

Trollope Anthony

The Vicar of Bullhampton



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PREFACE

The writing of prefaces is, for the most part, work thrown away; and the writing of a preface to a novel is almost always a vain thing. Nevertheless, I am tempted to prefix a few words to this novel on its completion, not expecting that many people will read them, but desirous, in doing so, of defending myself against a charge which may possibly be made against me by the critics, – as to which I shall be unwilling to revert after it shall have been preferred.

I have introduced in the Vicar of Bullhampton the character of a girl whom I will call, – for want of a truer word that shall not in its truth be offensive, – a castaway. I have endeavoured to endow her with qualities that may create sympathy, and I have brought her back at last from degradation at least to decency. I have not married her to a wealthy lover, and I have endeavoured to explain that though there was possible to her a way out of perdition, still things could not be with her as they would have been had she not fallen.

There arises, of course, the question whether a novelist, who professes to write for the amusement of the young of both sexes, should allow himself to bring upon his stage such a character as that of Carry Brattle? It is not long since, – it is well within the memory of the author, – that the very existence of such a condition of life, as was hers, was supposed to be unknown to our sisters and daughters, and was, in truth, unknown to many of them. Whether that ignorance was good may be questioned; but that it exists no longer is beyond question. Then arises that further question, – how far the condition of such unfortunates should be made a matter of concern to the sweet young hearts of those whose delicacy and cleanliness of thought is a matter of pride to so many of us. Cannot women, who are good, pity the sufferings of the vicious, and do something perhaps to mitigate and shorten them, without contamination from the vice? It will be admitted probably by most men who have thought upon the subject that no fault among us is punished so heavily as that fault, often so light in itself but so terrible in its consequences to the less faulty of the two offenders, by which a woman falls. All her own sex is against her, – and all those of the other sex in whose veins runs the blood which she is thought to have contaminated, and who, of nature, would befriend her were her trouble any other than it is.

She is what she is, and remains in her abject, pitiless, unutterable misery, because this sentence of the world has placed her beyond the helping hand of Love and Friendship. It may be said, no doubt, that the severity of this judgment acts as a protection to female virtue, – deterring, as all known punishments do deter, from vice. But this punishment, which is horrible beyond the conception of those who have not regarded it closely, is not known beforehand. Instead of the punishment there is seen a false glitter of gaudy life, – a glitter which is damnably false, – and which, alas, has been more often portrayed in glowing colours, for the injury of young girls, than have those horrors, which ought to deter, with the dark shadowings which belong to them.

To write in fiction of one so fallen as the noblest of her sex, as one to be rewarded because of her weakness, as one whose life is happy, bright, and glorious, is certainly to allure to vice and misery. But it may perhaps be possible that if the matter be handled with truth to life, some girl, who would have been thoughtless, may be made thoughtful, or some parent's heart may be softened. It may also at last be felt that this misery is worthy of alleviation, as is every misery to which humanity is subject.

A. T.

CHAPTER I. BULLHAMPTON

I am disposed to believe that no novel reader in England has seen the little town of Bullhampton, in Wiltshire, except such novel readers as live there, and those others, very few in number, who visit it perhaps four times a year for the purposes of trade, and who are known as commercial gentlemen. Bullhampton is seventeen miles from Salisbury, eleven from Marlborough, nine from Westbury, seven from Haylesbury, and five from the nearest railroad station, which is called Bullhampton Road, and lies on the line from Salisbury to Ycovil. It is not quite on Salisbury Plain, but probably was so once, when Salisbury Plain was wider than it is now. Whether it should be called a small town or a large village I cannot say. It has no mayor, and no market, but it has a fair. There rages a feud in Bullhampton touching this want of a market, as there are certain Bullhamptonites who aver that the charter giving all rights of a market to Bullhampton does exist; and that at one period in its history the market existed also, – for a year or two; but the three bakers and two butchers are opposed to change; and the patriots of the place, though they declaim on the matter over their evening pipes and gin-and-water, have not enough of matutinal zeal to carry out their purpose. Bullhampton is situated on a little river, which meanders through the chalky ground, and has a quiet, slow, dreamy prettiness of its own. A mile above the town, – for we will call it a town, – the stream divides itself into many streamlets, and there is a district called the Water Meads, in which bridges are more frequent than trustworthy, in which there are hundreds of little sluice-gates for regulating the irrigation, and a growth of grass which is a source of much anxiety and considerable trouble to the farmers. There is a water-mill here, too, very low, with ever a floury, mealy look, with a pasty look often, as the flour becomes damp with the spray of the water as it is thrown by the mill-wheel. It seems to be a tattered, shattered, ramshackle concern, but it has been in the same family for many years; and as the family has not hitherto been in distress, it may be supposed that the mill still affords a fair means of livelihood. The Brattles, – for Jacob Brattle is the miller's name, – have ever been known as men who paid their way, and were able to hold up their heads. But nevertheless Jacob Brattle is ever at war with his landlord in regard to repairs wanted for his mill, and Mr. Gilmore, the landlord in question, declares that he wishes that the Avon would some night run so high as to carry off the mill altogether. Bullhampton is very quiet. There is no special trade in the place. Its interests are altogether agricultural. It has no newspaper. Its tendencies are altogether conservative. It is a good deal given to religion; and the Primitive Methodists have a very strong holding there, although in all Wiltshire there is not a clergyman more popular in his own parish than the Rev. Frank Fenwick. He himself, in his inner heart, rather likes his rival, Mr. Puddleham, the dissenting minister; because Mr. Puddleham is an earnest man, who, in spite of the intensity of his ignorance, is efficacious among the poor. But Mr. Fenwick is bound to keep up the fight; and Mr. Puddleham considers it to be his duty to put down Mr. Fenwick and the Church Establishment altogether.

The men of Bullhampton, and the women also, are aware that the glory has departed from them, in that Bullhampton was once a borough, and returned two members to Parliament. No borough more close, or shall we say more rotten, ever existed. It was not that the Marquis of Trowbridge had, what has often delicately been called, an interest in it; but he held it absolutely in his breeches pocket, to do with it as he liked; and it had been the liking of the late Marquis to sell one of the seats at every election to the highest bidder on his side in politics. Nevertheless, the people of Bullhampton had gloried in being a borough, and the shame, or at least the regret of their downfall, had not yet altogether passed away when the tidings of a new Reform Bill came upon them. The people of Bullhampton are notoriously slow to learn, and slow to forget. It was

told of a farmer of Bullhampton, in old days, that he asked what had become of Charles I., when told that Charles II. had been restored. Cromwell had come and gone, and had not disturbed him at Bullhampton.

At Bullhampton there is no public building, except the church, which indeed is a very handsome edifice with a magnificent tower, a thing to go to see, and almost as worthy of a visit as its neighbour the cathedral at Salisbury. The body of the church is somewhat low, but its yellow-gray colour is perfect, and there is, moreover, a Norman door, and there are Early English windows in the aisle, and a perfection of perpendicular architecture in the chancel, all of which should bring many visitors to Bullhampton; and there are brasses in the nave, very curious, and one or two tombs of the Gilmore family, very rare in their construction, and the churchyard is large and green, and bowery, with the Avon flowing close under it, and nooks in it which would make a man wish to die that he might be buried there. The church and churchyard of Bullhampton are indeed perfect, and yet but few people go to see it. It has not as yet had its own bard to sing its praises. Properly it is called Bullhampton Monachorum, the living having belonged to the friars of Chiltern. The great tithes now go to the Earl of Todmorden, who has no other interest in the place whatever, and who never saw it. The benefice belongs to St. John's, Oxford, and as the vicarage is not worth more than £400 a year, it happens that a clergyman generally accepts it before he has lived for twenty or thirty years in the common room of his college. Mr. Fenwick took it on his marriage, when he was about twenty-seven, and Bullhampton has been lucky.

The bulk of the parish belongs to the Marquis of Trowbridge, who, however, has no residence within ten miles of it. The squire of the parish is Squire Gilmore, – Harry Gilmore, – and he possesses every acre in it that is not owned by the Marquis. With the village, or town as it may be, Mr. Gilmore has no concern; but he owns a large tract of the water meads, and again has a farm or two up on the downs as you go towards Chiltern. But they lie out of the parish of Bullhampton. Altogether he is a man of about fifteen hundred a year, and as he is not as yet married, many a Wiltshire mother's eye is turned towards Hampton Privets, as Mr. Gilmore's house is, somewhat fantastically, named.

Mr. Gilmore's character must be made to develop itself in these pages, – if such developing may be accomplished. He is to be our hero, – or at least one of two. The author will not, in these early words, declare that the squire will be his favourite hero, as he will wish that his readers should form their own opinions on that matter. At this period he was a man somewhat over thirty, – perhaps thirty-three years of age, who had done fairly well at Harrow and at Oxford, but had never done enough to make his friends regard him as a swan. He still read a good deal; but he shot and fished more than he read, and had become, since his residence at the Privets, very fond of the outside of his books. Nevertheless, he went on buying books, and was rather proud of his library. He had travelled a good deal, and was a politician, – somewhat scandalising his own tenants and other Bullhamptonites by voting for the liberal candidates for his division of the county. The Marquis of Trowbridge did not know him, but regarded him as an objectionable person, who did not understand the nature of the duties which devolved upon him as a country gentleman; and the Marquis himself was always spoken of by Mr. Gilmore as – an idiot. On these various grounds the squire has hitherto regarded himself as being a little in advance of other squires, and has, perhaps, given himself more credit than he has deserved for intellectuality. But he is a man with a good heart, and a pure mind, generous, desirous of being just, somewhat sparing of that which is his own, never desirous of that which is another's. He is good-looking, though, perhaps, somewhat ordinary in appearance; tall, strong, with dark-brown hair, and dark-brown whiskers, with small, quick grey eyes, and teeth which are almost too white and too perfect for a man. Perhaps it is his greatest fault that he thinks that as a liberal politician and as an English country gentleman he has combined in his own position all that is most desirable upon earth. To have the acres without the acre-laden brains, is, he thinks, everything.

And now it may be as well told at once that Mr. Gilmore is over head and ears in love with a young lady to whom he has offered his hand and all that can be made to appertain to the future mistress of Hampton Privets. And the lady is one who has nothing to give in return but her hand, and her heart, and herself. The neighbours all round the country have been saying for the last five years that Harry Gilmore was looking out for an heiress; for it has always been told of Harry, especially among those who have opposed him in politics, that he had a keen eye for the main chance. But Mary Lowther has not, and never can have, a penny with which to make up for any deficiency in her own personal attributes. But Mary is a lady, and Harry Gilmore thinks her the sweetest woman on whom his eye ever rested. Whatever resolutions as to fortune-hunting he may have made, – though probably none were ever made, – they have all now gone to the winds. He is so absolutely in love that nothing in the world is, to him, at present worth thinking about except Mary Lowther. I do not doubt that he would vote for a conservative candidate if Mary Lowther so ordered him; or consent to go and live in New York if Mary Lowther would accept him on no other condition. All Bullhampton parish is nothing to him at the present moment, except as far as it is connected with Mary Lowther. Hampton Privets is dear to him only as far as it can be made to look attractive in the eyes of Mary Lowther. The mill is to be repaired, though he knows he will never get any interest on the outlay, because Mary Lowther has said that Bullhampton water-meads would be destroyed if the mill were to tumble down. He has drawn for himself mental pictures of Mary Lowther till he has invested her with every charm and grace and virtue that can adorn a woman. In very truth he believes her to be perfect. He is actually and absolutely in love. Mary Lowther has hitherto neither accepted nor rejected him. In a very few lines further on we will tell how the matter stands between them.

It has already been told that the Rev. Frank Fenwick is Vicar of Bullhampton. Perhaps he was somewhat guided in his taking of the living by the fact that Harry Gilmore, the squire of the parish, had been his very intimate friend at Oxford. Fenwick, at the period with which we are about to begin our story, had been six years at Bullhampton, and had been married about five and a half. Of him something has already been said, and perhaps it may be only necessary further to state that he is a tall, fair-haired man, already becoming somewhat bald on the top of his head, with bright eyes, and the slightest possible amount of whiskers, and a look about his nose and mouth which seems to imply that he could be severe if he were not so thoroughly good-humoured. He has more of breeding in his appearance than his friend, – a show of higher blood; though whence comes such show, and how one discerns that appearance, few of us can tell. He was a man who read more and thought more than Harry Gilmore, though given much to athletics and very fond of field sports. It shall only further be said of Frank Fenwick that he esteemed both his churchwardens and his bishop, and was afraid of neither.

