

Hume Fergus

The Solitary Farm



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CHAPTER I

THE DOMAIN OF CERES

"S' y' want t' merry m' gel, Bella!" remarked Captain Huxham, rubbing his stout knees slowly, and repeating the exact words of the clerical suitor. "S' thet she may be yer handmaiden, an' yer spouse, and yer sealed fountain, es y' put it in yer flowery pulpit lingo. Jus' so! Jus' so!" and shifting the quid which bulged his weather-beaten cheek, he stared with hard blue eyes. "Jus' so, Mr. Pence!"

The young minister and the elderly skipper discussed the subject of marriage in a shabby antique room of small size, which had the appearance of having been used to more aristocratic company. The dark-oak panelled walls, the grotesquely-carved ceiling-beams, the Dutch-tiled fire-place, with its ungainly brass dogs, and the deep slanting embrasure of the lozenge-paned casement, suggested Georgian beaux and belles dancing buckram minutes, or at least hard-riding country squires plotting Jacobite restoration. But these happenings were in the long-ago, but this stately Essex manor-house had declined woefully from its high estate, and now sheltered a rough and ready mariner, who camped, rather than dwelt, under its roof.

Captain Huxham, seated on the broad, low window-sill, thrust his hands into the pockets of his brass-buttoned pea-jacket, and swung his short, sturdy legs, which were enveloped in wide blue-cloth trousers. He was a squat man, with lengthy arms and aggressively square shoulders, and his large, flat face was as the winter sun for redness. Clean-shaven, save for a fringe of white hair which curved under his stubborn chin from one large ear to the other, his tough skin was seamed with innumerable wrinkles, accumulating particularly thickly about his eyes. He had gold rings in his ears, and plenteous grey hair hung like seaweed from under a peaked cap, pushed back from his lined forehead. He looked what he truly was – a rough, uneducated, imperious old sea-dog, whose knowledge of strong drink and stronger language was only exceeded by his strenuous grip of the purse which held the savings of many rapacious years. In this romantic room he looked entirely out of place. Nevertheless it was his own property, and while considering his answer to Mr. Pence, he examined it mechanically.

To the left he beheld a large open fire-place, which gaped under an ornate oak mantel-piece, carved with the crest and motto of the dispossessed family. A door appeared on the right, leading to the entrance hall, and this also was elaborately carved with wreaths of fruit and flowers, and with fat, foolish Cupids, entangled in knots of ribbon. The fourth wall was unbroken, and faced the window, but against it stood a common deal table covered incongruously with an embroidered Indian cloth. Above this, and leaning forward, was a round convex mirror, surmounted by a Napoleonic eagle. This was flanked on one side by an oilskin coat and a sou'-wester, and on the other by a sextant and a long brass telescope. A Louis Quinze sofa, with a gilt frame, and covered with faded brocade, fitted into the space between the fire-place and the casement. In the opposite corner, with its back to the outer wall, stood a large modern office-desk of mahogany, with a flexible curved lid, which was drawn down and fastened, because a visitor was in the room. Captain Huxham never received anyone in his sanctum unless he first assured himself that the desk was closed, and a small, green-painted safe near it fast-locked.

There were three or four rush-bottomed chairs, which looked plebeian even on the dusty, uncarpeted floor. On the mantel-shelf stood a lyre-shaped clock, bearing the sun symbol of Louis XIV.; several cheap and gaudy vases, and many fantastic shells picked up on South Sea beaches.

Here and there were Japanese curios, Polynesian mats and war weapons; uncouth Chinese idols, stuffed birds, Indian ivory carvings, photographs and paintings of various ships, and all the flotsam and jetsam which collects in a sailor's sea-chest during endless voyages. The deal table was littered with old magazines, yellow-backed novels, and navigation books with ragged covers; while the fire-place was a species of dust-bin for matches, cigar-ends, torn papers, orange peel, and such like. Everywhere the dust lay thick. It was an odd room – at once sumptuous and dingy, markedly chaotic, yet orderly in an untidy way. It reflected more or less the mind of its present owner, who, as has been before remarked, camped, rather than lived, amidst his surroundings. In the same way do Eastern nomads house in the ruined palaces of kings.

Silas Pence, who was the minister of the Little Bethel Chapel in Marshely village, curled his long thin legs under his chair and looked anxiously at his meditative host. That portion of the light from the casement not intercepted by Huxham's bulky figure, revealed a lean, eager face, framed in sparse, fair hair, parted in the centre and falling untidily on the coat collar. The young preacher's features were sharply defined and somewhat mean, while a short and scanty beard scarcely concealed his sensitive mouth. His forehead was lofty, his chin weak, and his grey eyes glittered in a strange, fanatical fashion. There were exceptional possibilities both for good and evil in that pale countenance, and it could be guessed that environment would have much to do with the development of such possibilities. Mr. Pence was arrayed in a tightly-fitting frock coat and loose trousers, both of worn broadcloth. He wore also a low collar with a white tie, bow-fashion, white socks, and low-heeled shoes, and every part of his attire, although neat and well-brushed and well-mended, revealed dire poverty. On the whole, he had the rapt ascetic gaze of a mediæval saint, and a monkish robe would have suited him better than his semi-ecclesiastical garb as a Non-conformist preacher.

But if Pence resembled a saint, Huxham might have passed for a grey old badger, sullen and infinitely wary. Having taken stock of his worldly possessions, recalling meanwhile a not altogether spotless past, he brought his shrewd eyes back again to his visitor's attentive face. Still anxious to gain time for further consideration, he remarked once more, "So' y' want t' merry m' gel, Bella, Mr. Pence? Jus' so! Jus' so!"

The other replied, in a musical but high-pitched voice almost feminine in its timbre, "I am not comely; I am not wealthy; nor do I sit in the seat of the rulers. But the Lord has gifted me with a pleading tongue, an admiring eye, and an admonishing nature. With Isabella by my side, Brother Huxham, I can lead more hopefully our little flock towards the pleasant land of Beulah. What says Isaiah?"

"Dunno!" confessed the mariner. "Ain't bin readin' Isaiaher's log lately."

"Thou shalt be called Hephzibah," quoted Mr. Pence shrilly, "and thy land Beulah: for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land will be married."

"Didn't know es Isaiaher knew of m' twenty acres," growled Huxham, with another turn of his quid; "'course ef it be, es y' merry Bella, th' land goes with her when I fits int' m' little wooden overcoat. Y' kin take yer davy on thet, Mr. Pence, fur I've a conscience, I hev, – let 'em say contrary es likes."

It must have been an uneasy conscience, for Captain Huxham glared defiantly at his visitor, and then cast a doubtful look over his left shoulder, as though he expected to be tapped thereon. Pence was puzzled as much by this behaviour as by the literal way in which the sailor had taken the saying of the prophet. "Isaiah spoke in parables," he explained, lamely.

"Maybe," grunted Huxham, "but y' speak sraight 'nough, Mr. Pence. Touching this merrage. Y' love Bella, es I take it?"

"I call her Hephzibah," burst out the young minister enthusiastically, "which, being interpreted, means – my delight is in her."

"Jus' so! Jus' so! But does th' gel love you, Mr. Pence?"

The face of the suitor clouded. "I have my doubts," he sighed, "seeing that she has looked upon vanity in the person of a man from Babylon."

"Damn your parables!" snapped the captain; "put a blamed name t' him."

"Mr. Cyril Lister," began Pence, and was about to reprove his host for the use of strong language, when he was startled by much worse. And Huxham grew purple in the face when using it.

It is unnecessary to set down the exact words, but the fluency and originality and picturesqueness of the retired mariner's speech made Silas close his scandalised ears. With many adjectives of the most lurid description, the preacher understood Huxham to say that he would see his daughter grilling in the nethermost pit of Tophet before he would permit his daughter to marry this – adjective, double adjective – swab from London.

"I ain't seen th' blighter," bellowed the captain, furiously, "but I've heard of his blessed name. Bella met him et thet blamed Miss Ankers', the school-mistress', house, she did. Sh' wanted him t' kim an' see this old shanty, 'cause he writes fur the noospapers, cuss him. But I up an' tole her, es I'd twist her damned neck ef she spoke agin with the lop-sided –"

"Stop! stop!" remonstrated Pence feebly. "We are all brothers in –"

"The lubber ain't no relative o' mine, hang him; an' y' too, fur sayin' so. Oh, Lister, Lister!" Huxham swung two huge fists impotently. "I hate him."

"Why? why? why?" babbled the visitor incoherently.

The surprise in his tones brought Huxham to his calmer senses, like the cunning old badger he was.

"'Cause I jolly well do," he snorted, wiping his perspiring face with a flaunting red and yellow bandana. "But it don't matter nohow, and I arsk yer pardon fur gittin' up steam. My gel don't merry no Lister, y' kin lay yer soul t' thet, Mr. Pence. Lister! Lister!" He slipped off the sill in his excitement. "I hates the whole damned breed of 'em; sea-cooks all, es oughter t' hev their silly faces in the slush tub."

"Do you know the Lister family then?" asked Pence, open-mouthed at this vehemence.

This remark cooled the captain still further. "Shut yer silly mouth," he growled, rolling porpoise-fashion across the room, "and wait till I git m' breath back int' m' bellers."

Being a discreet young man, Pence took the hint and silently watched the squat, ungainly figure of his host lunging and plunging in the narrow confines of the apartment. Whatever may have been the reason, it was evident that the name of Lister acted like a red rag to this nautical bull. Pence ran over in his mind what he knew of the young stranger, to see if he could account for this outbreak. He could recall nothing pertinent. Cyril Lister had come to remain in Marshely some six months previously, and declared himself to be a journalist in search of quiet, for the purpose of writing a novel. He occupied a tiny cottage in the village, and was looked after by Mrs. Block, a stout, gossiping widow, who spoke well of her master. So far as Pence knew, Captain Huxham had never set eyes on the stranger, and could not possibly know anything of him or of his family. Yet, from his late outburst of rage, it was apparent that he hated the young man.

Lister sometimes went to London, but for the most part remained in the village, writing his novel and making friends with the inhabitants. At the house of the board-school mistress he had met Bella Huxham, and the two had been frequently in one another's company, in spite of the captain's prohibition. But it was evident that Huxham knew nothing of their meetings. Pence did, however, and resented that the girl should prefer Lister's company to his own. He was very deeply in love, and it rejoiced his heart when he heard how annoyed the captain was at the mere idea of a marriage between Lister and his daughter. The preacher was by no means a selfish man, or a bad man, but being in love he naturally wished to triumph over his rival. He now knew that his suit would be supported by Huxham, if only out of his inexplicable hatred for the journalist.

Meanwhile Huxham stamped and muttered, and wiped his broad face as he walked off his anger. Finally he stopped opposite his visitor and waved him to the door. "Y' shell merry m' gel,

Bella," he announced hoarsely; "m' conscience won't let me merry her t' thet – thet – oh, cuss him! why can't he an' the likes o' he keep away!" He paused, and again cast an uncomfortable look over his left shoulder. "Kim up on th' roof," he said abruptly, driving Pence into the entrance hall. "I'll show y' wot I'll give y' with m' gel – on conditions."

"Conditions!" The preacher was bewildered.

Huxham vouchsafed no reply, but mounted the shallow steps of the grand staircase. The manor-house was large and rambling, and of great age, having been built in the reign of Henry VII. The rooms were spacious, the corridors wide, and the ceilings lofty. The present possessor led his guest up the stairs into a long, broad passage, with many doors leading into various bedrooms. At the end he opened a smaller door to reveal a narrow flight of steep steps. Followed by the minister, Huxham ascended these, and the two emerged through a wooden trap-door on the roof. Silas then beheld a moderately broad space running parallel with the passage below, and extending from one parapet to the other. On either side of this walk – as it might be termed – the red-tiled roofs sloped abruptly upward to cover the two portions of the mansion, here joined by the flat leads forming the walk aforesaid. On the slope of the left roof, looking from the trap-door, was a wooden ladder which led up to a small platform, also of wood, built round the emerging chimney stack. This was Captain Huxham's quarter deck, whither he went on occasions to survey his property. He clambered up the ladder with the agility of a sailor, in spite of his age, and was followed by the preacher with some misgivings. These proved to be correct, for when he reached the quarter-deck, the view which met his startled eyes so shook his nerve, that he would have fallen but that the captain propped him up against the broad brick-work of the chimney.

"Oh, me," moaned the unfortunate Silas, holding on tightly to the iron clamps of the brick-work. "I am throned on a dangerous eminence," and closed his eyes.

"Open 'em, open 'em," commanded the captain gruffly, "an' jes' look et them twenty acres of corn, es y'll git with m' gel when I'm a deader."

