sidney is her young man now, and they'll make the best looking couple in Highfield," said Bessie.

"How silly of you to tell her that!" said Mrs. Drake crossly.

Miss Yard said nothing for a few moments. She stared at the mummy, then at the grandfather clock, which was no longer in working order; and presently her poor old face began to twitch and tears rolled down her cheeks. She tried to rise, but Kezia restrained her with kindly hands, saying, "Don't worry, miss. Sidney is a very nice young man, and I'm sure Nellie couldn't do much better."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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