His wife had been a Miss Balfour, from Loring, in Gloucestershire, and had had some considerable fortune. She was now the mother of four children, and, as Fenwick used to say, might have fourteen for anything he knew. But as he also had possessed some small means of his own, there was no poverty, or prospect of poverty at the vicarage, and the babies were made welcome as they came. Mrs. Fenwick is as good a specimen of an English country parson's wife as you shall meet in a county, – gay, good-looking, fond of the society around her, with a little dash of fun, knowing in blankets and corduroys and coals and tea; knowing also as to beer and gin and tobacco; acquainted with every man and woman in the parish; thinking her husband to be quite as good as the squire in regard to position, and to be infinitely superior to the squire, or any other man in the world, in regard to his personal self; – a handsome, pleasant, well-dressed lady, who has no nonsense about her. Such a one was, and is, Mrs. Fenwick.

Now the Balfours were considerable people at Loring, though their property was not county property; and it was always considered that Janet Balfour might have done better than she did, in a worldly point of view. Of that, however, little had been said at Loring, because it soon became

known there that she and her husband stood rather well in the country round about Bullhampton; and when she asked Mary Lowther to come and stay with her for six months, Mary Lowther's aunt, Miss Marrable, had nothing to say against the arrangement, although she herself was a most particular old lady, and always remembered that Mary Lowther was third or fourth cousin to some earl in Scotland. Nothing more shall be said of Miss Marrable at present, as it is expedient, for the sake of the story, that the reader should fix his attention on Bullhampton till he find himself quite at home there. I would wish him to know his way among the water meads, to be quite alive to the fact that the lodge of Hampton Privets is a mile and a quarter to the north of Bullhampton church, and half a mile across the fields west from Brattle's mill; that Mr. Fenwick's parsonage adjoins the churchyard, being thus a little farther from Hampton Privets than the church; and that there commences Bullhampton street, with its inn, – the Trowbridge Arms, its four public-houses, its three bakers, and its two butchers. The bounds of the parsonage run down to the river, so that the Vicar can catch his trout from his own bank, – though he much prefers to catch them at distances which admit of the appurtenances of sport.

Now there must be one word of Mary Lowther, and then the story shall be commenced. She had come to the vicarage in May, intending to stay a month, and it was now August, and she had been already three months with her friend. Everybody said that she was staying because she intended to become the mistress of Hampton Privets. It was a month since Harry Gilmore had formally made his offer, and as she had not refused him, and as she still stayed on, the folk of Bullhampton were justified in their conclusions. She was a tall girl, with dark brown hair, which she wore fastened in a knot at the back of her head, after the simplest fashion. Her eyes were large and grey, and full of lustre; but they were not eyes which would make you say that Mary Lowther was especially a bright-eyed girl. They were eyes, however, which could make you think, when they looked at you, that if Mary Lowther would only like you, how happy your lot would be, – that if she would love you, the world would have nothing higher or better to offer. If you judged her face by any rules of beauty, you would say that it was too thin; but feeling its influence with sympathy, you could never wish it to be changed. Her nose and mouth were perfect. How many little noses there are on young women's faces which of themselves cannot be said to be things of beauty, or joys for ever, although they do very well in their places! There is the softness and colour of youth, and perhaps a dash of fun, and the eyes above are bright, and the lips below alluring. In the midst of such sweet charms, what does it matter that the nose be puggish, – or even a nose of putty, such as you think you might improve in the original material by a squeeze of your thumb and forefinger? But with Mary Lowther her nose itself was a feature of exquisite beauty, a feature that could be eloquent with pity, reverence, or scorn. The curves of the nostrils, with their almost transparent membranes, told of the working of the mind within, as every portion of human face should tell – in some degree. And the mouth was equally expressive, though the lips were thin. It was a mouth to watch, and listen to, and read with curious interest, rather than a mouth to kiss. Not but that the desire to kiss would come, when there might be a hope to kiss with favour; – but they were lips which no man would think to ravage in boisterous play. It might have been said that there was a want of capability for passion in her face, had it not been for the well-marked dimple in her little chin, – that soft couch in which one may be always sure, when one sees it, that some little imp of Love lies hidden.

It has already been said that Mary Lowther was tall, – taller than common. Her back was as lovely a form of womanhood as man's eye ever measured and appreciated. Her movements, which were never naturally quick, had a grace about them which touched men and women alike. It was the very poetry of motion; but its chief beauty consisted in this, that it was what it was by no effort of her own. We have all seen those efforts, and it may be that many of us have liked them when they have been made on our own behalf. But no man as yet could ever have felt himself to be so far flattered by Miss Lowther. Her dress was very plain; as it became her that it should be, for she

was living on the kindness of an aunt who was herself not a rich woman. But it may be doubted whether dress could have added much to her charms.

She was now turned one-and-twenty, and though, doubtless, there were young men at Loring who had sighed for her smiles, no young man had sighed with any efficacy. It must be acknowledged, indeed, that she was not a girl for whom the most susceptible of young men would sigh. Young men given to sigh are generally attracted by some outward and visible sign of softness which may be taken as an indication that sighing will produce some result, however small. At Loring it was said that Mary Lowther was cold and repellent, and, on that account, one who might very probably descend to the shades as an old maid in spite of the beauty of which she was the acknowledged possessor. No enemy, no friend, had ever accused her of being a flirt.

Such as she was, Harry Gilmore's passion for her much astonished his friends. Those who knew him best had thought that, as regarded his fate matrimonial, – or non-matrimonial, – there were three chances before him: he might carry out their presumed intention of marrying money; or he might become the sudden spoil of the bow and spear of some red-cheeked lass; or he might walk on as an old bachelor, too cautious to be caught at all. But none believed that he would become the victim of a grand passion for a poor, reticent, high-bred, high-minded specimen of womanhood. Such, however, was now his condition.

He had an uncle, a clergyman, living at Salisbury, a prebendary there, who was a man of the world, and in whom Harry trusted more than in any other member of his own family. His mother had been the sister of the Rev. Henry Fitzackerly Chamberlaine; and as Mr. Chamberlaine had never married, much of his solicitude was bestowed upon his nephew.

"Don't, my dear fellow," had been the prebendary's advice when he was taken over to see Miss Lowther. "She is a lady, no doubt; but you would never be your own master, and you would be a poor man till you died. An easy temper and a little money are almost as common in our rank of life as destitution and obstinacy." On the day after this advice was given, Harry Gilmore made his formal offer.

CHAPTER II. FLO'S RED BALL

"You should give him an answer, dear, one way or the other." These wise words were spoken by Mrs. Fenwick to her friend as they sat together, with their work in their hands, on a garden seat under a cedar tree. It was an August evening after dinner, and the Vicar was out about his parish. The two elder children were playing in the garden, and the two young women were alone together.

"Of course I shall give him an answer. What answer does he wish?"

"You know what answer he wishes. If any man was ever in earnest he is."

"Am I not doing the best I can for him then in waiting – to see whether I can say yes?"

"It cannot be well for him to be in suspense on such a matter; and, dear Mary, it cannot be well for you either. One always feels that when a girl bids a man to wait, she will take him after a while. It always comes to that. If you had been at home at Loring, the time would not have been much; but, being so near to him, and seeing him every day, must be bad. You must both be in a state of fever."

"Then I will go back to Loring."

"No; not now, till you have positively made up your mind, and given him an answer one way or the other. You could not go now and leave him in doubt. Take him at once, and have done with it. He is as good as gold."

In answer to this, Mary for a while said nothing, but went sedulously on with her work.

"Mamma," said a little girl, running up, followed by a nursery-maid, "the ball's in the water!"

The child was a beautiful fair-haired little darling about four-and-a-half years old, and a boy, a year younger, and a little shorter, and a little stouter, was toddling after her.

"The ball in the water, Flo! Can't Jim get it out?"

"Jim's gone, mamma."

Then Jane, the nursery-maid, proceeded to explain that the ball had rolled in and had been carried down the stream to some bushes, and that it was caught there just out of reach of all that she, Jane, could do with a long stick for its recovery. Jim, the gardener, was not to be found; and they were in despair lest the ball should become wet through and should perish.

Mary at once saw her opportunity of escape, – her opportunity for that five minutes of thought by herself which she needed. "I'll come, Flo, and see what can be done," said Mary.

"Do; 'cause you is so big," said the little girl.

"We'll see if my long arms won't do as well as Jim's," said Mary; "only Jim would go in, perhaps, which I certainly shall not do." Then she took Flo by the hand, and together they ran down to the margin of the river.

There lay the treasure, a huge red inflated ball, just stopped in its downward current by a short projecting stick. Jim could have got it certainly, because he could have suspended himself over the stream from a bough, and could have dislodged the ball, and have floated it on to the bank.

"Lean over, Mary, – a great deal, and we'll hold you," said Flo, to whom her ball was at this moment worth any effort. Mary did lean over, and poked at it, and at last thought that she would trust herself to the bough, as Jim would have done, and became more and more venturous, and at last touched the ball, and then, at last, – fell into the river! Immediately there was a scream and a roar, and a splashing about of skirts and petticoats, and by the time that Mrs. Fenwick was on the bank, Mary Lowther had extricated herself, and had triumphantly brought out Flo's treasure with her.

"Mary, are you hurt?" said her friend.

"What should hurt me? Oh dear, oh dear! I never fell into a river before. My darling Flo, don't be unhappy. It's such good fun. Only you mustn't fall in yourself, till you're as big as I am." Flo was in an agony of tears, not deigning to look at the rescued ball.

"You do not mean that your head has been under?" said Mrs. Fenwick.

"My face was, and I felt so odd. For about half a moment I had a sound of Ophelia in my ears. Then I was laughing at myself for being such a goose."

"You'd better come up and go to bed, dear; and I'll get you something warm."

"I won't go to bed, and I won't have anything warm; but I will change my clothes. What an adventure! What will Mr. Fenwick say?"

"What will Mr. Gilmore say?" To this Mary Lowther made no answer, but went straight up to the house, and into her room, and changed her clothes.

While she was there Fenwick and Gilmore both appeared at the open window of the drawing-room in which Mrs. Fenwick was sitting. She had known well enough that Harry Gilmore would not let the evening pass without coming to the vicarage, and at one time had hoped to persuade Mary Lowther to give her verdict on this very day. Both she and her husband were painfully anxious that Harry might succeed. Fenwick had loved the man dearly for many years, and Janet Fenwick had loved him since she had known him as her husband's friend. They both felt that he was showing more of manhood than they had expected from him in the persistency of his love, and that he deserved his reward. And they both believed also that for Mary herself it would be a prosperous and a happy marriage. And then, where is the married woman who does not wish that the maiden friend who comes to stay with her should find a husband in her house? The parson and his wife were altogether of one mind in this matter, and thought that Mary Lowther ought to be made to give herself to Harry Gilmore.

"What do you think has happened?" said Mrs. Fenwick, coming to the window, which opened down to the ground. "Mary Lowther has fallen into the river."

"Fallen where?" shouted Gilmore, putting up both his hands, and seeming to prepare himself to rush away among the river gods in search of his love.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Gilmore, she's upstairs, quite safe, – only she has had a ducking." Then the circumstances were explained, and the papa declared magisterially that Flo must not play any more with her ball near the river, – an order to which it was not probable that much close attention would ever be paid.

"I suppose Miss Lowther will have gone to bed?" said Gilmore.

"On the contrary, I expect her every moment. I suggested bed, and warm drinks, and cossetting; but she would have none of it. She scrambled out all by herself, and seemed to think it very good fun."

"Come in at any rate and have some tea," said the Vicar. "If you start before eleven, I'll walk half the way back with you."