Pence slipped into a sitting position and looked as directed. He beheld from his dizzy elevation the rolling marshland, extending from the far-distant stream of the Thames to the foot of low-lying inland hills. As it was July, and the sun shone strongly, the marshes were comparatively dry, but here and there Pence beheld pools and ditches flashing like jewels in the yellow radiance. Immediately before him he could see the village of Marshely, not so very far away, with red-roofed houses gathered closely round the grey, square tower of the church; he could even see the tin roof of his own humble Bethel gleaming like silver in the sunlight. And here and there, dotted indiscriminately, were lonely houses, single huts, clumps of trees, and on the higher ground rising inland, more villages similar to Marshely. The flat and perilously green lands were divided by hedges and ditches and fences into squares and triangles and oblongs and rectangles, all as emerald-hued as faery rings. The human habitations were so scattered, that it looked as though some careless genii had dropped them by chance when flying overhead. Far away glittered the broad stream of the Thames, with ships and steamers and boats and barges moving, outward and inward bound, on its placid surface. The rigid line of the railway shot straightly through villages and trees and occasional cuttings, across the verdant expanse, with here and there a knot representing a station. Smoke curled from the tall chimneys of the dynamite factories near the river, and silvery puffs of steam showed that a train was on its way to Tilbury. All was fresh, restful, beautiful, and so intensely green as to be suggestive of early Spring buddings.

"When I took command of this here farm, ten years back," observed Captain Huxham, drawing in a deep breath of moist air, "it were water-logged like a derelict, es y' might say. Cast yer weather-eye over it now, Mr. Pence, an' wot's yer look-out: a gardin of Edin, smilin' with grain."

"Yet it's a derelict still," remarked the preacher, struggling to his feet and holding on by the chimney; "let me examine your farm of Bleacres."

Bleacres – a corruption of bleakacres – consisted of only twenty acres not at all bleak, but a mere slice out of the wide domains formerly owned by the aristocratic family dispossessed by Huxham. It extended all round the ancient manor-house, which stood exactly in the centre, and every foot of it was sown with corn. On every side waved the greenish-bluish crop, now almost breast high. It rolled right up to the walls of the house, so that this was drowned, so to speak, in the ocean of grain. The various fields were divided and sub-divided by water-ways wide and narrow, which drained the land, and these gave the place quite a Dutch look, as fancy might picture them as canals. But the corn grew everywhere so thick and high, in contrast to the barren marshes, that the farm looked almost aggressively cultivated. Bleacres was widely known as "The Solitary Farm," for there was not another like it for many miles, though why it should have been left to a retired sailor to cultivate the soil it is hard to say. But Huxham for many years had sown corn on his twenty acres, so that the mansion for the most part of the year was quite shut off from the world. Only a narrow path was left, which meandered from the front door and across various water-ways to Marshely village, one mile distant. In no other way save by this path could the mansion be approached. And as guardian of the place a red-coated scarecrow stood sentinel a stone-throw from the house. The bit of brilliant colour looked gay amidst the rolling acres of green.

"The domain of Ceres," said Pence dreamily, and recalling his meagre classical studies; "here the goddess might preside. Yet," he added again, with a side glance at his rugged host, "a derelict still."

"Mr. Pence don't know the English langwidge, apparently," said Huxham, addressing the landscape with a pitying smile. "A derelict's a ship abandoned."

"And a derelict," insisted Pence, "can also be described as a tract of land left dry by the sea, and fit for cultivation or use. You will find that explanation in Nuttall's Standard Dictionary, captain."

"Live an' larn; live an' larn," commented Huxham, accepting the explanation without question; "but I ain't got no use for dix'onaries m'self. Made m' dollars to buy this here farm without sich truck."

"In what way, captain?" asked Silas absently, and looked at the view.

Had he looked instead at Huxham's weather-beaten face he might have been surprised. The captain grew a little trifle paler under his bronze, an uneasy look crept into his hard blue eyes, and he threw another anxious glance over his shoulder. But a stealthy examination of the minister's indifferent countenance assured him that the question, although a leading one, had been asked in all innocence. And in all innocence the captain replied, for the momentary pause had given him time to frame his reply.

"I arned m' dollars, Mr. Pence, es an honest man should, by sweatin' on th' high an' narrer seas these forty year'. Ran away fro' m' father, es wos a cobbler," added Huxham, addressing the landscape once more, "when I wos ten year old, an' a hop-me-thumb et thet, es y' could hev squeezed int' a pint pot. Cabin boy, A.B., mate, fust an' second, and a skipper by m' own determination t' git top-hole. Likewise hard tack, cold quarters, kickin's an' brimstone langwidge es would hev made thet hair of yours curl tremenjous, Mr. Pence. I made 'nough when fifty an' more, t' buy this here farm, an' this here house, th' roof of which I've walked quarter-deck fashion, es y' see, these ten years – me bein' sixty odd, so t' speak. Waitin' now fur a hail t' jine th' angels, an' Mrs. Arabeller Huxham, who is a flier with a halo, an' expectin' me aloft, es she remarked frequent when chokin' in her engine pipes. Asthma et wos," finished the widower, spitting out some tobacco juice, "es settled her hash."

This astonishing speech, delivered with slow gruffness, did not startle Silas, as he had known Captain Huxham for at least five years, and had before remarked upon his eccentric way of talking. "Very interesting; very commendable," he murmured, and returned to the object of his visit. "And your daughter, sir?"

"Y' shell hev her, an' hev this here," the captain waved his hand to the four points of the compass, "when I jine the late Mrs. Arabeller Huxham, ef y' – ef y' – thet is – " he halted dubiously.

"If what?" demanded Pence, unsuspectingly.

"Ef y' chuck thet Lister int' one of them water-ways," said Huxham.

"What?" cried the preacher, considerably startled.

"I want him dead," growled Huxham gruffly, "drown dead an' buried."

Perhaps his sojourn in distant lands on the fringes of the empire had familiarised the captain with sudden death and murder, for he made this amazing proposition in a calm and cheerful voice. But the minister was not so steeled to horrors.

"What?" he repeated in a shaking voice and with dilated eyes.

"All fur you," murmured the tempter persuasively, "every blamed acre of et, t' say nothing of Bella es is a fine gel, an' – "

"No, no, no!" cried Silas vehemently, spreading his hands across his lean, agitated face, "how dare you ask such a thing?"

"Jus' a push," went on Huxham softly, "he bein' on the edge of one of them ditches, es y' might say. Wot th' water gits th' water holds. He'd go down int' the black slime an' never come up. It 'ud choke him. Cuss me," murmured Huxham softly, "I'd like t' see the black slime choke a Lister."

Pence gasped again and recalled how the Evil One had taken the Saviour of men up to an exceedingly high mountain, to show Him the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. "All these things will I give thee," said Satan, "if – "

"No!" shouted Silas, his eyes lighting up with wrath. "Get thee behind me – " Before finishing his sentence, and before Huxham could reply, he scrambled down the ladder to rush for the open trap. The captain leaned from his quarter-deck scornfully. "Y' needn't say es I gave y' the chance, fur no one 'ull believe y'," he cried out, coolly, "an' a milksop y' are. Twenty acres, a house, an' a fine gel – y'd be set up for life, ef y'd only push – "

Pence heard no more. In a frenzy of horror he dropped through the trap-door, inwardly praying that he might be kept from temptation. Huxham saw him vanish and scowled. "Blamed milky swab," he grumbled, then turned to survey the bribe he had offered for wilful murder. He looked at the corn and across the corn uneasily, as though he saw danger in the distance. "No cause to be afeared," muttered the ex-mariner; "he can't get through the corn. It keeps me safe anyhow."

But who the "he" referred to might be, Huxham did not say.

CHAPTER II

THE WOOLIN' O'T

Imagine a man wrapped from infancy in the cotton wool of civilisation suddenly jerked out of the same into barbaric nakedness. Deprived of the strong protection of the law, brought suddenly face to face with the "might-is-right" theory, he would have to fight for his own land, even to the extent of slaying anyone who thwarted his needs. Such a man, amazed and horrified at first, would gradually become accustomed to his Ishmael existence, since habit is second nature. Silas Pence felt sick when he reflected on the offer made by Captain Huxham, and to him of all people – a minister of the Gospel, a follower of the Prince of Peace. For the first time in his guarded life, he became aware of the evil which underlies the smiling surface of things, and it was as though an abyss had opened suddenly at his feet. But although he did not know it at the time, the seed had been sown in his heart at the right moment, and would germinate almost without his knowledge. In a few days Silas could look back at the horrifying suggestion with calmness, and could even consider the advantages it offered.

But just now he felt sick, physically sick, and descending with trembling limbs to the ground floor of the house, staggered towards the hall and door. All he desired was to get away, and put the corn-fields between himself and the evil atmosphere of Bleacres. But his legs failed him as he laid hands on the latch, and he sank white-faced and shaking into a chair. In this state he was discovered by Mrs. Coppersley, the captain's sister and housekeeper. She was a buxom, amiable woman, with a fixed smile meaning nothing. The expression of her rosy face changed to one of alarm when she saw the heap in the chair. "Save us, Mr. Pence, what's wrong?"

Pence was about to break forth into a denunciation of Huxham's wickedness, but a timely recollection of the captain's last words – that his story would not be believed – made him pause. After all, Huxham was well known as a decent man and an open-handed friend to one and all, so there was nothing to be gained by telling a truth which would certainly be scoffed at. The preacher changed his mind in one swift instant, and replied nervously to Mrs. Coppersley's inquiry. "I have been on the quarter-deck, and it made me dizzy. I am not accustomed to –"

"Drat that brother of mine," interrupted Mrs. Coppersley angrily, "he got me up there once, and I thought I'd never come down. Here, Mr. Pence, you hold up while I get you a sup of rum."

"No, no! Strong drink leads us into desperate ways," protested the preacher. But Mrs. Coppersley was gone, and had returned before he could make up his mind to fly temptation. Silas was not used to alcohol, but the shock he had sustained in learning so much of Huxham's true nature prevented his exercising his usual self-control. With his highly strung nerves he was half-hysterical, and so, when forced by kindly Mrs. Coppersley, readily drank half a tumbler of rum slightly diluted with water.

"Drink it all, there's a good soul," entreated the housekeeper, forcing the glass to his lips.

"No!" He pushed it away. "I feel better already!" and he did, for the strong spirit brought colour to his cheek and new strength to his limbs. He stood up in a few minutes, quite himself, and indeed more than himself, since the rum put into him more courage than came by nature. "Wine maketh glad the heart of man," said Silas, in excuse for his unusual indulgence.

"Rum isn't wine," said Mrs. Coppersley, with a jolly laugh, "it's something much better, Mr. Pence. Now you go home and lie down."

"Oh, no! I feel as though I could charge an army," said Pence valiantly.

"Then wait in the study." She indicated the panelled room with a jerk of her head. "Jabez will be down from his quarter-deck soon."

"No." Pence shivered, in spite of the rum, at the thought of again having to face his tempter. "I must go now. My presence is required in the village."

"Then you can take a message for me to Mr. Vand," said Mrs. Coppersley, with a slight accession of colour to her already florid face. "Say that I am coming to Marshely about seven o'clock, and will call at the shop."

This request changed Pence into the preacher and the leader of the godly people who called his chapel their fold. Vand was the son of the woman who kept the village grocery shop, and a cripple who played the violin at various local concerts. He was at least ten years younger than Mrs. Coppersley, who confessed to being thirty-five – though probably she was older – and the way in which the widow ran after him was something of a scandal. As both Mrs. Coppersley and Henry Vand were members of Little Bethel, Silas felt that he was entitled to inquire into the matter. "You ask me to take such a message, sister?" he demanded austere.

The widow's face flamed, and her eyes sparkled. "There is no shame in it that I am aware of, Mr. Pence," she declared violently; "if I choose to marry again, that's no one's business but mine, I take it."

"Oh, so you desire to marry Henry Vand?" said Pence, amazed.

"It's not a question of desiring," said the buxom woman impatiently. "Henry and I have arranged to be married this summer."

"He is a cripple."

"I know that," she snapped, "and therefore needs the care of a wife."

"His mother looks after him," protested Pence weakly.

"Does she?" inquired Mrs. Coppersley. "I thought she looked after no one but herself. She's that selfish as never was, so don't you go to defend her, Mr. Pence. Henry, poor boy, who is an angel, if ever there was one, is quite neglected; so I am going to marry him and look after him. So there!" and Mrs. Coppersley, placing her hands akimbo, defied her pastor.

"Henry has no money," said Pence, finding another objection.

"As to that," remarked Mrs. Coppersley indifferently, "when my brother dies I'll have money for us both, and this house into the bargain."