In the mean time, in spite of her accident, Mary had gained the opportunity that she had required. The point for self-meditation was not so much whether she would or would not accept Mr. Gilmore now, as that other point; – was she or was she not wrong to keep him in suspense. She knew very well that she would not accept him now. It seemed to her that a girl should know a man very thoroughly before she would be justified in trusting herself altogether to his hands, and she thought that her knowledge of Mr. Gilmore was insufficient. It might however be the case that in such circumstances duty required her to give him at once an unhesitating answer. She did not find herself to be a bit nearer to knowing him and to loving him than she was a month since. Her friend Janet had complained again and again of the suspense to which she was subjecting the man; – but she knew on the other hand that her friend Janet did this in her intense anxiety to promote the match. Was it wrong to say to the man – "I will wait and try?" Her friend told her that to say that she would wait and try, was in truth to say that she would take him at some future time; –

that any girl who said so had almost committed herself to such a decision; – that the very fact that she was waiting and trying to love a man ought to bind her to the man at last. Such certainly had not been her own idea. As far as she could at present look into her own future feelings, she did not think that she could ever bring herself to say that she would be this man's wife. There was a solemnity about the position which had never come fully home to her before she had been thus placed. Everybody around her told her that the man's happiness was really bound up in her reply. If this were so, – and she in truth believed that it was so, – was she not bound to give him every chance in her power? And yet because she still doubted, she was told by her friend that she was behaving badly! She would believe her friend, would confess her fault, and would tell her lover in what most respectful words of denial she could mould, that she would not be his wife. For herself personally, there would be no sorrow in this, and no regret.

Her ducking had given her time for all this thought; and then, having so decided, she went downstairs. She was met, of course, with various inquiries about her bath. Mr. Gilmore was all pity, as though the accident were the most serious thing in the world. Mr. Fenwick was all mirth, as though there had never been a better joke. Mrs. Fenwick, who was perhaps unwise in her impatience, was specially anxious that her two guests might be left together. She did not believe that Mary Lowther would ever say the final No; and yet she thought also that, if it were so, the time had quite come in which Mary Lowther ought to say the final Yes.

"Let us go down and look at the spot," she said, after tea.

So they went down. It was a beautiful August night. There was no moon, and the twilight was over; but still it was not absolutely dark; and the air was as soft as a mother's kiss to her sleeping child. They walked down together, four abreast, across the lawn, and thence they reached a certain green orchard path that led down to the river. Mrs. Fenwick purposely went on with the lover, leaving Mary with her husband, in order that there might be no appearance of a scheme. She would return with her husband, and then there might be a ramble among the paths, and the question would be pressed, and the thing might be settled.

They saw through the gloom the spot where Mary had scrambled, and the water which had then been bright and smiling, was now black and awful.

"To think that you should have been in there!" said Harry Gilmore, shuddering.

"To think that she should ever have got out again!" said the parson.

"It looks frightful in the dark," said Mrs. Fenwick. "Come away, Frank. It makes me sick." And the charming schemer took her husband's arm, and continued the round of the garden. "I have been talking to her, and I think she would take him if he would ask her now."

The other pair of course followed them. Mary's mind was so fully made up, at this moment, that she almost wished that her companion might ask the question. She had been told that she was misusing him; and she would misuse him no longer. She had a firm No, as it were, within her grasp, and a resolution that she would not be driven from it. But he walked on beside her talking of the water, and of the danger, and of the chance of a cold, and got no nearer to the subject than to bid her think what suffering she would have caused had she failed to extricate herself from the pool. He also had made up his mind. Something had been said by himself of a certain day when last he had pleaded his cause; and that day would not come round till the morrow. He considered himself pledged to restrain himself till then; but on the morrow he would come to her.

There was a little gate which led from the parsonage garden through the churchyard to a field path, by which was the nearest way to Hampton Privets.

"I'll leave you here," he said, "because I don't want to make Fenwick come out again to-night. You won't mind going up through the garden alone?"

"Oh dear, no."

"And, Miss Lowther, – pray, pray take care of yourself. I hardly think you ought to have been out again to-night."

"It was nothing, Mr. Gilmore. You make infinitely too much of it."

"How can I make too much of anything that regards you? You will be at home to-morrow?"

"Yes, I fancy so."

"Do remain at home. I intend to come down after lunch. Do remain at home." He held her by the hand as he spoke to her, and she promised him that she would obey him. He clearly was entitled to her obedience on such a point. Then she slowly made her way round the garden, and entered the house at the front door, some quarter of an hour after the others.

Why should she refuse him? What was it that she wanted in the world? She liked him, his manners, his character, his ways, his mode of life, and after a fashion she liked his person. If there was more of love in the world than this, she did not think that it would ever come in her way. Up to this time of her life she had never felt any such feeling. If not for her own sake, why should she not do it for him? Why should he not be made happy? She had risked a plunge in the water to get Flo her ball, and she liked him better than she liked Flo. It seemed that her mind had been altogether changed by that stroll through the dark alleys.

"Well," said Janet, "how is it to be?"

"He is to come to-morrow, and I do not know how it will be," she said, turning away to her own room.

CHAPTER III. SAM BRATTLE

It was about eleven o'clock when Gilmore passed through the wicket leading from the vicarage garden to the churchyard. The path he was about to take crossed simply a corner of the church precincts, as it came at once upon a public footway leading from the fields through the churchyard to the town. There was, of course, no stopping the public path, but Fenwick had been often advised to keep a lock on his own gate, as otherwise it almost seemed that the vicarage gardens were open to all Bullhampton. But the lock had never been put on. The gate was the way by which he and his family went to the church, and the parson was accustomed to say that however many keys there might be provided, he knew that there would never be one in his pocket when he wanted it. And he was wont to add, when his wife would tease him on the subject, that they who desired to come in decently were welcome, and that they who were minded to make an entrance indecently would not be debarred by such rails and fences as hemmed in the vicarage grounds. Gilmore, as he passed through the corner of the churchyard, clearly saw a man standing near to the stile leading from the fields. Indeed, this man was quite close to him, although, from the want of light and the posture of the man, the face was invisible to him. But he knew the fellow to be a stranger to Bullhampton. The dress was strange, the manner was strange, and the mode of standing was strange. Gilmore had lived at Bullhampton all his life, and, without much thought on the subject, knew Bullhampton ways. The jacket which the man wore was a town-made jacket, a jacket that had come farther a-field even than Salisbury; and the man's gaiters had a savour which was decidedly not of Wiltshire. Dark as it was, he could see so much as this. "Good night, my friend," said Gilmore, in a sharp cheery voice. The man muttered something, and passed on as though to the village. There had, however, been something in his position which made Gilmore think that the stranger had intended to trespass on his friend's garden. He crossed the stile into the fields, however, without waiting, – without having waited for half a moment, and immediately saw the figure of a second man standing down, hidden as it were in the ditch; and though he could discover no more than the cap and shoulders of the man through the gloom, he was sure he knew who it was that owned the cap and shoulders. He did not speak again, but passed on quickly, thinking what he might best do. The man whom he had seen and recognised had latterly been talked of as a discredit to his family, and anything but an honour to the usually respectable inhabitants of Bullhampton.

On the further side of the church from the town was a farmyard, in the occupation of one of Lord Trowbridge's tenants, – a man who had ever been very keen at preventing the inroads of trespassers, to which he had, perhaps, been driven by the fact that his land was traversed by various public pathways. Now a public pathway through pasture is a nuisance, as it is impossible to induce those who use it to keep themselves to one beaten track; but a pathway through cornfields is worse, for, let what pains may be taken, wheat, beans, and barley will be torn down and trampled under foot. And yet in apportioning his rents, no landlord takes all this into consideration. Farmer Trumbull considered it a good deal, and was often a wrathful man. There was at any rate no right of way across his farmyard, and here he might keep as big a dog as he chose, chained or unchained. Harry Gilmore knew the dog well, and stood for a moment leaning on the gate.

"Who be there?" said the voice of the farmer.

"Is that you, Mr. Trumbull? It is I, – Mr. Gilmore. I want to get round to the front of the parson's house."

"Zurely, zurely," said the farmer, coming forward and opening the gate. "Be there anything wrong about, Squire?"

"I don't know. I think there is. Speak softly. I fancy there are men lying in the churchyard."

"I be a-thinking so, too, Squire. Bone'm was a growling just now like the old 'un." Bone'm was the name of the bull-dog as to which Gilmore had been solicitous as he looked over the gate. "What is't t'ey're up to? Not bugglary?"

"Our friend's apricots, perhaps. But I'll just move round to the front. Do you and Bone'm keep a look-out here."

"Never fear, Squire; never fear. Me and Bone'm together is a'most too much for 'em, bugglars and all." Then he led Mr. Gilmore through the farmyard, and out on to the road, Bone'm growling a low growl as he passed away.

The Squire hurried along the high road, past the church, and in at the Vicarage front gate. Knowing the place well, he could have made his way round into the garden; but he thought it better to go to the front door. There was no light to be seen from the windows; but almost all the rooms of the house looked out into the garden at the back. He knocked sharply, and in a minute or two the door was opened by the parson in person.

"Frank," said the Squire.

"Halloo! is that you? What's up now?"

"Men who ought to be in bed. I came across two men hanging about your gate in the churchyard, and I'm not sure there wasn't a third."

"They're up to nothing. They often sit and smoke there."

"These fellows were up to something. The man I saw plainest was a stranger, and just the sort of man who won't do your parishioners any good to be among them. The other was Sam Brattle."

"Whew – w – w," said the parson.

"He has gone utterly to the dogs," said the Squire.

"He's on the road, Harry; but nobody has gone while he's still going. I had some words with him in his father's presence last week, and he followed me afterwards, and told me he'd see it out with me. I wouldn't tell you, because I didn't want to set you more against them."

"I wish they were out of the place, – the whole lot of them."

"I don't know that they'd do better elsewhere than here. I suppose Mr. Sam is going to keep his word with me."

"Only for the look of that other fellow, I shouldn't think they meant anything serious," said Gilmore.

"I don't suppose they do, but I'll be on the look-out."

"Shall I stay with you, Frank?"

"Oh, no; I've a life-preserver, and I'll take a round of the gardens. You come with me, and you can pass home that way. The chances are they'll mizzle away to bed, as they've seen you, and heard Bone'm, – and probably heard too every word you said to Trumbull."

He then got his hat and the short, thick stick of which he had spoken, and turning the key of the door, put it in his pocket. Then the two friends went round by the kitchen garden, and so through to the orchard, and down to the churchyard gate. Hitherto they had seen nothing, and heard nothing, and Fenwick was sure that the men had made their way through the churchyard to the village.

"But they may come back," said Gilmore.

"I'll be about if they do," said the parson.

"What is one against three? You had better let me stay."

Fenwick laughed at this, saying that it would be quite as rational to propose that they should keep watch every night.

"But, hark!" said the Squire, with a mind evidently perturbed.

"Don't you be alarmed about us," said the parson.

"If anything should happen to Mary Lowther!"

"That, no doubt, is matter of anxiety, to which may, perhaps, be added some trifle of additional feeling on the score of Janet and the children. But I'll do my best. If the women knew that you and I were patrolling the place, they'd be frightened out of their wits."

Then Gilmore, who never liked that there should be a laugh against himself, took his leave and walked home across the fields. Fenwick passed up through the garden, and, when he was near the terrace which ran along the garden front of the house, he thought that he heard a voice. He stood under the shade of a wall dark with ivy, and distinctly heard whispering on the other side of it. As far as he could tell there were the voices of more than two men. He wished now that he had kept Gilmore with him, – not that he was personally afraid of the trespassers, for his courage was of that steady settled kind which enables the possessor to remember that men who are doing deeds of darkness are ever afraid of those whom they are injuring; but had there been an ally with him his prospect of catching one or more of the ruffians would have been greatly increased. Standing where he was he would probably be able to interrupt them, should they attempt to enter the house; but in the mean time they might be stripping his fruit from the wall. They were certainly, at present, in the kitchen garden, and he was not minded to leave them there at such work as they might have in hand. Having paused to think of this, he crept along under the wall, close to the house, towards the passage by which he could reach them. But they had not heard him, nor had they waited among the fruit. When he was near the corner of the wall, one leading man came round within a foot or two of the spot on which he stood; and, before he could decide on what he would do, the second had appeared. He rushed forward with the loaded stick in his hand, but, knowing its weight, and remembering the possibility of the comparative innocence of the intruders, he hesitated to strike. A blow on the head would have brained a man, and a knock on the arm with such an instrument would break the bone. In a moment he found his left hand on the leading man's throat, and the man's foot behind his heel. He fell, but as he fell he did strike heavily, cutting upwards with his weapon, and bringing the heavy weight of lead at the end of it on to the man's shoulder. He stumbled rather than fell, but when he regained his footing, the man was gone. That man was gone, and two others were following him down towards the gate at the bottom of the orchard. Of these two, in a few strides, he was able to catch the hindmost, and then he found himself wrestling with Sam Brattle.

"Sam," said he, speaking as well as he could with his short breath, "if you don't stand, I'll strike you with the life-preserver."

Sam made another struggle, trying to seize the weapon, and the parson hit him with it on the right arm.