"You will have nothing of the sort," said Silas, surprised into saying more than was wise. "Your brother's daughter will inherit this –"

"Oh, will she?" cried Mrs. Coppersley violently, "and much you know about it, Mr. Pence. When my late husband, who was a ship's steward, and saving, died ten year ago, I lent my brother some money to add to his own, so that he might buy Bleacres. He agreed that if I did so, I should inherit the house and the land. I promised to look after Bella until she got married, and –"

"Mrs. Coppersley," said Pence, with an effort at firmness, "your brother told me only lately that if I married Bella, he would give her the farm and the house when he died, so –"

"Ho, indeed," interrupted Mrs. Coppersley wrathfully, "pretty goings on, I'm sure. You call yourself a pastor, Mr. Pence, and come plotting to rob me of what is mine. I take everything, and Bella nothing, so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it, though you ain't man enough to smoke even a penny cigar. You marry Bella? Why, she's as good as engaged to that young Lister, who has got more gumption about him than you have."

"I advise you," said Pence, and his voice sounded strangely in his own ears, "not to tell your brother that his daughter is engaged to Mr. Lister."

"I never said that she was. But –"

"There is no but. The mere mention of such an engagement would send Captain Huxham crazy."

"In heaven's name, why?" gasped Mrs. Coppersley, looking the picture of stout amazement and sitting down heavily.

"Because for some reason he hates Mr. Lister, and would kill him rather than accept him as his son-in-law."

Mrs. Coppersley's florid face turned quite pale. Evidently she knew what her brother was like when roused. "Why should Jabez hate Mr. Lister?" she asked.

"You had better ask him," said Pence, opening the hall door; then to soften his abruptness he added, "I'll tell Henry Vand that you will see him." After which he departed, leaving Mrs. Coppersley still pale and still gasping.

After all there was no reason why the ship steward's widow would not marry the young man. Vand was handsome in a refined way, and very clever as a musician. He was only slightly crippled, too, and could get about with the aid of a stick. All the same, he needed someone to look after him, and as his own mother did not do so – as was notorious – why should he not become Mrs. Coppersley's husband? The disparity in age did not matter, as Vand, in spite of his good looks, was club-footed and poor. But Pence doubted if Mrs. Coppersley would inherit Bleacres after Captain Huxham's death, in spite of the arrangement between them. Unless – and here was the chance for the housekeeper – unless Bella married Lister, notwithstanding her father's opposition. In that event, Huxham would assuredly disinherit her. "I'll point this out to her," said the preacher, as he left the manor-house, "and urge my suit. Common-sense will make her yield to my prayers. Moreover, I can plead, and – " here he smiled complacently as he thought of his pulpit eloquence. Besides, the unaccustomed spirit of the rum was still keeping him brave.

Pence sauntered in the glowing sunshine down the narrow path which ran between the standing corn. The path was not straight. It wound deviously, as though Huxham wished to make the approach to his abode as difficult as possible. Indeed, it was strange that he should sow corn at all, since corn at the time was not remunerative. But every year since he had entered into possession of Bleacres the owner had sown corn, and every year there had only been the one meandering path through the same, the very path which Pence was now taking. There was evidently some purpose in this sowing, and in the fact that only one pathway was left whereby to approach the mansion. But what that purpose might be, neither Pence, nor indeed anyone else, could guess. Not that they gave it a thought. Huxham was presumed to be very wealthy, and his farming was looked upon more as a hobby than a necessity.

The preacher brushed between the breast-high corn, and walked over two or three narrow planks laid across two or three narrow ditches. But where the corn ended was a wide channel, at least ten feet broad, which stretched the whole length of the estate and passed beyond it on its way under the railway line to the distant river. The water-way ran straightly for some distance, and then curved down into the marshes at its own will, to spread into swamps. On one side sprang the thick green corn, but on the other stretched waste-lands up to the outskirts of the village, one mile distant. There was no fence round Bleacres at this point. Apparently, Huxham deemed the wide channel a sufficient protection to his corn, which it assuredly was, as no tramps ever trespassed on the land. But then, Marshely was not a tramp village. The inhabitants were poor, and had nothing to give in the way of charity. The loafer of the roads avoided the locality for very obvious reasons.

Before crossing the planks, which were laid on mid-channel supporting tressels over the water-way, Pence looked from right to left. The evening was so very beautiful that he thought he would prolong his walk until sundown, and it wanted some time to that hour. He was still indignant with Captain Huxham for his base offer, and came to the conclusion that the ex-mariner was mad when he made it. Pence, in his simplicity, could not think that any man could ask another to kill a third in cold blood. All the same, the offer had been made, and Silas found himself asking why Huxham should desire the death of a stranger with whom – so far as the preacher knew – he was not even acquainted. Huxham had always refused to permit Bella to bring Lister to Bleacres, and indeed had forbidden her even to speak to the young man. He therefore could not be cognisant of the fact, stated by Mrs. Coppersley, that Lister and the girl were on the eve of an engagement.

Thus thinking, Pence mechanically wandered along the left bank of the boundary water-way, and found himself near a small hut, inhabited by the sole labourer whom Huxham habitually employed. He engaged others, of course, when his fields were ploughed, and sown, and reaped, but Tunks – such was the euphonious name of the handy-man – was in demand all the year round. He resided in this somewhat lonely hut, along with his grandmother, a weird old gipsy reputed to be a witch, and it was this reputation which set Mr. Pence thinking.

Remembering that Mrs. Tunks was of the Romany, he thought, and blushed as he thought, that it would be worth while to expend a shilling in order to learn if his suit with Bella would really prosper. The temple of fate was before him, and the Sibyl was probably within, since the smoke of cooking the evening meal curled from the chimney. It was only necessary to lift the latch, lay down a shilling, and inquire. But even as the temptation drew him, he was seized with a feeling of shame, that he – a preacher of the Gospel, and the approved foe thereby of witches – should think for one moment of encouraging such traffic with the Evil One. Pence, blushing as red as the now setting sun, turned away hastily, and found himself face to face with the very girl who was causing him such torment.

"How are you, Mr. Pence?" said Bella Huxham, lightly. "A lovely evening, isn't it?" and she tried to pass him on the narrow path. Probably she was going to see the Witch of Endor.

The preacher placed himself directly before her.

"Wait for one moment."

The girl did not reply immediately, but looked at him earnestly, trying to guess what the usually nervous preacher had to say. Bella looked more lovely than ever in Pence's eyes, as she stood before him in her white dress and bathed in the rosy glory of the sunset. She did not in the least resemble her father or her aunt, both of whom were stout, uncomely folk of true plebeian type. Bella was aristocratic in her looks, as tall and slim and willowy as a young sapling. Her hair and eyes were dark, her face was a perfect oval of ivory-white delicately flushed with red, like a sweet-pea, and if her chin was a trifle resolute and hard, her mouth was perfect. She carried herself in a haughty way, and had a habit of bending her dark brows so imperiously, that she reminded Pence of Judith, who killed Holofernes. Judith and Jael and Deborah must have been just such women.

"Well?" asked Bella, bending her brows like an empress, "what is it?"

"I – I – love you, Miss Huxham."

She could not be angry at so naive a declaration, and one coming from a man whom she knew to be as timid as a hare. "I am somewhat surprised, Mr. Pence," she replied demurely, "are you not making a mistake?"

"No," he stuttered, flushing with eagerness, for amorous passion makes the most timid bold. "I have loved you for months, for years. I want you to be my wife – to share with me the glorious privilege of leading my flock to the land of Beulah, and –"

"Stop, stop!" She flung up her hand. "I assure you, Mr. Pence, that it is impossible. Forget that you ever said anything."

"I cannot forget. Why should I forget?"

"You must not ask a woman for her reasons, Mr. Pence," she answered drily, "for a woman never gives the true ones."

"Bella!"

"Miss Huxham to you, Mr. Pence." She spoke in a chilly manner.

"No," he cried wildly; "to me you are Bella. I think of you by that sweet name day and night. You come between me and my work. When I console the afflicted I feel that I am talking to you. When I read my Bible, your face comes between me and the sacred page. To me you are Hephzibah – yes, and the Shulamite. The Angel of the Covenant; the joy of my heart. Oh, Bella, I love the very ground that you tread on. Can you refuse me? See!" He threw himself on the path, heedless of the fact that Mrs. Tunks might be at her not far distant window. "I am at your feet, Bella! Bella!"

The girl was distressed by this earnestness. "Rise, Mr. Pence, someone will see you. You must not behave like this. I cannot be your wife."

"Why not? Oh, why not?"

"Because I am not fit to be a minister's wife."

The young man sprang to his feet, glowing with passion. "Let me teach you."

Bella avoided his extended arms. "No, no, no!" she insisted, "you must take my answer once and for all, Mr. Pence. I cannot marry you."

"But why?" he urged despairingly.

"I have a reason," she replied formally; "don't ask me for it."

"I have no need to. I know your reason."

Bella flushed, but overlooked the bitterness of his tone because she guessed what he suffered. "In that case, I need not explain," she said coldly, and again tried to pass. Again he prevented her.

"You love that man Lister," he said between his teeth.

"That is my business, Mr. Pence."

"Mine also," he cried, undaunted by her haughtiness. "Your father's business, too. Mrs. Coppersley said that you were almost engaged to this man Lister. But you shall not marry him; you will not even be engaged to him."

"Who will prevent me?" asked Bella angrily.

"Your father. He hates this man Lister."

"How can my father hate a man he has never even seen?" she demanded; "you are talking rubbish."

"Miss Huxham" – Pence detained her by laying his thin fingers on her arm – "if you marry this man Lister" – he kept to this sentence as though it were a charm – "you will be a pauper."

She flashed up into a royal rage and stamped. "How dare you say that?"

"I dare tell the truth."

"It is not the truth. How can you tell if – "

"Your father told me," insisted the preacher, hotly.

Bella withdrew a step or so, her eyes growing round with surprise. "My – father – said – that?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" cried Silas feverishly. "I went to him this very afternoon to ask permission to present myself to you as a suitor. He consented, but only when he heard that you loved this man who – "

"You told him that?" demanded Bella, her breath coming quick and short.

"Yes," said Pence, trying to be courageous, "and it is true."

"Who says that it is?"

"Everyone in the village."

"The village has nothing to do with my business," she declared imperiously, "and even if I do love – but let that pass. You told me that my father said I should be a pauper."

"If you married the man Lister," he reminded her. "Yes, he did say so, and declared also that he would give me the manor-house and the farm when he died, if I made you my wife."

Bella shrugged her shoulders. "My father does not mean what he says," she remarked disbelievingly; "as I am his only child, the Solitary Farm, as they call it, comes to me in any case. And I see no reason why I should discuss my father's business with you. Stand aside and let me pass."

"No." Silas was wonderfully brave for one of his timid soul. "You shall not pass until you learn the truth. You think that I am a fool and weak. I am not. I feel wise and strong; and I am strong – strong enough to withstand temptation, even when you are offered as a bribe."

Bella grew somewhat alarmed. She did not like the glittering of his shallow, grey eyes. "You are mad."

"I am sane; you know that I am sane, but you think to put me off by saying that I am crazy. I have had enough to make me so. Your father" – here his voice took on the sing-song pulpit style – "your father took me up to an exceedingly high mountain, and showed me the kingdoms of the world. All of them he offered me, together with you, if I murdered Lister."

"What!" Bella's voice leaped an octave; "you – you – murder Cyril?"

"Yes, Cyril, the man you love. And if I dared – "

"Mr. Pence" – Bella saw the necessity of keeping herself well in hand with this hysterical youth, for he was nothing else, and spoke in a calm, kind voice – "my father has not seen Mr. Lister, and cannot hate him."

"Go and ask him what he thinks," said Pence fiercely. "I tell you that to-day I was offered everything if I would kill this man Lister."

"You are talking at random," she said soothingly; "go home, and lie down."

"I am talking of what may come to pass. Your father wishes it, so why not, when I love you so deeply? I offer you the heart of an honest man, and yet you would throw that aside for this profligate."

"Cyril is not a profligate," interrupted Bella, and could have bitten out her tongue for the hasty speech.

"He is. He comes from London, the City of Evil, that shall yet fall like Babylon the Great. But your soul shall not be lost; you shall not marry him."

"I shall!" cried Bella, indignantly, and becoming rash again in her anger; "and what is more, I am engaged to him now. So there! Let me pass."

She slipped deftly past him, and walked swiftly homeward. Silas Pence stood where he was, staring after her, unable to speak or move or to follow. Then the sun sank, leaving him in the twilight of sorrow.

CHAPTER III A TARDY LOVER

Miss Huxham did not credit for one moment the story which Pence had told her. It was ridiculous to think that her father would even hint at the murder of an unoffending man whom he had never seen, and to hesitating, timid Silas, of all people. Bella remembered that, months previously, when she had mentioned a chance meeting with Lister – then a stranger – at the cottage of the Marshely school-mistress, Captain Huxham had not only forbidden her to bring him to Bleacres, which the young man desired to see, but had ordered her to discontinue the acquaintance. Evidently the retired mariner deemed this prohibition sufficient, for he made no further mention of the matter. That he gave no reason for his tyrannical edict, did not trouble him; but because of this very omission, his daughter took her own way. By stealth, it is true, lest Huxham should exhibit annoyance – for annoyance with him meant wild-beast rage.