"You've smashed that anyway, Mr. Fenwick," said the man.

"I hope not; but do you come along with me quietly, or I'll smash something else. I'll hit you on the head if you attempt to move away. What were you doing here?"

Brattle made no answer, but walked along towards the house at the parson's left hand, the parson holding him the while by the neck of his jacket, and swinging the life-preserver in his right hand. In this way he took him round to the front of the house, and then began to think what he would do with him.

"That, after all, you should be at this work, Sam!"

"What work is it, then?"

"Prowling about my place, after midnight, with a couple of strange blackguards."

"There ain't so much harm in that, as I knows of."

"Who were the men, Sam?"

"Who was the men?"

"Yes; – who were they?"

"Just friends of mine, Mr. Fenwick. I shan't say no more about 'em. You've got me, and you've smashed my arm, and now what is it you're a-going to do with me? I ain't done no harm, – only just walked about, like."

To tell the truth, our friend the parson did not quite know what he meant to do with the Tartar he had caught. There were reasons which made him very unwilling to hand over Sam Brattle to the village constable. Sam had a mother and sister who were among the Vicar's first favourites in the parish; and though old Jacob Brattle, the father, was not so great a favourite, and was a man whom the Squire, his landlord, held in great disfavour, Mr. Fenwick would desire, if possible, to spare the family. And of Sam, himself, he had had high hopes, though those hopes, for the last eighteen months had been becoming fainter and fainter. Upon the whole, he was much averse to knocking up the groom, the only man who lived on the parsonage except himself, and dragging Sam into the village. "I wish I knew," he said, "what you and your friends were going to do. I hardly think it has come to that with you, that you'd try to break into the house and cut our throats."

"We warn't after no breaking in, nor no cutting of throats, Mr. Fenwick. We warn't indeed!"

"What shall you do with yourself, to-night, if I let you off?"

"Just go home to father's, sir; not a foot else, s'help me."

"One of your friends, as you call them, will have to go to the doctor, if I am not very much mistaken; for the rap I gave you was nothing to what he got. You're all right?"

"It hurt, sir, I can tell ye; – but that won't matter."

"Well, Sam, – there; you may go. I shall be after you to-morrow, and the last word I say to you, to-night, is this; – as far as I can see, you're on the road to the gallows. It isn't pleasant to be hung, and I would advise you to change your road." So saying, he let go his hold, and stood waiting till Sam should have taken his departure.

"Don't be a-coming after me, to-morrow, parson, please," said the man.

"I shall see your mother, certainly."

"Dont'ee tell her of my being here, Mr. Fenwick, and nobody shan't ever come anigh this place again, – not in the way of priggging anything."

"You fool, you!" said the parson. "Do you think that it is to save anything that I might lose, that I let you go now? Don't you know that the thing I want to save is you, – you, – you; you helpless, idle, good-for-nothing reprobate? Go home, and be sure that I shall do the best I can according to my lights. I fear that my lights are bad lights, in that they have allowed me to let you go."

When he had seen Sam take his departure through the front gate, he returned to the house, and found that his wife, who had gone to bed, had come down-stairs in search of him.

"Frank, you have frightened me so terribly! Where have you been?"

"Thief-catching. And I'm afraid I've about split one fellow's back. I caught another, but I let him go."

"What on earth do you mean, Frank?"

Then he told her the whole story, – how Gilmore had seen the men, and had come up to him; how he had gone out and had a tussle with one man, whom he had, as he thought, hurt; and how he had then caught another, while the third escaped.

"We ain't safe in our beds, then," said the wife.

"You ain't safe in yours, my dear, because you chose to leave it; but I hope you're safe out of it. I doubt whether the melons and peaches are safe. The truth is, there ought to be a gardener's cottage on the place, and I must build one. I wonder whether I hurt that fellow much. I seemed to hear the bone crunch."

"Oh, Frank!"

"But what could I do? I got that thing because I thought it safer than a pistol, but I really think it's worse. I might have murdered them all, if I'd lost my temper, – and just for half-a-dozen apricots!"

"And what became of the man you took?"

"I let him go."

"Without doing anything to him?"

"Well; he got a tap too."

"Did you know him?"

"Yes, I knew him, – well."

"Who was he, Frank?"

The parson was silent for a moment, and then he answered her. "It was Sam Brattle."

"Sam Brattle, coming to rob?"

"He's been at it, I fear, for months, in some shape."

"And what shall you do?"

"I hardly know as yet. It would about kill her and Fanny, if they were told all that I suspect. They are stiff-necked, obstinate, ill-conditioned people – that is, the men. But I think Gilmore has been a little hard on them. The father and brother are honest men. Come; – we'll go to bed."

CHAPTER IV. THERE IS NO ONE ELSE

On the following morning there was of course a considerable amount of conversation at the Vicarage as to the affairs of the previous evening. There was first of all an examination of the fruit; but as this was made without taking Jem the gardener into confidence, no certain conclusion could be reached. It was clear, however, that no robbery for the purpose of sale had been made. An apricot or two might have been taken, and perhaps an assault made on an unripe peach. Mr. Fenwick was himself nearly sure that garden spoliation was not the purpose of the assailants, though it suited him to let his wife entertain that idea. The men would hardly have come from the kitchen garden up to the house and round the corner at which he had met them, if they were seeking fruit. Presuming it to have been their intention to attempt the drawing-room windows, he would have expected to meet them as he did meet them. From the garden the Vicar and the two ladies went down to the gate, and from thence over the stile to Farmer Trumbull's farmyard. The farmer had not again seen the men, after the Squire had left him, nor had he heard them. To him the parson said nothing of his encounter, and nothing of that blow on the man's back. From thence Mr. Fenwick went on to the town, and the ladies returned to the Vicarage.

The only person whom the parson at once consulted was the surgeon, – Dr. Cuttenden, as he was called. No man with an injured shoulder-blade had come to him last night or that morning. A man, he said, might receive a very violent blow on his back, in the manner in which the fellow had been struck, and might be disabled for days from any great personal exertion, without having a bone broken. If the blade of his shoulder were broken, the man – so thought the doctor – could not travel far on foot, would hardly be able to get away to any of the neighbouring towns unless he were carried. Of Sam Brattle the parson said nothing to the doctor; but when he had finished his morning's work about the town, he walked on to the mill.

In the mean time the two ladies remained at home at the Parsonage. The excitement occasioned by the events of the previous night was probably a little damaged by the knowledge that Mr. Gilmore was coming. The coming of Mr. Gilmore on this occasion was so important that even the terrible idea of burglars, and the sensation arising from the use of that deadly weapon which had been produced at the breakfast table during the morning, were robbed of some of their interest. They did not keep possession of the minds of the two ladies as they would have done had there been no violent interrupting cause. But here was the violent interrupting cause, and by the time that lunch was on the table, Sam Brattle and his comrades were forgotten.

Very little was said between the two women on that morning respecting Mr. Gilmore. Mrs. Fenwick, who had allowed herself to be convinced that Mary would act with great impropriety if she did not accept the man, thought that further speech might only render her friend obstinate. Mary, who knew the inside of her friend's mind very clearly, and who loved and respected her friend, could hardly fix her own mind. During the past night it had been fixed, or nearly fixed, two different ways. She had first determined that she would refuse her lover, – as to which resolve, for some hours or so, she had been very firm; then that she would accept him, – as to which she had ever, when most that way inclined, entertained some doubt as to the possibility of her uttering that word "Yes."

"If it be that other women don't love better than I love him, I wonder that they ever get married at all," she said to herself.

She was told that she was wrong to keep the man in suspense, and she believed it. Had she not been so told, she would have thought that some further waiting would have been of the three alternatives the best.

"I shall be upstairs with the bairns," said Mrs. Fenwick, as she left the dining-room after lunch, "so that if you prefer the garden to the drawing-room, it will be free."

"Oh dear, how solemn and ceremonious you make it."

"It is solemn, Mary; I don't know how anything can be more solemn, short of going to heaven or the other place. But I really don't see why there should be any doubt or difficulty."

There was something in the tone in which these words were said which almost made Mary Lowther again decide against the man. The man had a home and an income, and was Squire of the parish; and therefore there need be no difficulty! When she compared Mr. Fenwick and Mr. Gilmore together, she found that she liked Mr. Fenwick the best. She thought him to be the more clever, the higher spirited, the most of a man of the two. She certainly was not the least in love with her friend's husband; but then she was just as little in love with Mr. Gilmore.

At about half-past two Mr. Gilmore made his appearance, standing at the open window.

"May I come in?" he said.

"Of course you may come in."

"Mrs. Fenwick is not here?"

"She is in the house, I think, if you want her."

"Oh no. I hope you were not frightened last night. I have not seen Frank this morning; but I hear from Mr. Trumbull that there was something of a row."

"There was a row, certainly. Mr. Fenwick struck some of the men, and he is afraid that he hurt one of them."

"I wish he had broken their heads. I take it there was a son of one of my tenants there, who is about as bad as he can be. Frank will believe me now. I hope you were not frightened here."

"I heard nothing of it till this morning."

After that there was a pause. He had told himself as he came along that the task before him could not be easy and pleasant. To declare a passion to the girl he loves may be very pleasant work to the man who feels almost sure that his answer will not be against him. It may be an easy task enough even when there is a doubt. The very possession of the passion, – or even its pretence, – gives the man a liberty which he has a pleasure and a pride in using. But this is the case when the man dashes boldly at his purpose without preconcerted arrangements. Such pleasure, if it ever was a pleasure to him, – such excitement at least, was come and gone with Harry Gilmore. He had told his tale, and had been desired to wait. Now he had come again at a fixed hour to be informed – like a servant waiting for a place – whether it was thought that he would suit. The servant out of place, however, would have had this advantage, that he would receive his answer without the necessity of further eloquence on his own part. With the lover it was different. It was evident that Mary Lowther would not say to him, "I have considered the matter, and I think that, upon the whole, you will do." It was necessary that he should ask the question again, and ask it as a suppliant.

"Mary," he said, beginning with words that he had fixed for himself as he came up the garden, "it is six weeks, I think, since I asked you to be my wife; and now I have come to ask you again."

She made him no immediate answer, but sat as though waiting for some further effort of his eloquence.

"I do not think you doubt my truth, or the warmth of my affection. If you trust in them –"

"I do; I do."

"Then I don't know that I can say anything further. Nothing that I can say now will make you love me. I have not that sort of power which would compel a girl to come into my arms."

"I don't understand that kind of power, – how any man can have it with any girl."

"They say that it is so; but I do not flatter myself that it is so with me; and I do not think that it would be so with any man over you. Perhaps I may assure you that, as far as I know myself at present, all my future happiness must depend on your answer. It will not kill me – to be refused;

at least, I suppose not. But it will make me wish that it would." Having so spoken he waited for her reply.

She believed every word that he said. And she liked him so well that, for his own sake, she desired that he might be gratified. As far as she knew herself, she had no desire to be Harry Gilmore's wife. The position was not even one in which she could allow herself to look for consolation on one side, for disappointments on the other. She had read about love, and talked about love; and she desired to be in love. Certainly she was not in love with this man. She had begun to doubt whether it would ever be given to her to love, – to love as her friend Janet loved Frank Fenwick. Janet loved her husband's very footsteps, and seemed to eat with his palate, hear with his ears, and see with his eyes. She was, as it were, absolutely a bone from her husband's rib. Mary thought that she was sure that she could never have that same feeling towards Henry Gilmore. And yet it might come; or something might come which would do almost as well. It was likely that Janet's nature was softer and sweeter than her own, – more prone to adapt itself, like ivy to a strong tree. For herself, it might be, that she could never become as the ivy; but that, nevertheless, she might be the true wife of a true husband. But if ever she was to be the true wife of Harry Gilmore, she could not to-day say that it should be so.

"I suppose I must answer you," she said, very gently.

"If you tell me that you are not ready to do so I will wait, and come again. I shall never change my mind. You may be sure of that."

"But that is just what I may not do, Mr. Gilmore."

"Who says so?"

"My own feelings tell me so. I have no right to keep you in suspense, and I will not do it. I respect and esteem you most honestly. I have so much liking for you that I do not mind owning that I wish that it were more. Mr. Gilmore, I like you so much that I would make a great sacrifice for you; but I cannot sacrifice my own honesty or your happiness by making believe that I love you."

For a few moments he sat silent, and then there came over his face a look of inexpressible anguish, – a look as though the pain were almost more than he could bear. She could not keep her eyes from his face; and, in her woman's pity, she almost wished that her words had been different.