Now the girl felt puzzled. According to Silas, her father knew that she had disobeyed him, and she returned to the Manor in a somewhat nervous state of mind, quite prepared to do battle for her lover. But, to her surprise, Captain Huxham made no remark, and behaved much the same as usual, save that at odd times he was more observant of her comings and goings. In the face of his newly-acquired knowledge this very unusual demeanour should have made Bella more circumspect, but, being high-spirited, she did not change her life in any way. Also she believed that Silas had greatly exaggerated the captain's anger, and argued from his quietness that he cared very little what she did. She had reason to take this view, for Huxham was not an affectionate parent, and, save when things interfered with his own comfort, usually ignored his daughter. And on her side, Bella could not subscribe to the fifth commandment. It was impossible to honour King Log, who had an unpleasant way of becoming King Henry VIII. when contradicted.

Several times, Bella, needing sympathy, was on the point of reporting Pence's conversation to Mrs. Coppersley, so as to learn her opinion as to the truth of the preacher's preposterous statement. But the buxom widow was too much taken up with her own love-affairs to trouble about those of her niece, for whom she displayed no great affection. She attended to the house-keeping, cajoled her brother into a good humour when necessary, and nearly every evening slipped out to meet Henry Vand, who usually awaited her arrival on the hither side of the boundary channel. He did not dare to venture nearer to the lion's den, as Captain Huxham, aware of his sister's desire to contract a second marriage, discouraged the idea. The captain being aggressively selfish, did not intend to lose Mrs. Coppersley, whose services were necessary to his comfort. Besides, as she managed everything connected with the domestic arrangement of Bleacres, assisted by Bella, Huxham was spared the necessity of paying a servant. It was better, from the captain's point of view, to have two slaves who asked for no wages, and who could be bullied when he felt like playing the tyrant.

To a young girl in the first strong flush of womanhood, life at the solitary farm was extremely dreary, Captain Huxham rose early and strolled round his wealthy acres until breakfast, which for him was a Gargantuan meal. He then shut himself for the whole morning in his den, where he laboured at his accounts, with a locked door. In the afternoon he ordinarily walked to Marshely and conversed over strong drink with cronies at the village public-house. He returned to walk around the farm again, and after supper again sought his room to smoke and drink rum until bedtime, at ten o'clock. The routine of the captain's life never varied in any particular, even to seeking the quarter-deck once a day for the purpose, apparently, of viewing the results of his life's work. Also from his eyrie, the captain, armed with a long telescope, could gaze at outward and homeward-bound ships, and so enjoy vicariously the sea-life he had abandoned these ten years. Of Bella he took scarcely any notice.

It was indeed a dull life, especially as Bella was intellectual, and felt that she required food for her active brain. For some odd reason, which did not suit with his rough nature, Huxham had given his neglected daughter a first-class education, and only within the last two years had she returned from a fashionable Hampstead school to live this uneventful, unintellectual life on an Essex farm. She possessed a few books, and these she read over and over again. Huxham was not actively unkind, and gave her plenty of frocks, ribbons, hats, gloves, and such-like things, which he presumed were what the ordinary girl wanted. But he overlooked the fact that Bella was not an ordinary girl, and that she hungered for a more moving life, or, at least, for one which would afford her an opportunity of displaying her social abilities. Bella sang excellently, and played the piano unusually well; but her uncouth father did not care for music, and Mrs. Coppersley scorned it also. The girl therefore allowed her talents to lie dormant, and became a silent, handsome image of a woman, moving ghost-like through the dreary mansion. But her chance meeting with the clever young man aroused all her disused capabilities; aroused also her womanly coquetry, and stimulated her into exhibiting a really fascinating nature. Warned that her father would have no strangers coming to the manor, by his own lips, she kept secret the delightful meetings with Lister, and only when the two met at the cottage of Miss Ankers could they speak freely. Bella thought that her secret attachment was unknown, whereas everyone in the village watched the progress of Lister's wooing. It came as has been seen, to Pence's jealous ears, and he reported the same to Captain Huxham. Knowing this, Bella was more perplexed than ever, that, as time went on, Huxham did nothing and said nothing. At one time he had been peremptory, but now he appeared inclined to let her act as she chose. And the mere fact that he did so, made Bella feel more than ever what an indifferent father she possessed.

For quite a week after his interview with the captain, and his futile wooing of Bella, the lovesick preacher kept away from the farm and attended sedulously to his clerical duties in connection with Little Bethel. The truth was, that he felt afraid of Huxham, now knowing what use the captain desired to make of him. For this reason also, Silas did not report that Bella was engaged to Lister. He feared lest Huxham, in a rage at such disregard of his wishes, should slay the young journalist, and perhaps might, in his infernal cunning, lay the blame on Silas himself. At all events, Pence was wise enough to avoid the danger zone of the farm, and although, after reflection, aided by jealousy, he was not quite so shocked at the idea of thrusting Lister to a muddy death, he yet thought it more judicious to keep out of Huxham's way. The old mariner, as Pence knew, possessed a strong will, and might force him to be his tool in getting rid of the journalist. Silas was wiser than he knew in acting so discreetly, for the sailor-turned farmer was a more dangerous man than even he imagined, despite the glimpse he had gained of Huxham's possible iniquity.

Things were in this position when Bella, rendered reckless by her father's indifference, actually met Cyril Lister in a secluded nook of the corn-field, and on the sacred ground of Bleacres itself. Usually the lovers met in Miss Ankers' cottage, or in Mrs. Tunks' hut, but on this special occasion the weather was so hot that Lister proposed an adjournment to the open field. "You will be Ruth, and I Boaz," suggested the young man, with a smile.

Bella shivered even in the warm air into which she had stepped out of the malodorous gloom of Mrs. Tunks' hut. "What an unlucky comparison," she said, leading the way along the bank of the boundary channel.

"Ruth left her people and her home, to go amongst strangers, and earn her living as a gleaner."

"But she found a devoted husband in the end," Cyril reminded her.

"Peace and happiness also, I hope," sighed Bella. "I have plenty of peace, but very little happiness, save of the vegetable sort."

"When we are married," began Lister, then stopped short, biting his moustache – "we shall be very happy," he ended lamely, seeing that Bella looked inquiringly at him.

"That is obvious, since we love one another," she said somewhat tartly, for his hesitation annoyed her. "Why did you change the conclusion of your sentence?"

Lister threw himself down on the hard-baked ground and under the shadow of the tall blue-green corn stalks. "It just struck me that our marriage was very far distant," he said gloomily.

Bella sat beside him shoulder to shoulder, and hugged her knees. "Why should it be far distant?" she inquired. "If I love you, and you love me, no power on earth can keep us apart."

"Your father – "

"I shall disobey my father if it be necessary," she informed him serenely.

Lister looked at her through half-shut eyes, and noticed the firmness of her mouth and the clear, steady gaze of her eyes. "You have a strong will, I think, dear," he murmured admiringly.

"I have, Cyril – as strong as that of my father. When our two wills clash" – she shrugged – "there may be murder committed."

"Bella!" – the young man looked startled – "what dreadful things you say."

"It is the truth," she insisted quietly; "why shirk obvious facts? For some reason, which I cannot discover, my father detests you."

"By Jove!" Cyril sat up alertly. "And why? He has never seen me, as I have kept well out of his way after your warning. But I have had a sly glimpse of him, and he seems to be a jolly sort of animal – I beg your pardon for calling him so."

"Man is an animal, and my father is a man," said the girl coolly, "a neolithic man, if you like. You are a man also, Cyril – the kind of firm, bold, daring man I like. Yet if you met with my father, I wonder – " She paused, and it flashed across her brain that her father and her lover would scarcely suit one another. Both were strong-willed and both masterful. She wondered if they met, who would come out top-dog; so she phrased it in her quick brain. Then abruptly she added, before Cyril could speak. "Be quiet for a few minutes. I wish to think."

Lister nodded, and, leaning on one elbow, chewed a corn-stalk and watched her in silence. He was a slim, tall, small-boned young man of the fair-skinned type, with smooth brown hair, and a small, drooping brown moustache. His present attitude indicated indolence, and he certainly loved to be lazy when a pretty girl was at his elbow. But on occasions he could display wonderful activity, and twice had been chosen as war correspondent to a London daily, when one or two of the little wars on the fringe of the Empire had been in progress. He was not particularly good-looking, but the freshness of his five-and-twenty years, and the virility of his manner, made women bestow a great deal of attention on him. Much more than he deserved, in fact, as, until he met with Bella, he had given very little attention to the sex. He had flirted in many countries, and with many women; but this was the first time he had made genuine love, or had felt the genuine passion. And with a country maiden, too, unsophisticated and pathetically innocent. So he meditated as he watched her, until, struck by the firm curve of the chin and the look of resolve on the tightly-closed lips, he confessed privately that if this country maiden were placed in the forefront of society, the chances were that she would do more than hold her own. There were Joan-of-Arc-like possibilities in that strongly-featured face.

"But, upon my word, I am quite afraid," he said aloud, following up his train of thought and speaking almost unconsciously.

"Of what?" asked Bella, turning quickly towards him.

"Of you. Such a determined young woman, as you are. If I make you my wife, I know who will be master."

"My dear," she said quietly, "in marriage there should be neither a master nor a mistress. It's a sublime co-partnership, and the partners are equal. One supplies what the other lacks, and two incomplete persons are required to make one perfect being."

Lister opened his brown eyes. "Who told you all this?"

"No one. I have ample time to think, and – I think."

"You asked me to be quiet, so that you could think," he remarked lazily; "may I ask what you have been considering?"

She surveyed him quietly. "You may ask; but I am not sure if I will reply."

"See here, my dearest" – Cyril struggled to his knees, and took her hand firmly within his own – "you are altogether too independent a young woman. You always want your own way, I perceive."

"It will never clash with yours," said Bella, smiling.

"Why not?"

"Because you will always wish to do what I desire, and I will always be anxious to act as you indicate. You have your line of life, and I have mine, but the two are one."

"Humph! At school I learned that two parallel straight lines never met."

"Ah, Euclid was a bachelor, and ignorant. They meet in marriage, for then the two lines blend into one. What's the matter?"

She asked this question because Cyril suddenly let go her hands and swerved, blinking his eyes rapidly. "A sudden flash almost blinded me. Some one is heliographing hereabouts." He stood up, considerably taller than the already tall corn, and stared in the direction of the manor, shading his eyes with one slim hand. "There's someone on the roof there and –"

Bella pulled the sleeve of his coat, with a stifled cry. "Oh, sit down, do sit down," she implored. "It must be my father on his quarter-deck. The flash, perhaps, came from his telescope, and if he sees you – do sit down."

Cyril laughed and relapsed into a sitting position. "Dearest, your father cannot harm me in any way. I have heard of his quarter-deck. I suppose he has it to remind him of the bridge of a steamer when he was skipper."

"I hope he hasn't seen you," said Bella anxiously, "for then he would come straight here, and –"

"Let him come, and then I shall ask him to let me marry you."

"He will refuse. He wants me to marry Mr. Pence."

"What!" Lister frowned. "That half-baked psalm-singer? What nonsense, and what cheek. The idea of that Pence creature aspiring to your hand. I wish we could marry at once. But –" He paused, and shook his head. Lines appeared on his forehead, and a vexed look in his eyes. "It's impossible," he said with a deep breath.

"Why is it impossible?" asked Bella imperiously and very directly.

"My dear, I am very poor, and just make enough to keep my head above water. Besides, there is another reason."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you," he said in low voice, and becoming suddenly pale; "no one but the wearer knows where the shoe pinches, you know."

"Cyril." Bella wreathed her arms around his neck. "You have a secret. I have noticed several times that you have been worried. Sometimes you forget everything when we are together, and your face becomes like that of an old man. I must know your secret, so that I can help you."

"God forbid." Lister removed her arms, and grew even paler than he was. "The kindest way I can act towards you, Bella, is to go out of your life, and never see you again."

"Cyril, how can you when I love you so?"

"Would you love me if you knew of my troubles?"

"Try me. Try me," she implored, clasping his hand warmly.

"There are some things which can't be told to a woman," he said sternly.

"Tell them to a comrade, then. I wish to be your comrade as well as your wife. And I love you so that anything you say will only make me love you the more. Tell me, Cyril, so that I can prove my love."

"Upon my soul, I believe you'd go to hell with me," said Lister strongly.

"Yes, I would. I demand, by the love which exists between us, to be told this secret that troubles you so greatly."

Lister frowned, and meditated. "I cannot tell you everything – yet," he remarked, after a painful pause, "but I can tell you this much, that unless I have one thousand pounds within a week, I can never marry you."

"One thousand pounds. But for what purpose?"

"You must not ask me that, Bella," and his mouth closed firmly.

"Trust me all in all, or not at all," she quoted.