"And must that be all?" he asked.

"What else can I say, Mr. Gilmore?"

"If that must be all, it will be to me a doom that I shall not know how to bear. I cannot live here without you. I have thought about you till you have become mixed with every tree and every cottage about the place. I did not know of myself that I could become such a slave to a passion. Mary, say that you will wait again. Try it once more. I would not ask for this, but that you have told me that there was no one else."

"Certainly, there is no one else."

"Then let me wait again. It can do you no harm. If there should come any man more fortunate than I am, you can tell me, and I shall know that it is over. I ask no sacrifice from you, and no pledge; but I give you mine. I shall not change."

"There must be no such promise, Mr. Gilmore."

"But there is the promise. I certainly shall not change. When three months are over I will come to you again."

She tried to think whether she was bound to tell him that her answer must be taken as final, or whether she might allow the matter to stand as he proposed, with some chance of a result that might be good for him. On one point she was quite sure, – that if she left him now, with an understanding that he should again renew his offer after a period of three months, she must go away from Bullhampton. If there was any possibility that she should learn to love him, such feeling would arise within her more quickly in his absence than in his presence. She would go home to Loring, and try to bring herself to accept him.

"I think," she said, "that what we now say had better be the last of it."

"It shall not be the last of it. I will try again. What is there that I can do, so that I may make myself worthy of you?"

"It is no question of worthiness, Mr. Gilmore. Who can say how his heart is moved, – and why? I shall go home to Loring; and you may be sure of this, that if there be anything that you should hear of me, I will let you know."

Then he took her hand in his own, held it for a while, pressed it to his lips, and left her. She was by no means contented with herself, and, to tell the truth, was ashamed to let her friend know what she had done. And yet how could she have answered him in other words? It might be that she could teach herself to be contented with the amount of regard which she entertained for him. It might be that she could persuade herself to be his wife; and if so, why should he not have the chance, – the chance which he professed that he was so anxious to retain? He had paid her the greatest compliment which a man can pay a woman, and she owed him everything, – except herself. She was hardly sure even now that if the proposition had come to her by letter the answer might not have been of a different nature.

As soon as he was gone she went upstairs to the nursery, and thence to Mrs. Fenwick's bedroom. Flo was there, but Flo was soon dismissed. Mary began her story instantly, before a question could be asked.

"Janet," she said, "I am going home – at once."

"Why so?"

"Because it is best. Nothing more is settled than was settled before. When he asks me whether he may come again, how can I say that he may not? What can I say, except that as far I can see now, I cannot be his wife?"

"You have not accepted him, then?"

"No."

"I believe that you would, if he had asked you last night."

"Most certainly I should not. I may doubt when I am talking behind his back; but when I meet him face to face I cannot do it."

"I think you have been wrong, – very wrong and very foolish."

"In not taking a man I do not love?" said Mary.

"You do love him; but you are longing for you do not know what; some romance, – some grand passion, – something that will never come."

"Shall I tell you what I want?"

"If you please."

"A feeling such as you have for Frank. You are my model; I want nothing beyond that."

"That comes after marriage. Frank was very little to me till we were man and wife. He'll tell you the same. I don't know whether I didn't almost dislike him when I married him."

"Oh, Janet!"

"Certainly the sort of love you are thinking of comes afterwards; – when the interests of two people are the same. Frank was very well as a lover."

"Don't I remember it?"

"You were a child."

"I was fifteen; and don't I remember how all the world used to change for you when he was coming? There wasn't a ribbon you wore but you wore it for him; you dressed yourself in his eyes; you lived by his thoughts."

"That was all after I was engaged. If you would accept Harry Gilmore, you would do just the same."

"I must be sure that it would be so. I am now almost sure that it would not."

"And why do you want to go home?"

"That he may not be pestered by having me near him. I think it will be better for him that I should go."

"And he is to ask you again?"

"He says that he will – in three months. But you should tell him that it will be better that he should not. I would advise him to travel, – if I were his friend, like you."

"And leave all his duties, and his pleasures, and his house, and his property, because of your face and figure, my dear! I don't think any woman is worth so much to a man."

Mary bit her lips in sorrow for what she had said. "I was thinking of his own speech about himself, Janet, not of my worth. It does not astonish you more than it does me that such a man as Mr. Gilmore should be perplexed in spirit for such a cause. But he says that he is perplexed."

"Of course he is perplexed, and of course I was in joke. Only it does seem so hard upon him! I should like to shake you till you fell into his arms. I know it would be best for you. You will go on examining your own feelings and doubting about your heart, and waiting for something that will never come till you will have lost your time. That is the way old maids are made. If you married Harry, by the time your first child was born you would think that he was Jupiter, – just as I think that Frank is."

Mrs. Fenwick owned, however, that as matters stood at present, it would be best that Mary should return home; and letters were written that afternoon to say that she would be at Loring by the middle of next week.

The Vicar was not seen till dinner-time, and then he came home in considerable perplexity of spirit. It was agreed between the two women that the fate of Harry Gilmore, as far as it had been decided, should be told to Mr. Fenwick by his wife; and she, though she was vexed, and almost angry with Mary, promised to make the best of it.

"She'll lose him at last; that'll be the end of it," said the parson, as he scoured his face with a towel after washing it.

"I never saw a man so much in love in my life," said Mrs. Fenwick.

"But iron won't remain long at red heat," said he. "What she says herself would be the best for him. He'll break up and go away for a time, and then, when he comes back, there'll be somebody else. She'll live to repent it."

"When she's away from him there may be a change."

"Fiddlestick!" said the parson.

Mary, when she met him before dinner, could see that he was angry with her, but she bore it with the utmost meekness. She believed of herself that she was much to blame in that she could not fall in love with Harry Gilmore. Mrs. Fenwick had also asked a question or two about Sam Brattle during the dressing of her husband; but he had declined to say anything on that subject till they two should be secluded together for the night.

CHAPTER V. THE MILLER

Mr. Fenwick reached Brattle's mill about two o'clock in the day. During the whole morning, while saying comfortable words to old women, and gently rebuking young maidens, he had been thinking of Sam Brattle and his offences. He had not been in the parish very long, not over five or six years, but he had been there long enough to see Sam grow out of boyhood into manhood; and at his first coming to the parish, for the first two or three years, the lad had been a favourite with him. Young Brattle could run well, leap well, fish well, and do a good turn of work about his father's mill. And he could also read and write, and cast accounts, and was a clever fellow. The parson, though he had tried his hand with energy at making the man, had, perhaps, done something towards marring him; and it may be that some feeling of this was on Mr. Fenwick's conscience. A gentleman's favourite in a country village, when of Sam Brattle's age, is very apt to be spoiled by the kindness that is shown to him. Sam had spent many a long afternoon fishing with the parson, but those fishing days were now more than two years gone by. It had been understood that Sam was to assist his father at the mill; and much good advice as to his trade the lad had received from Mr. Fenwick. There ought to be no more fishing for the young miller, except on special holiday occasions, – no more fishing, at least, during the hours required for milling purposes. So Mr. Fenwick had said frequently. Nevertheless the old miller attributed his son's idleness in great part to the parson's conduct, and he had so told the parson more than once. Of late Sam Brattle had certainly not been a good son, had neglected his work, disobeyed his father, and brought trouble on a household which had much suffering to endure independently of that which he might bring upon it.

Jacob Brattle was a man at this time over sixty-five years of age, and every year of the time had been spent in that mill. He had never known another occupation or another home, and had very rarely slept under another roof. He had married the daughter of a neighbouring farmer, and had had some twelve or fourteen children. There were at this time six still living. He himself had ever been a hardworking, sober, honest man. But he was cross-grained, litigious, moody, and tyrannical. He held his mill and about a hundred acres of adjoining meadow land at a rent in which no account was taken either of the building or of the mill privileges attached to it. He paid simply for the land at a rate per acre, which, as both he and his landlord well knew, would make it acceptable on the same terms to any farmer in the parish; and neither for his mill, nor for his land, had he any lease, nor had his father or his grandfather had leases before him. Though he was a clever man in his way, he hardly knew what a lease was. He doubted whether his landlord could dispossess him as long as he paid his rent, but he was not sure. But of this he thought he was sure, – that were Mr. Gilmore to attempt to do such a thing, all Wiltshire would cry out against the deed, and probably the heavens would fall and crush the doer. He was a man with an unlimited love of justice; but the justice which he loved best was justice to himself. He brooded over injuries done to him, – injuries real or fancied, – till he taught himself to wish that all who hurt him might be crucified for the hurt they did to him. He never forgot, and never wished to forgive. If any prayer came from him, it was a prayer that his own heart might be so hardened that when vengeance came in his way he might take it without stint against the trespasser of the moment. And yet he was not a cruel man. He would almost despise himself, because when the moment for vengeance did come, he would abstain from vengeance. He would dismiss a disobedient servant with curses which would make one's hair stand on end, and would hope within his heart of hearts that before the end of the next week the man with his wife and children might be in the poorhouse. When the end of the next week came, he would send the wife meat, and would give the children bread, and would despise himself for doing so. In matters of religion he was an old Pagan, going to no place of worship, saying no

prayer, believing in no creed, – with some vague idea that a supreme power would bring him right at last, if he worked hard, robbed no one, fed his wife and children, and paid his way. To pay his way was the pride of his heart; to be paid on his way was its joy.

In that matter of his quarrel with his landlord he was very bitter. The Squire's father some fifteen years since had given to the miller a verbal promise that the house and mill should be repaired. The old Squire had not been a good man of business, and had gone on with his tenants very much as he had found them, without looking much into the position of each. But he had, no doubt, said something that amounted to a promise on his own account as to these repairs. He had died soon after, and the repairs had not been effected. A year after his death an application, – almost a demand, – was made upon our Squire by the miller, and the miller had been wrathful even when the Squire said that he would look into it. The Squire did look into it, and came to the conclusion that as he received no rent at all for the house and mill, and as his own property would be improved if the house and mill were made to vanish, and as he had no evidence whatever of any undertaking on his father's part, as any such promise on his father's part must simply have been a promise of a gift of money out of his own pocket, and further as the miller was impudent, he would not repair the mill. Ultimately he offered £20 towards the repairs, which the miller indignantly refused. Readers will be able to imagine how pretty a quarrel there would thus be between the landlord and his tenant. When all this was commencing, – at the time, that is, of the old Squire's death, – Brattle had the name of being a substantial person; but misfortune had come upon him; doctors' bills had been very heavy, his children had drained his resources from him, and it was now known that it set him very hard to pay his way. In regard to the house and the mill, some absolutely essential repairs had been done at his own costs; but the £20 had never been taken.

In some respects the man's fortune in life had been good. His wife was one of those loving, patient, self-denying, almost heavenly human beings, one or two of whom may come across one's path, and who, when found, are generally found in that sphere of life to which this woman belonged. Among the rich there is that difficulty of the needle's eye; among the poor there is the difficulty of the hardness of their lives. And the miller loved this woman with a perfect love. He hardly knew that he loved her as he did. He could be harsh to her and tyrannical. He could say cutting words to her. But at any time in his life he would have struck over the head, with his staff, another man who should have said a word to hurt her. They had lost many children; but of the six who remained, there were four of whom they might be proud. The eldest was a farmer, married and away, doing well in a far part of the county, beyond Salisbury, on the borders of Hampshire. The father in his emergencies had almost been tempted to ask his son for money; but hitherto he had refrained. A daughter was married to a tradesman at Warminster, and was also doing well. A second son who had once been sickly and weak, was a scholar in his way, and was now a schoolmaster, also at Warminster, and in great repute with the parson of the parish there. There was a second daughter, Fanny, at home, a girl as good as gold, the glory and joy and mainstay of her mother, whom even the miller could not scold, – whom all Bullhampton loved. But she was a plain girl, brown, and somewhat hard-visaged; – a morsel of fruit as sweet as any in the garden, but one that the eye would not select for its outside grace, colour, and roundness. Then there were the two younger. Of Sam, the youngest of all, who was now twenty-one, something has already been said. Between him and Fanny there was, – perhaps it will be better to say there had been, – another daughter. Of all the flock Carry had been her father's darling. She had not been brown or hard-visaged. She was such a morsel of fruit as men do choose, when allowed to range and pick through the whole length of the garden wall. Fair she had been, with laughing eyes, and floating curls; strong in health, generous in temper, though now and again with something of her father's humour. To her mother's eye she had never been as sweet as Fanny; but to her father she had been as bright and beautiful as the harvest moon. Now she was a thing, somewhere, never to be mentioned! Any man who would have named her to her father's ears, would have encountered instantly the force of his wrath. This was so

well known in Bullhampton that there was not one who would dare to suggest to him even that she might be saved. But her mother prayed for her daily, and her father thought of her always. It was a great lump upon him, which he must bear to his grave; and for which there could be no release. He did not know whether it was his mind, his heart, or his body that suffered. He only knew that it was there, – a load that could never be lightened. What comfort was it to him now, that he had beaten a miscreant to death's door – that he, with his old hands, had nearly torn the wretch limb from limb – that he had left him all but lifeless, and had walked off scatheless, nobody daring to put a finger on him? The man had been pieced up by some doctor, and was away in Asia, in Africa, in America – soldiering somewhere. He had been a lieutenant in those days, and was probably a lieutenant still. It was nothing to old Brattle where he was. Had he been able to drink the fellow's blood to the last drop, it would not have lightened his load an ounce. He knew that it was so now. Nothing could lighten it; – not though an angel could come and tell him that his girl was a second Magdalen. The Brattles had ever held up their heads. The women, at least, had always been decent.

Jacob Brattle, himself, was a low, thickset man, with an appearance of great strength, which was now submitting itself, very slowly, to the hand of time. He had sharp green eyes, and shaggy eyebrows, with thin lips, and a square chin, a nose which, though its shape was aquiline, protruded but little from his face. His forehead was low and broad, and he was seldom seen without a flat hat upon his head. His hair and very scanty whiskers were gray; but, then too, he was gray from head to foot. The colour of his trade had so clung to him, that no one could say whether that grayish whiteness of his face came chiefly from meal or from sorrow. He was a silent, sad, meditative man, thinking always of the evil things that had been done to him.

CHAPTER VI. BRATTLE'S MILL

When Mr. Fenwick reached the mill, he found old Brattle sitting alone on a fixed bench in front of the house door with a pipe in his mouth. Mary Lowther was quite right in saying that the mill, in spite of its dilapidations, – perhaps by reason of them, – was as pretty as anything in Bullhampton. In the first place it was permeated and surrounded by cool, bright, limpid little streams. One of them ran right through it, as it were, passing between the dwelling-house and the mill, and turning the wheel, which was there placed. This course was, no doubt, artificial, and the water ran more rapidly in it than it did in the neighbouring streamlets. There were sluice-gates, too, by which it could be altogether expelled, or kept up to this or that height; and it was a river absolutely under man's control, in which no water-god could take delight. But there were other natural streams on each side of the building, the one being the main course of the Avon, and the other some offspring of a brooklet, which joined its parent two hundred yards below, and fifty yards from the spot at which the ill-used working water was received back into its mother's idle bosom. Mill and house were thatched, and were very low. There were garrets in the roof, but they were so shaped that they could hardly be said to have walls to them at all, so nearly were they contained by the sloping roof. In front of the building there ran a road, – which after all was no more than a private lane. It crossed the smaller stream and the mill-run by two wooden bridges; but the river itself had been too large for the bridge-maker's efforts, and here there was a ford, with stepping-stones for foot passengers. The banks on every side were lined with leaning willows, which had been pollarded over and over again, and which with their light-green wavy heads gave the place, from a distance, the appearance of a grove. There was a little porch in front of the house, and outside of that a fixed seat, with a high back, on which old Brattle was sitting when the parson accosted him. He did not rise when Mr. Fenwick addressed him; but he intended no want of courtesy by not doing so. He was on his legs at business during nearly the whole of the day, and why should he not rest his old limbs during the few mid-day minutes which he allowed himself for recreation?

"I thought I should catch you idle just at this moment," said the clergyman.

"Like enough, Muster Fenwick," said the miller; "I be idle at times, no doubt."

"It would be a bad life if you did not, – and a very short one too. It's hot walking, I can tell you, Mr. Brattle. If it goes on like this, I shall want a little idle time myself, I fear. Is Sam here?"

"No, Muster Fenwick, Sam is not here."

"Nor has been this morning, I suppose?"

"He's not here now, if you're wanting him."

This the old man said in a tone that seemed to signify some offence, or at least a readiness to take offence if more were said to him about his son. The clergyman did not sit down, but stood close over the father, looking down upon him; and the miller went on with his pipe gazing into the clear blue sky.

"I do want him, Mr. Brattle." Then he stopped, and there was a pause. The miller puffed his pipe, but said not a word. "I do want him. I fear, Mr. Brattle, he's not coming to much good."

"Who said as he was? I never said so. The lad'd have been well enough if other folks would have let him be."

"I know what you mean, Mr. Brattle."

"I usually intend folks to know what I mean, Muster Fenwick. What's the good o' speaking else? If nobody hadn't a meddled with the lad, he'd been a good lad. But they did, and he ain't. That's all about it."

"You do me a great injustice, but I'm not going to argue that with you now. There would be no use in it. I've come to tell you I fear that Sam was at no good last night."

"That's like enough."

"I had better tell you the truth at once. He was about my place with two ruffians."

"And you wants to take him afore the magistrate?"

"I want nothing of the kind. I would make almost any sacrifice rather. I had him yesterday night by the collar of the coat, and I let him go free."

"If he couldn't shake himself free o' you, Muster Fenwick, without any letting in the matter, he ain't no son of mine."

"I was armed, and he couldn't. But what does that matter? What does matter is this; – that they who were with him were thoroughly bad fellows. Was he at home last night?"

"You'd better ax his mother, Muster Fenwick. The truth is, I don't care much to be talking of him at all. It's time I was in the mill, I believe. There's no one much to help me now, barring the hired man." So saying, he got up and passed into the mill without making the slightest form of salutation.

Mr. Fenwick paused for a minute, looking after the old man, and then went into the house. He knew very well that his treatment from the women would be very different to that which the miller had vouchsafed to him; but on that very account it would be difficult for him to make his communication. He had, however, known all this before he came. Old Brattle would, quite of course, be silent, suspicious, and uncivil. It had become the nature of the man to be so, and there was no help for it. But the two women would be glad to see him, – would accept his visit as a pleasure and a privilege; and on this account he found it to be very hard to say unpleasant words to them. But the unpleasant words must be spoken. Neither in duty nor in kindness could he know what he had learned last night, and be silent on this matter to the young man's family. He entered the house, and turned into the large kitchen or keeping-room on the left, in which the two women were almost always to be found. This was a spacious, square, low apartment, in which there was a long grate with various appurtenances for boiling, roasting, and baking. It was an old-fashioned apparatus, but Mrs. Brattle thought it to be infinitely more commodious than any of the newer-fangled ranges which from time to time she had been taken to see. Opposite to the fire-place there was a small piece of carpet, without which the stone floor would hardly have looked warm and comfortable. On the outer corner of this, half facing the fire, and half on one side of it, was an old oak arm-chair, made of oak throughout, but with a well-worn cushion on the seat of it, in which it was the miller's custom to sit when the work of the day was done. In this chair no one else would ever sit, unless Sam would do so occasionally, in bravado, and as a protest against his father's authority. When he did so his mother would be wretched, and his sister lately had begged him to desist from the sacrilege. Close to this was a little round deal table, on which would be set the miller's single glass of gin and water, which would be made to last out the process of his evening smoking, and the candle, by the light of which, and with the aid of a huge pair of tortoise-shell spectacles, his wife would sit and darn her husband's stockings. She also had her own peculiar chair in this corner, but she had never accustomed herself to the luxury of arms to lean on, and had no cushion for her own comfort. There were various dressers, tables, and sideboards round the room, and a multiplicity of dishes, plates, and bowls, all standing in their proper places. But though the apartment was called a kitchen, – and, in truth, the cookery for the family was done here, – there was behind it, opening out to the rear, another kitchen in which there was a great boiler, and a huge oven never now used. The necessary but unsightly doings of kitchen life were here carried on, out of view. He, indeed, would have been fastidious who would have hesitated, on any score of cleanliness or niceness, to sit and eat at the long board on which the miller's dinner was daily served, or would have found it amiss to sit at that fire and listen to the ticking of the great mahogany-cased clock, which stood in the corner of the room. On the other side of the broad opening passage Mrs. Brattle had her parlour. Doubtless this parlour added something to the few joys of her life; though how it did so, or why

she should have rejoiced in it, it would be very difficult to say. She never entered it except for the purpose of cleaning and dusting. But it may be presumed that it was a glory to her to have a room carpeted, with six horsehair chairs, and a round table, and a horsehair sofa, and an old mirror over the fireplace, and a piece of worsted-work done by her daughter and framed like a picture, hanging up on one of the walls. But there must have come from it, we should say, more of regret than of pleasure; for when that room was first furnished, under her own auspices, and when those horsehair chairs were bought with a portion of her own modest dowry, doubtless she had intended that these luxuries should be used by her and hers. But they never had been so used. The day for using them had never come. Her husband never, by any chance, entered the apartment. To him probably, even in his youth, it had been a woman's gewgaw, useless, but allowable as tending to her happiness. Now the door was never even opened before his eye. His last interview with Carry had been in that room, – when he had laid his curse upon her, and bade her begone before his return, so that his decent threshold should be no longer polluted by her vileness.

On this side of the house there was a cross passage, dividing the front rooms from the back. At the end of this, looking to the front so as to have the parlour between it and the house-door, was the chamber in which slept Brattle and his wife. Here all those children had been born who had brought upon the household so many joys and so much sorrow. And behind, looking to the back on to the little plot of vegetables which was called the garden, – a plot in which it seemed that cabbages and gooseberry bushes were made to alternate, – there was a large store-room, and the chamber in which Fanny slept, – now alone, but which she had once shared with four sisters. Carry was the last one that had left her; and now Fanny hardly dared to name the word sister above her breath. She could speak, indeed, of Sister Jay, the wife of the prosperous ironmonger at Warminster; but of sisters by their Christian names no mention was ever made.

Upstairs there were garrets, one of which was inhabited by Sam, when he chose to reside at home; and another by the red-armed country lass, who was maid-of-all-work at Brattle Mill. When it has also been told that below the cabbage-plot there was an orchard, stretching down to the junction of the waters, the description of Brattle Mill will have been made.

CHAPTER VII. THE MILLER'S WIFE

When Mr. Fenwick entered the kitchen, Mrs. Brattle was sitting there alone. Her daughter was away, disposing of the remnants and utensils of the dinner-table. The old lady, with her spectacles on her nose, was sitting as usual with a stocking over her left arm. On the round table was a great open Bible, and, lying on the Bible, were sundry large worsted hose, which always seemed to Mr. Fenwick as though they must have undarned themselves as quickly as they were darned. Her Bible and her stockings furnished the whole of Mrs. Brattle's occupation from her dinner to her bed. In the morning, she would still occupy herself in matters of cookery, would peel potatoes, and prepare apples for puddings, and would look into the pot in which the cabbage was being boiled. But her stockings and her Bible shared together the afternoons of her week-days. On the Sundays there would only be the Bible, and then she would pass many hours of the day asleep. On every other Sunday morning she still walked to church and back, – going there always alone. There was no one now to accompany her. Her husband never went, – never had gone, – to church, and her son now had broken away from his good practices. On alternate mornings Fanny went, and also on every Sunday afternoon. Wet or dry, storm or sunshine, she always went; and her father, who was an old Pagan, loved her for her zeal. Mrs. Brattle was a slight-made old woman, with hair almost white peering out modestly from under her clean cap, dressed always in a brown stuff gown that never came down below her ankle. Her features were still pretty, small, and *débonnaire*, and there was a sweetness in her eyes that no observer could overlook. She was a modest, pure, high-minded woman, – whom we will not call a lady, because of her position in life, and because she darned stockings in a kitchen. In all other respects she deserved the name.

"I heard your voice outside with the master," she said, rising from her chair to answer the parson's salutation, and putting down her stockings first, and then her spectacles upon the book, so that the Bible was completely hidden; "and I knew you would not go without saying a word to the old woman."

"I believe I came mostly to see you to-day, Mrs. Brattle."

"Did you then? It's kind of you, I'm sure, Mr. Fenwick, this hot weather, – and you with so many folk to mind too. Will you take an apple, Mr. Fenwick? I don't know that we've anything else to offer, but the quarantines are rare this year, they say; – though, no doubt, you have them better at the Vicarage?"

Fenwick took a large, red apple from the dresser, and began to munch, it, declaring that they had none such in their orchard. And then, when the apple was finished, he had to begin his story.