"Then I trust you not at all."

"Oh!" She drew back with a cry of pain like a wounded animal.

In a moment he was on his knees, holding her hands to his beating heart. "My dearest, if I could I would. But I can't, and I am unable just now to give you the reason. Save that I am a journalist, and your devoted lover, you know nothing about me. Later I shall tell you my whole story, and how I am situated. Then you can marry me or not, as you choose."

"I shall marry you, in any case," she said quickly.

"Do you think that I am a poor, weak fool, who demands perfection in a man. Whatever your sins may be, to me you are the man I have chosen to be my husband. We are here, in the corn-fields, and you just now called me Ruth. Then, like Ruth, I can say that 'your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.'"

"Dearest and best," he kissed her ardently, "what have I done to deserve such perfect love? But do not think me so very wicked. It is not myself, so much as another. Then you – "

"Is it a woman?" she asked, drawing back.

Lister caught her to his breast again. "No, you jealous angel, it is not a woman. The thousand pounds I must have, to save – but that is neither here nor there. You must think me but a tardy lover not to carry you off, forthwith, and – " he rose, with Bella in his arms – "oh, it's impossible!"

"Do carry me off," she whispered, clinging to him. "Let us have a Sabine wedding. As your wife, you can tell me all your secrets."

"Bella, Bella, I cannot. I am desperately poor."

"So am I, and if I marry you my father will leave all his money to my aunt, for he told Mr. Pence so. But what does poverty matter, so long as we love one another with all our hearts and souls."

"Oh!" Cyril clenched his hands desperately. "Do not tempt me. Only one thousand pounds stands between us. If I had that I could make you my wife within a week. I would steal, or murder, or do anything in the world to get the money and remove the barrier. But" – he pushed her away almost brutally, and frowned – "you are making me talk rubbish. We must wait."

"Until when, Cyril?" she asked sadly.

"Until Destiny is kinder."

"You will tell me – "

"I tell you nothing. Give me one kiss, and then good-bye for – "

He bent to touch her lips, but was caught and hurled back. Bella uttered a cry of astonishment and dread, for between Cyril and herself stood Captain Huxham, purple with anger.

CHAPTER IV

SUDDEN DEATH

"Y' shell not kiss m' gel, or merry her, or hev anything t' do with m' gel," said Captain Huxham, in a thick voice. "Oh, I saw y' fro' th' quarter-deck with m' gel. Jus' y' git, or – "

He made a threatening step forward, while Cyril waited him without flinching. What would have happened it is hard to say, for Captain Huxham was in a frenzy of rage. But Bella, recovering from her first surprise, threw herself between the two men.

"Father," she cried passionately, "I love him."

"Oh, y' do, do y'?" growled the fireside tyrant, turning fiercely on her, "an' arter I told y' es y'd hev t' leave the swab alone. Did I, or did I not?"

"Yes, but you assigned no reason for asking me to avoid Cyril, so – "

"Cyril! Cyril!" The captain clenched his huge hand, and his little eyes flashed with desperate anger. "Y' call him Cyril, y' – y' – slut." He raised a mighty fist to strike her, and the blow would have fallen, but that Lister suddenly gripped Huxham's shoulder and twitched him unexpectedly aside.

"If you blame anyone, sir, you must blame me."

"I'll break yer neck, cuss y'," raged the older man.

Cyril shrugged his shoulders, indifferently. "You can try, if you like, but I don't propose to let you do it. Come, Captain Huxham, let us both be reasonable and talk matters over."

"Y're on m' land; git off m' land," shouted Huxham, swinging his fists like windmills.

"Go, Cyril, go," implored Bella who was terrified lest there should be a hand-to-hand struggle between the two men. That was not to be thought of, as if Lister killed the captain, or the captain killed Lister, there would be no chance of her becoming the wife of the man she loved.

"I am quite ready to go," said Cyril, keeping a watchful eye on Huxham; "but first I should like to hear why you, sir, object to my marrying Bella." He spoke quietly and firmly, so that the level tones of his voice, and the admirable way in which he kept his temper, had a cooling effect on the enraged sailor.

Huxham, born bully as he was, found that it was difficult for him to storm at a man so cool, and calm, and self-controlled. "Y' ain't m' chice," said he in lower but very sulky tones; "m' gel's goin' t' merry th' sky-pilot, Silas Pence."

"Oh, no, she's not," said Lister smoothly; "she will marry me."

"If she does, she don't get no money o' mine."

"That will be no hindrance," said Bella, who was rapidly regaining her colour. "I am willing to marry Cyril without a penny."

"Y' shent, then," grumbled her father savagely.

"I have yet to hear your objections, sir."

"Yer name's Lister, and – "

The objection was so petty, that Bella quite expected to see Cyril laugh. But in place of doing so, he turned white and retreated a step. "What – what do you know of my name?" he asked, with apparent nervousness.

"Thet's my business," snapped Huxham, seeing his advantage, "an' I shen't tell y' m' business. Y' git off m' land, or – " he suddenly lunged forward in the attempt to throw Lister when off his guard.

But the young man was watchful, and, unexpectedly swerving, dexterously tripped up his bulky antagonist. Huxham, with a shout, or rather a bellow of rage like a wounded bull, sprawled full length amongst the corn. Bella pushed her lover away before the captain could regain his feet. "Go, go, I can see you to-morrow," she said hastily.

"Y' shell never see the swab again," roared Huxham, rising slowly, for the fall had shaken him, and he was no longer young. "I'll shut y' in yer room, an' feed y' on bread an' water."

"If you dare to say that again, I'll break your head," cried Lister, suddenly losing his temper at the insult to the girl he loved.

"Oh, will y'?" Huxham passed his tongue over his coarse lips and rubbed his big hands slowly. Apparently nothing would have given him greater pleasure than to pitch this man who dared him into the boundary channel; but he had learned a lesson from his late fall. Lister was active and young; the captain was elderly and slow. Therefore, in spite of his superior strength – and Huxham judged that he had that – it was risky to try conclusions of sheer brute force. The captain therefore, being a coward at heart, as all bullies are, weakened and retreated. "Y' git off m' land," was all that he could find to say, "an' y' git home, Bella. Es m' daughter I'll deal with y'."

"I am quite ready to go home," said Bella boldly; "but you are not going to behave as though I were one of your sailors, father."

"I'll do wot I please," growled Huxham, looking white and wicked.

Bella laughed somewhat artificially, for her father did not look amiable. "I don't think you will," she said, with feigned carelessness. "Cyril, go now, and I'll see you again to-morrow."

"Ef y' come here again," shouted Huxham, boiling over once more, "I'll kill y' – thet I will."

"Take care you aren't killed yourself first," retorted Lister, and was surprised at the effect the threat – an idle one – had on the ex-sailor.

Huxham turned pale under his bronze, and hastily cast a look over his left shoulder.

"Why do you hate me so?" asked the young man sharply. "I never met you before; you have never set eyes on me. Why do you hate me?"

"Ef I'd a dog called Lister, I'd shoot it; if I'd a cat called Lister, I'd drown it; and if I'd a parrot named Lister, I'd twist its blamed neck, same es I would yours, ef I could. Bella, come home;" and casting a venomous look on the astonished Cyril, the captain moved away.

It was useless to prolong the unpleasant scene, since Huxham declined to explain his objection to the young man's name. And again, as she took a few steps to accompany her father, Bella noticed that Cyril winced and paled at the coarse taunts of his antagonist. "What is the matter with your name?" she asked sharply.

Lister strode forward and caught her in his arms. "I shall explain when next we meet," he whispered, and kissed her good-bye, while Huxham grated his strong white teeth at the sight. Indeed, so angry was the captain, that he might again have assaulted his daughter's lover, but Cyril walked rapidly away, and without even a backward glance. Bella watched him with a heavy heart: there seemed to be something sinister about this mystery of the name. Huxham's inexplicable hatred appeared to be foolish; but Lister undoubtedly took it seriously.

"Kim home," breathed the captain furiously in her ear; "you an' me hes t' hev a talk."

"It will be a last talk if you do not behave properly," retorted Bella, walking proudly by his side, "even though I have the misfortune to be your daughter, that does not give you the right to treat me so rudely."

"I'll treat y' es I blamed well like, y' hussy. Y'll go t' yer room, an' eat bread an' drink water t' cool yer hot blood."

Bella laughed derisively. "There is law in this country, father," she said quietly. "I shall go to my room certainly, as I have no wish to remain with you. But there need be no talk of bread and water."

"Tea an' dry toast, then," grunted Huxham, looking at her savagely with his hard blue eyes. "Y' shell be punished, y' slut."

"Because I have fallen in love? Nonsense."

"Because y've disobeyed me in seein' this blamed Lister."

"Father" – Bella stopped directly before the front door of the manor-house – "why do you hate Cyril? What have you against his name?"

The captain quivered, blinked his eyes, cast his usual look over the left shoulder, and then scowled. "Shut yer mouth," he growled, "an' go t' yer room, cuss y'. This house is mine. I am master here." He rolled into the doorway and suddenly turned on the threshold. "I'd ruther see y' dead an' buried than merried t' a man of t' name of Lister," he snarled; and before Bella could recover from her astonishment, he plunged into his den and shut the door with a noisy bang.

The girl passed her hand across her forehead in a bewildered way. The mystery was becoming deeper, and she saw no way of solving it. Huxham would not explain, and Cyril evaded the subject. Then Bella remembered that her lover had promised an explanation when next they met. A remembrance of this aided her to possess herself in patience, and she tried to put the matter out of her head. But it was impossible for her to meet her father at supper and forbear asking questions, so she decided to obey him ostensibly, and retire to her bedroom. The next day she could have an interview with her lover, and then would learn why the captain stormed and Cyril winced when the name was mentioned.

Bella's room was on the first floor, and in the front of the mansion, so that she had an extended view of the corn-fields, of Mrs. Tunks' hut near the boundary channel, and of the pathway through the wheat leading deviously from the front door of Bleacres, across the channel, and to the distant village of Marshely. Standing at the window, she could see the red-roofed houses gathered round the square tower of the church, and the uncultivated fields, green and moist, spreading on all sides. The sun was setting, and the landscape was bathed in rosy hues. Everything was peaceful and restful outside, but under the manor roof was discord and dread. Huxham in his den paced up and down like a caged bear, angered exceedingly by his daughter's obstinacy, as he termed it. And Bella, in the seclusion of her own room, was trying to quieten her fears. Hitherto, she had lived what she termed a vegetable life; but in these ominous hints it seemed as though she would very shortly have more than enough to occupy her mind.

As the twilight darkened, Bella still continued to sit at the window vainly endeavouring to forecast a doubtful future. It was certain that Huxham would never agree to her marriage with Lister, and would probably insist that she should become the wife of Pence. As Bella had no money, and no expectations of any, save by obeying her father, she did not know what to do unless the captain ceased to persecute her. He would possibly turn her out of doors if she persisted in thwarting his will. In that event she would either have to earn her bread as a governess, or would be forced to ask Lister to marry her – a direct question which her maidenly pride shrank from putting. Moreover – as she recollected – Cyril had plainly told her, only a few hours previously, that he could not marry her unless he obtained one thousand pounds within the week. It was now Tuesday, and it was not easy to raise such a large sum within the next few days. Of course, Bella did not know what resources Cyril had to draw upon, and it might be that he would gain what he wanted. Then he could take her away and marry her: but until the unexpected happened, she did not know what to say or how to act. It seemed to her that she had come to the cross-roads of life, and that all her future depended upon the path she now chose. Yet there was nothing to show her how to select the direction.

Her idle eyes caught at the vivid spot of scarlet which came from the red coat of the martial scarecrow. There it stood, bound stiffly to a tall pole in the midst of the corn – the sentinel of those prosperous acres. Bella wondered that her father, having been a sailor, had not arrayed the figure in nautical dress. As it was, the red hue annoyed her, for red was the colour of blood, and there lingered in her mind the ominous speeches which had been made by her father and Lister, when quarrelling. "I'll kill y'!" said the captain; and "Take care," Cyril had replied, "that you aren't killed yourself first!" Also there was the wild tale of Pence regarding the offer made by Huxham to compass the death of Lister. These things flashed into Bella's uncomfortable mind, as she looked at the red and ominous figure of the scarecrow. Then, with a shudder, she rose and dismissed these evil fancies.

"I am growing morbid," she thought, looking at her anxious face in the glass. "To-morrow, when I see Cyril – oh, come in!" said she aloud.

She broke off to give the invitation, as a sharp knock came to the door, and it opened almost immediately to admit the plump figure of Mrs. Coppersley, carrying a tray. "Here's some dry toast and a cup of tea," said the widow severely; "your father says you are not to come to supper."

"I shouldn't come if he wanted me to," retorted Bella, as Mrs. Coppersley set down her burden; "and if he thinks to punish me in this way, he is very much mistaken. Does he think that I am a child, to submit to his tyranny?"

"He thinks that you are a disobedient daughter," said Mrs. Coppersley, drily.

"And what do you think, aunt?"

The older woman coughed. She thought that her niece was much too pretty, and much too independent, but had no ill-feeling toward her, save a natural petty feminine jealousy. "I don't know what to think," she said, sitting down to gossip. "Of course, your father is impossible, and always wants his own way. I don't see why folks should not be allowed to choose husbands for themselves. Jabez" – this was Huxham's Christian name – "objects to my marrying Henry, and to your becoming the wife of this Lister person."

"Don't speak of Cyril in that way," said Bella, with some impatience; "he is a gentleman, and the man I love. By the way, aunt, you might have brought up the teapot. I dislike anyone else to pour out my tea."

"Your father poured it out himself while I went to the kitchen for the toast," snapped Mrs. Coppersley; "he said you were to have only this one cup."

"What a petty tyrant he is," sighed Bella, pushing the cup away. "Aunt, what do you think of Cyril?"

"He is very handsome," rejoined Mrs. Coppersley cautiously, "but I don't know anything about his position or disposition."

"I know he is the dearest fellow in the world, aunt; but, like yourself, his position is unknown to me."

Mrs. Coppersley rose aghast. "Do you mean to say that you would marry a man about whom you know nothing?" she demanded.

"I know sufficient to choose him for my husband," retorted Bella, spiritedly; "and I intend to marry him, in spite of my father's bullying."

"Then your father will not give you a single penny," cried Mrs. Coppersley. "I approve of his doing so. You can't marry this man."

"Oh!" said Bella, bitterly. "I thought you agreed that a woman should choose her own husband."

"A woman like myself, who knows life, Bella – not a chit of a girl like you."

"I am twenty years of age," flashed out her niece.

"And have the sense of a babe of three," scoffed Mrs. Coppersley, moving towards the door. "Perhaps a night of loneliness will bring you to your senses, my dear." She passed through the door and closed it. "I am locking you in, by your father's wish," said Mrs. Coppersley from the other side.

Bella, white with rage at this indignity, sprang to wrench open the door, but almost before she reached it, the key clicked in the lock, and she knew that she was a prisoner. And the door was so stout and strong that there was no chance of a frail girl, such as she was, breaking it down. But Bella was in a royal rage, and it was in her mind to scramble out of the window and escape.

"But what's the use!" she thought, her eyes filling with impotent tears. "I have no money, and no friends, and no other home. What a shame it is for me to be at the mercy of my father in this way! I shall have to submit to this insult. There is nothing else I can do. But oh, oh!" – she clenched her hands as she again returned to the window and looked out into the rapidly darkening

night. "I shall insist upon Cyril marrying me at once. If he loves me he surely will not stand by idly, when I am treated in this way."

Trying to calm herself, she walked up and down the room. The one slice of toast and the one cup of tea were on the table, but anger had taken her appetite. Inexperienced in the troubles of life, she was like a newly-captured bird dashing itself against the wires of its hateful cage. To and fro the girl walked, revolving plans of escape from her father's tyranny, but in every direction the want of money proved an obstacle impossible to surmount. Nothing remained but for her to wait patiently until she could see Cyril the next day. Then an exhaustive talk might lead to the formation of some plan whereby her future could be arranged for.

Faint and far, she heard the clock in Marshely church-tower strike the hour of eight, and began to think of retiring to bed. The night was hot, so she flung up the window, and permitted the fresh air to circulate in the close room. The atmosphere was luminous with starlight, although there was no moon visible. A gentle wind bent the rustling stalks of the vast corn-fields, and their shimmering green was agitated like the waves of the sea. White mists rose ghost-like on the verge of the farm, and into them the ocean of grain melted faintly. What with the mists and the luminous night and the spreading wheat-fields phantom-like in the obscurity, Bella felt as though she were in a world of vague dreams.

Looking down the narrow path, which showed a mere thread in the semi-gloom, she beheld a tall, dark figure advancing towards the house. It was that of a man, and by the way in which he walked, Bella felt sure that he was her lover. Her heart beat wildly. Perhaps Cyril had come, or, rather, was coming, to see the captain, and to plead his suit once more. Greatly agitated by this unforeseen visit, she leaned out of the window as the man came almost directly under it. He was Cyril, she felt certain, both from his carriage and from the fact that she vaguely saw the grey suit he wore. During the afternoon, Lister had been thus dressed.

"Cyril! Cyril!" she called out cautiously.

The man looked up, and in the faint light she saw that he was indeed Cyril, for the eyes of love were keen enough to pierce the obscurity, and also her window was no great height from the ground. But the man looked up, making no sign of recognition, and stepped into the house without knocking at the door. Bella started back in surprise. She knew that the front door was always unlocked until ten, when her father usually retired to bed. But it seemed strange that Cyril, who had quarrelled with the captain that very day, should choose to risk his further wrath by entering the house uninvited. Also, it was stranger still that Cyril should have looked up without making some sign. He must have known who she was, for, failing sight, he had his hearing to recognise her voice. It was all very strange.

Bella twisted up her hair, which she had let down, and walked to the table to take up the now cold cup of tea. Her throat was parched with thirst by reason of her nerves, and she wished to refresh herself so that she might think of what was best to be done. Cyril and her father had quarrelled, and again she remembered the ominous threats they had used to one another. It was inconceivable madness for Lister to to beard the captain in his den, knowing what a vile temper the old man possessed. It was not at all impossible, or even improbable, but what the afternoon quarrel might be renewed, and then heaven only knew what might happen.

Drinking the cup of tea hastily, Bella thought over these things and resolved, if she could not escape by the door, to scramble out of the window. Then she could enter the house, and appear in the captain's den, to be present at what would probably be a stormy interview. Already she was straining her ears to catch the faintest sound of quarrelling, but as yet she could hear nothing. Certainly Cyril had closed the front door, for immediately he had entered she had heard him do so. And again, the walls of the old mansion were so thick, that it was impossible she could hear, when shut up in her bedroom, what was taking place below.

Anxiously she tried the door, but in spite of all her efforts, she failed to open it. Wild with alarm as to what might be happening, she crossed to her bed, intending to twist the sheets into a rope for descent from the window. But as she caught at the linen, she felt a drumming in her ears, and sparks seemed to dance before her eyes. Apparently the strain on her nerves was making her ill. Also she felt unaccountably drowsy, and in spite of every effort to keep awake, she sank beside the bed, with the sheets still grasped in her hands. In two or three minutes she was fast asleep.

The window was still open, and a bat swept into the room. He flitted round the motionless figure, uttering a thin cry, and again passed out into the starry night. The silvery voices of the nightingales in the copses round Marshely village came faintly across the meadows mingled with the cry of a mouse-hunting screech-owl. Still Bella slept on.

Hour after hour passed, and the night grew darker. The wind died away, the corn-fields ceased to rustle, the nightingales to sing. It became colder, too, as though the breath of winter was freezing the now moist air. The stars yet glittered faintly, and the high-pitched whistle of a steamer could be heard from the distant river, but on the whole, the earth was silent and weirdly gloomy for summer-time. During the small hours there came an ominous hush of expectant dread, which lasted until the twittering birds brought in the dawn.

Bella opened her eyes, to find her room radiant with royal red light. She felt sick and dizzy, for over her stood Mrs. Coppersley, shaking her vigorously by the shoulder. "Bella, Bella! Your father is dead. Murder, murder! Oh, come to the study and see the murder!"

CHAPTER V

A MYSTERIOUS CRIME

"Murder!" The ominous word struck at Bella's heart, in spite of the fact that her dazed brain could scarcely grasp its significance. With unseeing eyes she stared at her terrified aunt. Mrs. Coppersley, in her usual morning dress, simply made, for domestic purposes, fell back from the motionless girl, and gripped the table in the centre of the room. Her face was white, her figure limp; and almost crazy with alarm, she looked twice her age. Nor did the sight of her niece's bewildered gaze reassure her. With a quick indrawn breath of fear, she lurched forward and again shook the girl.

"Bella! Bella! what's come to you? Don't you hear me? Don't you understand, Bella? Jabez is dead! your father has been murdered. He's lying a corpse in his study. And oh – oh – oh!" – Mrs. Coppersley reeled against the table again, and showed signs of violent hysteria.

This spectacle brought back Bella with a rush to the necessities of the moment. She sprang to her feet, with every sense alert and ready to be used. Seizing the ewer from the wash-stand, she dashed the water over the sobbing, terrified woman, then braced herself to consider the situation.

Bella's thoughts reverted to the events of the previous night. She remembered that Cyril had come to the house and, without a sign of recognition had entered. She had not seen him depart, because – because – oh, yes, she had fallen unaccountably asleep. Slumber had overtaken her at the very moment when she was preparing to descend from the window, in order to – to – to – . Bella uttered a wild cry, and the ebbing blood left her face pearly white. The interview between her father and Cyril had taken place; she had not been there, and now – and now – . "What do you say?" she asked her aunt, in a hard, unemotional voice.

Mrs. Coppersley, quite unnerved, and drying her scared face with the towel, gasped and stared. "Didn't you hear? What's come to you, Bella? Your father has been murdered. I got up this morning as usual, and went into the study. He's lying there, covered with blood. Oh, who can have killed him?"

"How should I know?" cried Bella, harshly. "I was locked up in this room by you, Aunt Rosamund. I fell asleep after – after – " she stopped, aware that she might say something dangerous.

"After what?" asked Mrs. Coppersley, curiously.

"After you left – after I drank the tea. Oh, how could I fall asleep, when – when – ah!" Bella made a bound for the table, and took up the empty cup. Some dregs of tea remained, which she tasted. They had a bitter flavour, and a thought flashed into her mind. "You drugged this tea!" she cried.

Mrs. Coppersley flapped her plump hands feebly, and gasped again. Never a very strong-minded woman, she was now reduced to a markedly idiotic condition under the strain of the tragic circumstances. "I drug your tea? Save us, Bella, what do you mean?"

"I drank this tea and fell asleep," said the girl sharply; "although before drinking it, I did not feel at all sleepy. Now I have a disagreeable taste in my mouth, and my head aches. There is a queer flavour about what is left in the cup. I am sure this tea was drugged. By you?"

"Good Lord!" cried Mrs. Coppersley indignantly. "Why should I drug your tea, Bella? Your father poured it out himself in the study, when I was getting you toast in the kitchen. I told you so last night."

"Yes, yes. I remember." Bella passed her hand across her forehead. "My father evidently drugged the tea to keep me quiet. And so he has met with his death by violence."

"Bella," Mrs. Coppersley screamed, and made for the door, "what do you mean?"

Again the girl felt that she was talking too freely. If Cyril was implicated in the crime reported by Mrs. Coppersley, she must save Cyril. Or at least, she must hold her peace until she heard from

her lover what had taken place during that fatal interview. It was just possible that Cyril had slain the captain in self-defence, and knowing her father's violent character, the girl could scarcely blame the young man. She expected that this would happen, and so had been anxious to intervene as a peacemaker. But the drugged tea – she felt certain that it had been drugged by her father – had prevented her doing what she wished. Now Huxham was dead, and Lister, whether in self-defence or not, was his murderer. The thought was agony. Yet in the midst of the terror engendered by her surmise, Bella found herself blaming her father. If he had not drugged the tea in order to keep her in her room, this tragedy would not have happened. Captain Huxham had paved the way to his own death.

But, after all, there might be extenuating circumstances, and perhaps Cyril would be able to explain. Meantime she would hold her tongue as to having seen him enter the house. But if anyone else had seen him? She turned to Mrs. Coppersley. "Where were you last night?" she demanded, suspiciously.

"I was with Henry Vand from seven until after ten," said the woman meekly, and evidently unaware why the leading question had been put. "I left your father in his study, and when I returned I let myself in by the back door and went to bed quietly. You know, Jabez always objected to my seeing Henry, so I wished to avoid trouble. This morning, when I went into the – ugh! ugh! come and see for yourself!" and Mrs. Coppersley gripped Bella's wrist to draw her towards the door – "It's murder and robbery!"

Bella released her wrist with a sudden jerk, but followed the elder woman down the stairs. "Robbery! What do you mean?"

"Come and see!" said Mrs. Coppersley hysterically. "We must send for the police, I suppose. Oh, my poor nerves! Never, never shall I get over this shock, disagreeable as Jabez always was to me. And he wasn't ready for heaven, either; though perhaps he did send for Mr. Pence to talk religion to him."

"Did my father send for Mr. Pence?"

"Yes. He asked me to go to the village with a note for Mr. Pence. I could not find Mr. Pence at home, so left the note for him. Then I met Henry, and returned, as I told you, after ten o'clock."

"Did Mr. Pence come to see my father?" asked Bella anxiously. She was wondering if the preacher had by any chance seen Cyril enter the house.