"Mrs. Brattle, I'm sorry that I have something to say that will vex you."

"Eh, Mr. Fenwick! Bad news? 'Deed and I think there's but little good news left to us now, – little that comes from the tongues of men. It's bad news that is always coming here. Mr. Fenwick, – what is it, sir?"

Then he repeated the question he had before put to the miller about Sam. Where was Sam last night? – She only shook her head. Did he sleep at home? – She shook her head again. Had he breakfasted at home?

"'Deed no, sir. I haven't set eyes on him since before yesterday."

"But how does he live? His father does not give him money, I suppose?"

"There's little enough to give him, Mr. Fenwick. When he is at the mill his father do pay him a some'at over and above his keep. It isn't much, sir. Young men must have a some'at in their pockets at times."

"He has too much in his pockets, I fear. I wish he had nothing, so that he needs must come home for his meals. He works at the mill, doesn't he?"

"At times, sir; and there isn't a lad in all Bullumpton," – for so the name was ordinarily pronounced, – "who can do a turn of work to beat him."

"Do he and his father agree pretty well?"

"At times, sir. Times again his father don't say much to him. The master ain't given to much talking in the mill, and Sam, when he's there, works with a will. There's times when his father softens down to him, and then to see 'em, you'd think they was all in all to each other. There's a stroke of the master about Sam hisself, at times, Mr. Fenwick, and the old man's eyes gladden to see it. There's none so near his heart now as poor Sam."

"If he were as honest a man as his father, I could forgive all the rest," said Mr. Fenwick slowly, meaning to imply that he was not there now to complain of church observances neglected, or of small irregularities of life. The paganism of the old miller had often been the subject of converse between the parson and Mrs. Brattle, it being a matter on which she had many an unhappy thought. He, groping darkly among subjects which he hardly dared to touch in her presence lest he should seem to unteach that in private which he taught in public, had subtly striven to make her believe that though she, through her faith, would be saved, he, the husband, might yet escape that doom of everlasting fire, which to her was so stern a reality that she thought of its fury with a shudder whenever she heard of the world's wickedness. When Parson Fenwick had first made himself intimate at the mill Mrs. Brattle had thought that her husband's habits of life would have been to him as wormwood and gall, – that he would be unable not to chide, and well she knew that her husband would bear no chiding. By degrees she had come to understand that this new parson was one who talked more of life with its sorrows, and vices, and chances of happiness, and possibilities of goodness, than he did of the requirements of his religion. For herself inwardly she had grieved at this, and, possibly, also for him; but, doubtless, there had come to her some comfort, which she did not care to analyse, from the manner in which "the master," as she called him, Pagan as he was, had been treated by her clergyman. She wondered that it should be so, but yet it was a relief to her to know that God's messenger should come to her, and yet say never a word of his message to that hard lord, whom she so feared and so loved, and who was, as she well knew, too stubborn to receive it. And Fenwick had spoken, – still spoke to her, so tenderly of her erring, fallen child, never calling her a castaway, talking of her as Carry, who might yet be worthy of happiness here and of all joy hereafter; that when she thought of him as a minister of God, whose duty it was to pronounce God's threats to erring human beings, she was almost alarmed. She could hardly understand his leniency, – his abstinence from reproof; but entertained a vague, wandering, unformed wish that, as he never opened the vials of his wrath on them, he would pour it out upon her, – on her who would bear it for their sake so meekly. If there was such a wish it was certainly doomed to disappointment. At this moment Fanny came in and curtsied as she gave her hand to the parson.

"Was Sam at home last night, Fan?" asked the mother, in a sad, low voice.

"Yes, mother. He slept in his bed."

"You are sure?" said the parson.

"Quite sure. I heard him this morning as he went out. It was about five. He spoke to me, and I answered him."

"What did he say?"

"That he must go over to Lavington, and wouldn't be home till nightfall. I told him where he would find bread and cheese, and he took it."

"But you didn't see him last night?"

"No, sir. He comes in at all hours, when he pleases. He was at dinner before yesterday, but I haven't seen him since. He didn't go nigh the mill after dinner that day."

Then Mr. Fenwick considered how much he would tell to the mother and sister, and how much he would keep back. He did not in his heart believe that Sam Brattle had intended to enter his house and rob it; but he did believe that the men with whom Sam was associated were thieves and housebreakers. If these men were prowling about Bullhampton it was certainly his duty to have them arrested if possible, and to prevent probable depredations, for his neighbours' sake as well as for his own. Nor would he be justified in neglecting this duty with the object of saving Sam Brattle. If only he could entice Sam away from them, into his own hands, under the power of his tongue, – there might probably be a chance.

"You think he'll be home to-night?" he asked.

"He said he would," replied Fanny, who knew that she could not answer for her brother's word.

"If he does, bid him come to me. Make him come to me! Tell him that I will do him no harm. God knows how truly it is my object to do him good."

"We are sure of that, sir," said the mother.

"He need not be afraid that I will preach to him. I will only talk to him, as I would to a younger brother."

"But what is it that he has done, sir?"

"He has done nothing that I know. There; – I will tell you the whole. I found him prowling about my garden at near midnight, yesterday. Had he been alone I should have thought nothing of it. He thinks he owes me a grudge for speaking to his father; and had I found him paying it by filling his pockets with fruit, I should only have told him that it would be better that he should come and take it in the morning."

"But he wasn't – stealing?" asked the mother.

"He was doing nothing; neither were the men. But they were blackguards, and he was in bad hands. He could not have been in worse. I had a tussle with one of them, and I am sure the man was hurt. That, however, has nothing to do with it. What I desire is to get a hold of Sam, so that he may be rescued from the hands of such companions. If you can make him come to me, do so."

Fanny promised, and so did the mother; but the promise was given in that tone which seemed to imply that nothing should be expected from its performance. Sam had long been deaf to the voices of the women of his family, and, when his father's anger would be hot against him, he would simply go, and live where and how none of them knew. Among such men and women as the Brattles, parental authority must needs lie much lighter than it does with those who are wont to give much and to receive much. What obedience does the lad owe who at eighteen goes forth and earns his own bread? What is it to him that he has not yet reached man's estate? He has to do a man's work, and the price of it is his own, in his hands, when he has earned it. There is no curse upon the poor heavier than that which comes from the early breach of all ties of duty between fathers and their sons, and mothers and their daughters.

Mr. Fenwick, as he passed out of the miller's house, saw Jacob Brattle at the door of the mill. He was tugging along some load, pulling it in at the door, and prevailing against the weakness of his age by the force of his energy. The parson knew that the miller saw him, but the miller took no notice, – looked rather as though he did not wish to be observed, – and so the parson went on. When at home he postponed his account of what had taken place till he should be alone with his wife; but at night he told her the whole story.

"The long and the short of it is, Master Sam will turn to housebreaking, if somebody doesn't get hold of him."

"To housebreaking, Frank?"

"I believe that he is about it."

"And were they going to break in here?"

"I don't think he was. I don't believe he was so minded then. But he had shown them the way in, and they were looking about on their own scores. Don't you frighten yourself. What with the constable and the life-preserver, we'll be safe. I've a big dog coming, a second Bone'm. Sam Brattle is in more danger, I fear, than the silver forks."

But, in spite of the cheeriness of his speech, the Vicar was anxious, and almost unhappy. After all that occurred in reference to himself and to Sam Brattle, – their former intimacies, the fish they had caught together, the rats they had killed together, the favour which he, the parson of the parish, had shown to this lad, and especially after the evil things which had been said of himself because of this friendship on his part for one so much younger than himself, and so much his inferior in rank, – it would be to him a most grievous misfortune should he be called upon to acknowledge publicly Sam Brattle's iniquity, and more grievous still, if the necessity should be forced upon him of bringing Sam to open punishment. Fenwick knew well that diverse accusations had been made against him in the parish regarding Sam. The Marquis of Trowbridge had said a word. Mr. Puddleham had said many words. The old miller himself had growled. Even Gilmore had expressed disapprobation. The Vicar, in his pride, had turned a deaf ear to them all. He began to fear now that possibly he had been wrong in the favours shown to Sam Brattle.

CHAPTER VIII. THE LAST DAY

The parson's visit to the mill was on a Saturday. The next Sunday passed by very quietly, and nothing was seen of Mr. Gilmore at the Vicarage. He was at church, and walked with the two ladies from the porch to their garden gate, but he declined Mrs. Fenwick's invitation to lunch, and was not seen again on that day. The parson had sent word to Fanny Brattle during the service to stop a few minutes for him, and had learned from her that Sam had not been at home last night. He had also learned, before the service that morning, that very early on the Saturday, probably about four o'clock, two men had passed through Paul's Hinton with a huxter's cart and a pony. Now Paul's Hinton, or Hinton Saint Paul's as it should be properly called, was a long straggling village, six miles from Bullhampton, and half-way on the road to Market Lavington, to which latter place Sam had told his sister that he was going. Putting these things together, Mr. Fenwick did not in the least doubt but the two men in the cart were they who had been introduced to his garden by young Brattle.

"I only hope," said the parson, "that there's a good surgeon at Market Lavington. One of the gentlemen in that cart must have wanted him, I take it." Then he thought that it might, perhaps, be worth his while to trot over to Lavington in the course of the week, and make inquiries.

On the Wednesday Mary Lowther was to go back to Loring. This seemed like a partial break-up of their establishment, both to the parson and his wife. Fenwick had made up his mind that Mary was to be his nearest neighbour for life, and had fallen into the way of treating her accordingly, telling her of things in the parish as he might have done to the Squire's wife, presuming the Squire's wife to have been on the best possible terms with him. He now regarded Mary as being almost an impostor. She had taken him in and obtained his confidence under false pretences. It was true that she might still come and fill the place that he had appointed for her. He rather thought that at last she would do so. But he was angry with her because she hesitated. She was creating an unnecessary disturbance among them. She had, he thought, been now wooed long enough, and, as he told his wife more than once, was making an ass of herself. Mrs. Fenwick was not quite so hard in her judgment, but she also was tempted to be a little angry. She loved her friend Mary a great deal better than she loved Mr. Gilmore, but she was thoroughly convinced that Mary could not do better than accept a man whom she owned that she liked, – whom she, at any rate, liked so well that she had not as yet rejected him. Therefore, although Mary was going, they were, both of them, rather savage with her.

The Monday passed by, also very quietly, and Mr. Gilmore did not come to them, but he had sent a note to tell them that he would walk down on the Tuesday evening to say good-bye to Miss Lowther. Early on the Wednesday Mr. Fenwick was to drive her to Westbury, whence the railway would take her round by Chippenham and Swindon to Loring. On the Tuesday morning she was very melancholy. Though she knew that it was right to go away, she greatly regretted that it was necessary. She was angry with herself for not having better known her own mind, and though she was quite sure that were Mr. Gilmore to repeat his offer to her that moment, she would not accept it, nevertheless she thought ill of herself because she would not do so. "I do believe," she said to herself, "that I shall never like any man better." She knew well enough that if she was never brought to love any man, she never ought to marry any man; but she was not quite sure whether Janet was not right in telling her that she had formed erroneous notions of the sort of love she ought to feel for the man whom she should resolve to accept. Perhaps it was true that that kind of adoration which Janet entertained for her husband was a feeling which came after marriage – a feeling which would spring up in her own heart as soon as she was the man's own wife, the mistress of his house, the mother of his children, the one human being for whose welfare he was solicitous beyond that

of all others. And this man did love her. She had no doubt about that. And she was unhappy, too, because she felt that she had offended his friends, and that they thought that she was not treating their friend well.

"Janet," she said, as they were again sitting out on the lawn, on that Tuesday afternoon, "I am almost sorry that I came here at all."

"Don't say that, dear."

"I have spent some of the happiest days of my life here, but the visit, on the whole, has been unfortunate. I am going away in disgrace. I feel that so acutely."

"What nonsense! How are you in disgrace?"

"Mr. Fenwick and you think that I have behaved badly. I know you do, and I feel it so strongly! I think so much of him, and believe him to be so good, and so wise, and so understanding, – he knows what people should do, and should be, so well, – that I cannot doubt that I have been wrong if he thinks so."

"He only wishes that you could have made up your mind to marry a most worthy man, who is his friend, and who, by marrying you, would have fixed you close to us. He wishes it still, and so do I."

"But he thinks that I have been – have been mopish, and lack-a-daisical, and – and – almost untrue. I can hear it in the tone of his voice, and see it in his eye. I can tell it from the way he shakes hands with me in the morning. He is such a true man that I know in a moment what he means at all times. I am going away under his displeasure, and I wish I had never come."