"I don't know – I can't say – oh, dear me, how dreadful it all is!" maundered Mrs. Coppersley, opening the door of the study. "Just look for yourself, Bella. Your father lies dead in his blood. Oh, how I hope that the villain who killed and robbed him will be hanged and drawn and quartered! That I do, the wretch, the viper, the beast! I must get some rum. I can't stay in this room without some rum. I shall faint, I know I shall. What's the time? Seven o'clock. Oh, dear me, so late! I must send Tunks for the police. He has to be here to see your father, and oh, dear me, he can't see your father unless he goes to heaven, where I'm sure I hope Jabez has gone. But one never knows, and he certainly was most disagreeable to me. Oh, how ill I am! oh, how very, very bad I feel!" and thus lamenting Mrs. Coppersley drifted out of the room, towards the back part of the premises, leaving Bella alone with the dead man.

And Captain Huxham was dead, stone dead. His body lay on the floor between the desk and the chair he had been sitting on. From the position of the corpse, Bella judged that her father had suddenly risen to meet the descending weapon, which had pierced his heart. But not being able to defend himself, he had fallen dead at his murderer's feet. With a cautious remembrance that she must not remove anything until the police came, Bella knelt and examined the body carefully, but without laying a finger on the same. The clothes over the heart had been pierced by some extremely sharp instrument, which had penetrated even through the thick pea-jacket worn by the dead man. There was blood on the cloth and on the floor, and although ignorant of medical knowledge, Bella judged that death must have been almost instantaneous. Otherwise there would have been signs of a

struggle, as Captain Huxham would not have submitted tamely to death. But the casement was fast closed, the furniture was quite orderly. At least, Bella judged so when she first looked round, for no chairs were upset; but on a second glance she became aware that the drawers of the desk were open, that the flexible lid of the desk was up, and that the pigeon-holes had been emptied of their papers. Also – and it was this which startled her most – the green-painted safe was unlocked, and through the door, which stood ajar, she could see that the papers therein were likewise in disorder. In fact, some of them were lying on the floor.

Strongly agitated, Bella constructed a theory of the murder, and saw, as in a vision – perhaps wrongfully – what had taken place. The captain had come to his desk for some purpose, but hearing a noise, or perhaps suspecting that there was danger, had unexpectedly turned, only to be stabbed. When he fell dead, the criminal took the keys of the safe from the dead man's pocket, and committed the robbery. Then he examined the pigeon-holes of the desk, and afterwards departed – probably by the front door, since the casement was closed. Robbery, undoubtedly, was the motive for the commission of the crime.

The girl rose to her feet, drawing a long breath of relief. Cyril certainly could not have slain her father, since Cyril would not have robbed. The young man assuredly had come to the house – she could swear to that herself – and if he had quarrelled with Huxham, he might have struck him in a moment of anger. But there was no reason to believe that Cyril would rob the safe. Hence there must be another person, who had committed both the murder and the robbery. Who was that person?

Mrs. Coppersley had stated plainly that Huxham had sent a message to Pence, asking him to call. Perhaps he had obeyed the summons, after Cyril left, and then had murdered the captain. But there was no motive for so timid and good-living a man as the preacher to slay and rob. So far as Bella knew, Pence did not want money, and – since he wished to make her his wife – it was imperative that Huxham should live in order to forward his aims. And it was at this point that the girl recalled, with a shudder, the fact that Cyril had confessed his need for one thousand pounds. Could Lister be the culprit, after all?

"No," cried Bella aloud, and in an agony of shame; "the man I love could not be guilty of so vile an act." So she tried to comfort herself, but the fact of Cyril's visit to the house still lingered in her mind.

Shortly Mrs. Coppersley returned with Tunks at her heels. The handy-man of Bleacres was a medium-sized individual, with a swarthy skin and beady black eyes peering from under tangled black hair. Lean and lithe, and quick in his movements, he betrayed his gypsy blood immediately, to the most unobservant, for there was something Oriental in his appearance. Just now he looked considerably scared, and came no further than the door of the room.

"There's your master," said Mrs. Coppersley, pointing to the dead, "so just you go to the village and tell the policeman to come here. Bella, you have not touched anything, have you?"

Bella shook her head. "I have not even touched the body," she confessed with a shudder. "Tunks, were you about the house last night?"

"No, miss," said the man, looking more scared than ever. "I went home nigh on seven o'clock, and was with my granny all the evening. I know nothing about this, miss."

"I don't suppose you do," rejoined the girl tartly, "but I thought you might have seen my father later than Mrs. Coppersley here."

"I left the house last night at the same time as you, ma'am," said Tunks, addressing himself to the housekeeper. "You locked the back door after me."

"Yes," acknowledged Mrs. Coppersley promptly, "so you did. That would be at seven, as I came up and saw you, Bella, a few minutes before, with the tea and toast. You didn't come back, Tunks?"

"No, I didn't," retorted the gypsy sullenly. "You went on to Marshely, and I got back home. I never came near this house again until this morning. You can ask my granny if I wasn't in bed early last night."

"When did you see your master last?" questioned Bella.

Tunks removed his dingy cap to scratch his untidy locks. "It would be about six, just before I had my tea. He wanted to reduce my wages, too, and I said I'd give him notice if he did. But I suppose," growled Tunks, with his eyes on the remains, "it's notice in any case now."

"Never you mind bothering about yourself," cried Mrs. Coppersley sharply. "Go to Marshely, and tell the policeman to come here. Bella," she moved to the door, "let us leave the room and lock the door. Nothing must be touched until the truth is known."

"Will the truth ever be known?" asked the girl drearily, as she went into the hall, and watched her aunt lock the door of the death-room.

"Of course," retorted the elder woman, "one person cannot murder another person without being seen."

"I don't know so much about that, Aunt Rosamund. You and Tunks were away, and I was locked in my room, so anyone could enter, and – " she glanced towards the study door and shuddered.

"Did *you* see anyone?" asked Mrs. Coppersley quickly.

Bella started. "No," she replied, with unnecessary loudness; "how could I see anyone when I was drugged?"

"Drugged, miss?" cried Tunks, pricking up his ears.

Mrs. Coppersley turned on the handy-man, and stamped. "How dare you linger here?" she cried. "You should be half way to the village by this time. Miss Bella was having wakeful nights, and her father gave her a sleeping draught. Off with you," and she drove Tunks out of the front door.

"Why did you tell such a lie?" asked Bella when the man was hurrying down the path, eager, like all his tribe, to carry bad news.

"A lie! a lie!" Mrs. Coppersley placed her arms akimbo and looked defiant. "Why do you call it a lie? You *did* complain of sleepless nights, and you did say that the tea, poured out by Jabez, was drugged."

"That is true enough," admitted the girl quietly, "but I merely slept badly because of the hot weather, and never asked my father for a sleeping – "

"Oh!" interrupted Mrs. Coppersley, tossing her head. "What does it matter. I can't even say if the tea was drugged."

"I'll learn that soon," replied Bella drily, "for I have locked up the cup containing the dregs of tea. My father no doubt feared lest I should run away with Cyril, and so drugged it."

"The least said the soonest mended, Bella. Say nothing of the drugging at the inquest, as there is no need to blacken your father's character."

"I don't see that anything I could say would blacken my father's character, Aunt Rosamund. Of course, he had no business to drug me, but if I am asked at the inquest I shall tell the truth."

"And so your connection with that Lister person will come out."

Bella turned on her aunt in a fury. "What do I care?" she cried, stamping. "I have a right to marry him if I choose, and I don't care if all the world knows how I love him. In fact, the whole world soon will know."

"Well," said Mrs. Coppersley, with an air of washing her hands of the entire affair, "say what you like; but don't blame me if you find yourself in an unpleasant position."

Bella, who was ascending the stairs, turned to answer this last remark promptly. "Why should I find myself in an unpleasant position?" she demanded. "Do you accuse me of murdering father?"

"God forbid! God forbid!" cried Mrs. Coppersley piously and with a shudder, "but you cannot deny that you were alone in the house."

"And locked in my bedroom, as you can testify."

"Oh, I'll say that willingly. But you'd better wash out that cup of dregs, and say nothing more."

"I have already mentioned the matter in Tunks' hearing, so I must explain further if necessary. But I'll say why I believe my father acted so. Your story of sleepless nights will not do for me."

"You'll blacken the memory of the dead," groaned Mrs. Coppersley dismally. "Ah, you never loved your poor father."

"Did you?" asked Bella suddenly.

"In a way I did, and in a way I didn't," said her aunt evasively. "Jabez never was the brother he should have been to me. But a daughter's nearer than a sister, and you should have loved him to distraction."

"In spite of the way he behaved to me."

"He had to keep a firm hand over your high spirit."

"Aunt Rosamund," burst out Bella at white heat. "Why do you talk in this silly way? You know that both to you and to me my father acted like a cruel tyrant, and that while he was alive we could do nothing to please him. I don't want to speak ill of the dead, but you know what I say is true."

"We are none of us perfect," snuffled Mrs. Coppersley, wiping her eyes, "and I daresay Jabez was worse than many others. But I was a good sister to him, in spite of his horrid ways. I'm sure my life's been spent in looking after other people: first my mother, then my husband, and afterwards Jabez. Now I'll marry Henry Vand, and be happy."

"Don't talk of happiness with that" – Bella pointed downward to the study – "in the house. Go and make yourself tidy, aunt, and I'll do the same. We have a very trying day before us."

"So like Jabez, so very like Jabez," wailed Mrs. Coppersley, while Bella fled up the stairs. "He always brought trouble on everyone. Even as a little boy, he behaved like the pirate he was. Oh, dear me, how ill I feel. Bella! Bella! come down and see me faint. Bella! Bella!"

But the girl did not answer, as she knew that Mrs. Coppersley only wished to gossip. Going to her own room, she again examined the cup with the dregs, which she had not locked up, in spite of her saying so to Mrs. Coppersley. Undoubtedly, the tea tasted bitter, and she resolved to have it analysed so as to prove to herself the fact of the drugging. She knew perfectly well that her father had attended to the tea himself, evidently to render her helpless in case she meditated flight with Cyril. And in doing so, he had indirectly brought about his own death, for had she been awake she could have descended from the window to be present at the interview which had ended so fatally. And at this point – while she was locking up the cup in a convenient cupboard – Bella became aware that she was thinking as though her lover were actually guilty of the deed.

Of course he could not be, she decided desperately, even though things looked black against him. Lister, honest and frank, would not murder an old man in so treacherous a manner, however he might be goaded into doing so. And yet she had assuredly seen him enter the house. If she could only have seen him depart; but the drug had prevented that welcome sight. Pence might have struck the blow, but Pence had no reason to do so, and in fact had every inducement to keep Huxham alive. Bella could not read the riddle of the murder. All she knew was that it would be necessary for her to hold her tongue about Lister's unexpected visit to the Solitary Farm.

"But I shall never be able to marry him after this," she wailed.

CHAPTER VI THE INQUEST

Tunks lost no time in delivering his gruesome message and in spreading the news of the death. While the village policeman telegraphed to his superior officer at Pierside, the handy-man of the late Captain Huxham adopted the public-house as a kind of St. Paul's Cross, whence to promulgate the grim intelligence. Here he passed a happy and exciting hour detailing all that had happened, to an awe-stricken crowd, members of which supplied him with free drinks. The marsh-folk were a dull, peaceful, law-abiding people, and it was rarely that crimes were committed in the district. Hence the news of the murder caused a tremendous sensation.

Captain Jabez Huxham was well known, and his eccentricity in the matter of planting Bleacres with yearly corn had been much commented upon. In Napoleonic times the fertile marsh farms had been golden with grain, but of late years, owing to Russian and American competition, little had been sown. Huxham, as the rustics argued, could not have got even moderate prices for its crops, so it puzzled one and all why he persisted in his unprofitable venture. But there would be no more sowing at Bleacres now, for the captain himself was about to be put under the earth. "And a grand funeral he'll have," said the rustics, morbidly alive to the importance of the grim event. For thirty years no crime of this magnitude had been committed in the neighbourhood, and the violent death of Huxham provided these bovine creatures with a new thrill.

Meanwhile the policeman, Dutton by name, had proceeded to Bleacres, followed – when the news became more widely known – by a large and curious throng. For that day and for the following days, until Huxham's body was buried, Bleacres could no longer be called the solitary farm, in one sense of the word. But the inherent respect of the agriculturist for growing crops kept the individual members of the crowd, male and female, to the narrow path which led from the boundary channel to the front door of the Manor-house. When Inspector Inglis arrived with three or four policemen from Pierside, he excluded the public from the grounds, but the curious still hovered in the distance – beyond Jordan as it were – with inquisitive eyes fastened on the quaint old mansion. To them, one and all, it now assumed portentous proportions as the abode of terror.

Inspector Inglis was a very quiet man, who said little, but who kept his eyes on the alert. He inspected the body of the dead man, and then sent for a doctor, who delivered his report in due course. The study was examined thoroughly, and the entire house was searched from cellar to garret. Then Bella and her aunt were questioned, and Tunks was also put in the witness box. But in spite of all official curiosity, backed by official power on the part of Inglis, he convened the jury of the inquest, as ignorant of the truth as when he had begun his search. He certainly found a blood-stained dagger behind the massive mahogany desk, with which undoubtedly the crime had been committed; but he could discover no trace of the assassin, and three or four days later, when the inquest took place in the Manor-house, the mystery of the murder was still unsolved. Nor, on the evidence procurable, did there seem to be any chance of solution.

During the early part of the inquiry, Mrs. Coppersley had told Inglis how her late brother had sent her with a note to Marshely asking Silas Pence to call. When questioned, the preacher, not without agitation and dismay, stated that he had been absent from his lodgings until eleven o'clock on the fatal evening, and had not obeyed the summons of the deceased. Certainly on his return he had found and read the note asking him to call, but as the hour was late, he had deferred the visit until the next morning. Then, of course, the news of the murder had been made public, and Pence had said nothing until questioned by the Inspector. But he was quite frank and open in his replies, and Inglis was satisfied that the young preacher knew nothing about the matter.

From the moment when informed by Mrs. Coppersley of the crime until the inquest, Bella suffered greatly. At her request, Dr. Ward – the medical man who had reported on the time and manner of Huxham's death – had examined the dregs of the tea-cup. Beyond doubt, as he discovered, laudanum had been poured into the tea, and so largely, that it was little wonder she had slept so soundly. Even had there been a struggle, as Ward assured her, she would not have heard the commotion. And, as the state of the study showed that the murderer had taken his victim unawares, it was little to be wondered at that Bella woke in ignorance of what had taken place during the night. She was thankful to have the testimony of the young physician as to the drugging, since thereby she was entirely exonerated from complicity in the crime. For, dreadful as it may seem, there were those evil-seekers who hinted that Huxham's daughter, having been alone in the house, must be aware of the truth, if not actually guilty herself. But Bella knew that the evidence of Dr. Ward and Mrs. Coppersley as to the drugging and the locking of the bedroom door would clear her character.

It was therefore not on this account that she suffered, but because of the inexplicable absence of Cyril Lister. Since she had seen him enter the house shortly after eight o'clock on the fatal night she had not set eyes on him, nor had she received any communication. At a time when she needed him so greatly, it seemed strange that her lover should be absent, since the fact of the murder, now being known all over England, it appeared incredible that he alone should be ignorant. In spite of her desire to believe him guiltless, this conduct looked decidedly suspicious. If nothing serious had taken place between Cyril and her father on the night in question, why had Lister gone away? At least she surmised that he had gone away, as he did not appear to be in the village, and she heard no mention of his name from the many people who haunted the house. Try as she might, Bella, dearly as she loved the young man, could not rid herself of the frightful belief that he had struck the blow. Considering the circumstances, which she alone knew fully, he had every reason to commit the crime. Yet in the face of the strongest circumstantial evidence, Bella could not bring herself to credit Cyril's guilt. Day after day, like sister Anne, she climbed to the quarter-deck to see if he was coming. But the day of the inquest came in due course, and even then he had not put in an appearance.

The Coroner was a grim, snappy old doctor, who set forth the object of the inquest gruffly and tersely. The jury under his direction inspected the body and then gathered in the large and stately dining-room of the Manor-house to consider the evidence. Inspector Inglis confessed that he had few witnesses, and that there was nothing in the evidence likely to lead to the arrest of the murderer. Robbery, said the officer, was undoubtedly the cause of the crime, since the desk had been rifled, and the safe had been forced open. Mrs. Coppersley, the sister of the deceased, he went on to say, could state that she knew her brother kept at least one hundred pounds in gold in the safe. This was missing, so probably —

"We'll take things in order, if you please," snapped the gruff Coroner at this point of the Inspector's speech. "Call your witnesses."

Inglis was only too willing, and Dr. Ward gave his evidence, which proved that in his opinion, after an examination of the body, the deceased had been stabbed to the heart between the hours of eight and eleven on the night in question. Witness could not be more precise, he said, a confession which brought a grunt from the Coroner. The old doctor lifted his eye-brows to intimate that the young doctor did not know his business over well, else he would have been more explicit. But Dr. Ward avoided an argument by hurriedly stating that, according to his opinion – another grunt from the snappy Coroner – the wound had been inflicted with the dagger found behind the mahogany desk.

This remark led to the production of the dagger, a foot-long steel, broad towards the hilt and tapering to a sharp point. This was set in a handle of jet-black wood, carved into the semblance of an ugly negro. And the odd part about the blade was that the middle portion of the steel was

perforated with queer letters of the cuneiform type, and filled in with copper. The Coroner frowned when he examined this strange weapon, and he looked inquiringly at Mrs. Coppersley.

"Does this belong to your late brother?" he asked jerkily.

Mrs. Coppersley looked at the knife. "Jabez, being a sailor, had all manner of queer things," she said hesitatingly, "but I never set my eyes on that. He wasn't one to show what he had, sir."

"Was your brother ever in Africa on the West Coast?"

"He was all over the world, but I can't rightly say where, sir. Why?"

"This," the gruff Coroner shook the weapon, "is an African sacrificial knife in use on the West Coast. From the way in which the copper is welded into the steel, I fancy some Nigerian tribe possessed it. The members of tribes thereabouts are clever metal-workers. The handle and the lettering also remind me of something," mused the doctor, "for I was a long time out in Senegal and Sierra Leone and saw – and saw – but that's no matter. How comes an African sacrificial knife here?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir," said Mrs. Coppersley promptly. "Jabez, as I say, had all manner of queer things which he didn't show me."

"You can't say if this knife belonged to him?"

"No, sir, I can't. The murderer may have brought it."

"You are not here to give opinions," growled the doctor, throwing the ugly-looking weapon on the table. "Are you sure," he added to Ward, "that the wound was made with this knife?"

"Yes, I'm sure," replied the young practitioner, tartly, for the Coroner's attitude annoyed him. "The weapon is sharp pointed and fits the wound. Also the deceased wore a thick pea-jacket and only such a knife could have penetrated the cloth."

"If the blow were struck with sufficient force," snapped the Coroner.

"It was," rejoined the witness. "Have you any more questions to ask me?"

The Coroner nodded, and Ward gave surgical details to prove that death must have taken place almost instantaneously, since Huxham had been stabbed to the heart. "Apparently deceased heard a noise, and rose suddenly from his chair at the desk to face round in self-defence. But the assassin was too quick for him, and struck the knife to deceased's heart with great force as is apparent from –"

"That's all supposition," contradicted the Coroner rudely. "Stick to facts."

Boiling with rage, the young doctor confined himself forthwith to a bald statement of what he had discovered and then was curtly dismissed to give place to Mrs. Coppersley.

That lady was voluble and sharp-tongued, so that the Coroner quite met with his match, much to the delight of Dr. Ward, smarting under much discourtesy. Mrs. Coppersley deposed that she had left the house at seven o'clock, by the back door, with a note for Mr. Silas Pence from her brother, asking him to call at the Manor-house. She left the note at Mr. Pence's lodgings and then went on to the grocery shop to make some purchases and to see Mrs. Vand and her son Henry. There she remained until a quarter to ten o'clock and afterwards returned to the Manor-house. Mr. Vand saw her as far as the boundary channel and then went home.

"What time was that?" asked the Coroner, making notes.

"Just at ten," replied witness, flushing at the smile on the faces of those who knew of the love romance. "The clock struck ten while I was speaking to Henry – I mean to Mr. Vand – and not knowing that it was so late I feared lest my brother should be angry. Jabez was always very particular as to the house being locked up, so I thought he might shut me out. I went in by the back door, having the key, and retired at once to bed."

"Did you not see your brother?" asked the Coroner.

"No, sir. Knowing Jabez's violent temper I had no wish to see him, lest there should be trouble. I went on tip-toe to bed, after locking the back door."

"Did you hear Mr. Huxham moving about," questioned a juryman, timidly.

"No, Mr. Tatters, I didn't. Everything was quiet as I passed the door of the study, and it was closed."

"Did you see a light in the window of the study when at the boundary channel with Mr. Vand?" asked the Coroner.

"No; I looked too," said the witness, "for if Jabez had been up, there would have been trouble owing to my being late. But there was no light in the window, so I fancied Jabez might have gone to bed and have locked me out. But he hadn't guessed I was absent, and so –"

"Did you see a light under the study door when passing through the hall?"

"No, and that made me believe that Jabez had gone to bed. But I didn't think of looking into the study; if I had," witness shuddered, "oh dear me, how very dreadful it all is. Well, then I went to bed, and next morning came down early to clean the study. When I entered I saw my brother dead in his gore, whereupon I ran up stairs and got Bella to come down. Then we sent for the police, and that's all I know."

The Coroner looked towards Ward. "This evidence takes an hour off your time of death, doctor," he said sourly. "You say that the man was murdered after eight and before eleven. Well then, as this witness reached the house just after ten and saw no light in the study the deceased must have been dead when she passed through the hall on her way to bed."

"Oh," groaned Mrs. Coppersley, with her handkerchief to her lips. "How dreadful if I'd looked in to see Jabez weltering in his gore."

"It's a pity you didn't," rejoined the Coroner sharply, "for then you could have given the alarm and the assassin might have been arrested."

"Yes," cried Mrs. Coppersley violently, "and the assassin might have been in the house at the moment, with only two women, mind, and one of them drugged. I should have been killed myself had I given the alarm, so I'm glad I didn't."

"Drugged! Drugged! What do you mean by drugged?"

"Ask Bella," retorted Mrs. Coppersley. "I've told all I'm going to tell."

"Not all," said the Coroner, "was the front door locked?"

"I didn't notice at the time, being anxious to escape Jabez and get to bed."

"Did you notice if it was locked in the morning?"

"Yes, when I opened it for Tunks to go for the police."

"It *was* locked," said Bella, rising at this juncture, "but Tunks opened it while I was talking with my aunt in the hall."

"You can give your evidence when I ask you," snapped the Coroner rudely. "Humph! So the front door was locked and the back door also. How did the assassin escape? He couldn't have gone by the front door after committing the crime, since the key was in the inside, and you locked the back door coming and going, Mrs. Coppersley."

"The murdering beast," said the witness melodramatically, "might have got out of the study window."

"Then he must be a very small man," retorted the Coroner, "for only a small man could scramble through the window. I examined it an hour ago."

"Please yourself," said Mrs. Coppersley, with an air of indifference, "all I know is, that I'm glad I didn't discover Jabez in his gore on that night and at that hour. If I had, you'd be holding an inquest on me."

"Possibly. If the assassin was in the study when you passed through the hall, Mrs. Coppersley."

"Ugh," shivered the witness, "and that's just where he was, depend upon it, sir, getting through the window, when he'd dropped the knife behind the desk. Oh, what an escape I've had," wept Mrs. Coppersley.

"There, there, don't bellow," said the Coroner, testily, "get down and let the witness, Luke Tunks, be called."

The Bleacres handy-man had very little to say, but gave his evidence in a straightforward manner. He had left the house with Mrs. Coppersley at seven and had gone straight home to bed, as he was tired. His grandmother could depose to the fact that he was in bed until the morning. Then he came as usual to the Manor-house, and found that his master was dead. He admitted that he had quarrelled with his master over a possible curtailment of wages, and they had not parted in a very friendly spirit. "But you can't say as I did for him," ended the witness defiantly.

"No one suggests such a thing," snapped the Coroner. "Had you any reason to believe that deceased expected to be murdered?"

Tunks scratched his head, "I have and I haven't," he said at length; "master did seem afraid of someone, as he was always looking over his shoulder. He said that he planted the corn so that there should be only one path up to the house. Then he rigged up that out-look round the chimney there," witness jerked his head towards the ceiling, "and he's got a search-light there also, which he turned on at times."

The Coroner nodded. The late Captain's search-light was well-known, but it was only put down as another freak on the part of a freakish man. But the remark of the witness about the corn was new. "Do you mean to say that the deceased planted the corn as a protection against some one coming on him unawares?"

"Yes, I do," said Tunks, sturdily, "corn don't pay, and there was always only one pathway left. Now my idea is –"

"We don't want to hear your ideas," said the Coroner; "get down. Silas Pence."

The young preacher's examination occupied only a few minutes. He said that he was absent from his lodgings until eleven, and then returned to find the note. As it was late he did not call, and went to bed, as his landlady could prove. He had no reason to believe that Captain Huxham expected to be murdered, and considered that the old sailor was more than capable of looking after himself. Witness was very friendly with the Captain and wished to marry Miss Huxham, an arrangement to which the Captain was quite agreeable. Witness presumed that Huxham wished to see him about the projected marriage when he wrote the note asking witness to call. Next morning when about to pay the visit, witness heard of the murder.

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