"Return as Mrs. Gilmore, and all his displeasure will disappear."

"Yes, because he would forgive me. He would say to himself that, as I had repented, I might be taken back to his grace; but as things are at present he condemns me. And so do you."

"If you ask me, Mary, I must tell the truth. I don't think you know your own mind."

"Suppose I don't, is that disgraceful?"

"But there comes a time when a girl should know her own mind. You are giving this poor fellow an enormous deal of unnecessary trouble."

"I have known my own mind so far as to tell him that I could not marry him."

"As far as I understand, Mary, you have always told him to wait a little longer."

"I have never asked him to wait, Janet; – never. It is he who says that he will wait; and what can I answer when he says so? All the same I don't mean to defend myself. I do believe that I have been wrong, and I wish that I had never come here. It sounds ungrateful, but I do. It is so dreadful to feel that I have incurred the displeasure of people that I love so dearly."

"There is no displeasure, Mary; the word is a good deal too strong. I wonder what you'll think of all this when the parson and his wife come up on future Sundays to dine with the Squire and his lady. I have long since made up my mind that when afternoon service is over, we ought to go up and be made much of at the Privets; and you're putting all this off till I'm an old woman – for a chimera. It's about our Sunday dinners that I'm angry. Flo, my darling, what a face you have got. Do come and sit still for a few minutes, or you'll be in a fever." While Mrs. Fenwick was wiping her girl's brow, and smoothing her ringlets, Mary walked off to the orchard by herself. There was a broad green path which made the circuit of it, and she took the round twice, pausing at the bottom to look at the spot from which she had tumbled into the river. What a trouble she had been to them all! She was thoroughly dissatisfied with herself; especially so because she had fallen into those very difficulties which from early years she had resolved that she would avoid. She had made up her mind that she would not flirt, that she would never give a right to any man – or to any woman – to call her a coquette; that if love and a husband came in her way she would take them thankfully, and that if they did not, she would go on her path quietly, if possible, feeling no uneasiness, and certainly showing none, because the joys of a married life did not belong to her. But now she had gotten herself into a mess, and she could not tell herself that it was not her own fault. Then she

resolved again that in future she would go right. It could not but be that a woman could keep herself from floundering in these messes of half-courtship, – of courtship on one side, and doubt on the other, – if she would persistently adhere to some safe rule. Her rejection of Mr. Gilmore ought to have been unhesitating and certain from the first. She was sure of that now. She had been guilty of an absurdity in supposing that because the man had been in earnest, therefore she had been justified in keeping him in suspense, for his own sake. She had been guilty of an absurdity, and also of great self-conceit. She could do nothing now but wait till she should hear from him, – and then answer him steadily. After what had passed she could not go to him and declare that it was all over. He was coming to-night, and she was nearly sure that he would not say a word to her on the subject. If he did, – if he renewed his offer, – then she would speak out. It was hardly possible that he should do so, and therefore the trouble which she had created must remain.

As she thus resolved, she was leaning over the gate looking into the churchyard, not much observing the graves or the monuments or the beautiful old ivy-covered tower, or thinking of the dead that were lying there, or of the living who prayed there; but swearing to herself that for the rest of her life she would keep clear of, what she called, girlish messes. Like other young ladies she had read much poetry and many novels; but her sympathies had never been with young ladies who could not go straight through with their love affairs, from the beginning to the end, without flirtation of either an inward or an outward nature. Of all her heroines, Rosalind was the one she liked the best, because from the first moment of her passion she knew herself and what she was about, and loved her lover right heartily. Of all girls in prose or poetry she declared that Rosalind was the least of a flirt. She meant to have the man, and never had a doubt about it. But with such a one as Flora MacIvor she had no patience; – a girl who did and who didn't, who would and who wouldn't, who could and who couldn't, and who of all flirts was to her the most nauseous! As she was taking herself to task, accusing herself of being a Flora without the poetry and romance to excuse her, Mr. Fenwick came round from Farmer Trumbull's side of the church, and got over the stile into the churchyard.

"What, Mary, is that you gazing in so intently among your brethren that were?"

"I was not thinking of them," she said, with a smile. "My mind was intent on some of my brethren that are." Then there came a thought across her, and she made a sudden decision. "Mr. Fenwick," she said, "would you mind walking up and down the churchyard with me once or twice? I have something to say to you, and I can say it now so well." He opened the gate for her, and she joined him. "I want to beg your pardon, and to get you to forgive me. I know you have been angry with me."

"Hardly angry, – but vexed. As you ask me so frankly and prettily, I will forgive you. There is my hand upon it. All evil thoughts against you shall go out of my head. I shall still have my wishes, but I will not be cross with you."

"You are so good, and so clearly honest. I declare I think Janet the happiest woman that I ever heard of."

"Come, come; I didn't bargain for this kind of thing when I allowed myself to be brought in here."

"But it is so. I did not stop you for that, however, but to acknowledge that I have been wrong, and to ask you to pardon me."

"I will. I do. If there has been anything amiss, it shall not be looked on again as amiss. But there has been only one thing amiss."

"And, Mr. Fenwick, will you do this for me? Will you tell him that I was foolish to say that he might wait? Why should he wait? Of course he should not wait. When I am gone, tell him so, and beg him to make an end of it. I had not thought of it properly, or I would not have allowed him to be tormented."

There was a pause after this, during which they walked half the length of the path in silence. "No, Mary," he said, after a while; "I will not tell him that."

"Why not, Mr. Fenwick?"

"Because it will not be for his good, or for mine, or for Janet's, or, as I believe, for yours."

"Indeed, it will, for the good of us all."

"I think, Mary, you do not quite understand. There is not one among us who does not wish that you should come here and be one of us; a real, right down Bullompton 'ooman, as they say in the village. I want you to be my wife's dearest friend, and my own nearest neighbour. There is no man in the world whom I love as I do Harry Gilmore, and I want you to be his wife. I have said to myself and to Janet a score of times that you certainly would be so sooner or later. My wrath has not come from your bidding him to wait, but from your coldness in not taking him without waiting. You should remember that we grow gray very quickly, Mary."

Here was the old story again, – the old story as she had heard it from Harry Gilmore, but told as she had never expected to hear it from the lips of Frank Fenwick. It amounted to this; that even he, Frank Fenwick, bade her wait and try. But she had formed her resolution, and she was not going to be turned aside, even by Frank Fenwick; "I had thought that you would help me," she said, very slowly.

"So I will, with all my heart, towards the keys of the store closets of the Privets, but not a step the other way. It has to be, Mary. He is too much in earnest, and too good, and too fit for the place to which he aspires, to miss his object. Come, we'll go in. Mind, you and I are one again, let it go how it may. I will own that I have been vexed for the last two days, – have been in a humour unbecoming your departure to-morrow. I throw all that behind me. You and I are dear friends, – are we not?"

"I do hope so, Mr. Fenwick?"

"There shall be no feather moulted between us. But as to operating between you and Harry, with the view of keeping you apart, I decline the commission. It is my assured belief that sooner or later he will be your husband. Now we will go up to Janet, who will begin to think herself a Penelope, if we desert her much longer."

Immediately after this Mary went up to dress for dinner. Should she make up her mind to give way, and put on the blue ribbons which he loved so well? She thought that she could tell him at once, if she made up her mind in that direction. It would not, perhaps, be very maidenly, but anything would be better than suspense, – than torment to him. Then she took out her blue ribbons, and tried to go through that ceremony of telling him. It was quite impossible. Were she to do so, she would know no happiness again in this world, or probably in the other. To do the thing, it would be necessary that she should lie to him.

She came down in a simple white dress, without any ribbons, in just the dress which she would have worn had Mr. Gilmore not been coming. At dinner they were very merry. The word of command had gone forth from Frank that Mary was to be forgiven, and Janet of course obeyed. The usual courtesies of society demand that there shall be civility – almost flattering civility – from host to guest, and from guest to host; and yet how often does it occur that in the midst of these courtesies there is something that tells of hatred, of ridicule, or of scorn! How often does it happen that the guest knows that he is disliked, or the host knows that he is a bore! In the last two days Mary had felt that she was not cordially a welcome guest. She had felt also that the reason was one against which she could not contend. Now all that, at least, was over. Frank Fenwick's manner had never been pleasanter to her than it was on this occasion, and Janet followed the suit which her lord led.

They were again on the lawn between eight and nine o'clock when Harry Gilmore came up to them. He was gracious enough in his salutation to Mary Lowther, but no indifferent person would have thought that he was her lover. He talked chiefly to Fenwick, and when they went in to tea did not take a place on the sofa beside Mary. But after a while he said something which told them all of his love.

"What do you think I've been doing to-day, Frank?"

"Getting your wheat down, I should hope."

"We begin that to-morrow. I never like to be quite the earliest at that work, or yet the latest."

"Better be a day too early than a day too late, Harry."

"Never mind about that. I've been down with old Brattle."

"And what have you been doing with him?"

"I'm half ashamed, and yet I fancy I'm right."

As he said this he looked across to Mary Lowther, who no doubt was watching every turn of his face from the corner of her eye. "I've just been and knocked under, and told him that the old place shall be put to rights."

"That's your doing, Mary," said Mrs. Fenwick, injudiciously.

"Oh, no; I'm sure it is not. Mr. Gilmore would only do such a thing as that because it is proper."

"I don't know about it's being proper," said he. "I'm not quite sure whether it is or not. I shall never get any interest for my money."

"Interest for one's money is not everything," said Mrs. Fenwick.

"Nevertheless, when one builds houses for other people to live in, one has to look to it," said the parson.

"People say it's the prettiest spot in the parish," continued Mr. Gilmore, "and as such it shouldn't be let go to ruin." Janet remarked afterwards to her husband that Mary Lowther had certainly declared that it was the prettiest spot in the parish, but that, as far as her knowledge went, nobody else had ever said so. "And then, you see, when I refused to spend money upon it, old Brattle had money of his own, and it was his business to do it."

"He hasn't much now, I fear," said Mr. Fenwick.

"I fear not. His family has been very heavy on him. He paid money to put two of his boys into trade who died afterwards, and then for years he had either doctors or undertakers about the place. So I just went down to him and told him I would do it."

"And how did he take it?"

"Like a bear, as he is. He would hardly speak to me, but went away into the mill, telling me that I might settle it all with his wife. It's going to be done, however. I shall have the estimate next week, and I suppose it will cost me two or three hundred pounds. The mill is worse than the house, I take it."

"I am so glad it is to be done," said Mary. After that Mr. Gilmore did not in the least begrudge his two or three hundred pounds. But he said not a word to Mary, just pressed her hand at parting, and left her subject to a possibility of a reversal of her sentence at the end of the stated period.

On the next morning Mr. Fenwick drove her in his little open phaeton to the station at Westbury. "You are to come back to us, you know," said Mrs. Fenwick, "and remember how anxiously I am waiting for my Sunday dinners." Mary said not a word, but as she was driven round in front of the church she looked up at the dear old tower, telling herself that, in all probability, she would never see it again.

"I have just one thing to say, Mary," said the parson, as he walked up and down the platform with her at Westbury; "you are to remember that, whatever happens, there is always a home for you at Bullhampton when you choose to come to it. I am not speaking of the Privets now, but of the Vicarage."

"How very good you are to me!"

"And so are you to us. Dear friends should be good to each other. God bless you, dear." From thence she made her way home to Loring by herself.

CHAPTER IX. MISS MARRABLE

Whatever may be the fact as to the rank and proper calling of Bullhampton, there can be no doubt that Loring is a town. There is a market-place, and a High Street, and a Board of Health, and a Paragon Crescent, and a Town Hall, and two different parish churches, one called St. Peter Lowtown, and the other St. Botolph's Uphill, and there are Uphill Street, and Lowtown Street, and various other streets. I never heard of a mayor of Loring, but, nevertheless, there is no doubt as to its being a town. Nor did it ever return members to Parliament; but there was once, in one of the numerous bills that have been proposed, an idea of grouping it with Cirencester and Lechlade. All the world of course knows that this was never done; but the transient rumour of it gave the Loringites an improved position, and justified that little joke about a live dog being better than a dead lion, with which the parson at Bullhampton regaled Miss Lowther at the time.

All the fashion of Loring dwelt, as a matter of course, at Uphill. Lowtown was vulgar, dirty, devoted to commercial and manufacturing purposes, and hardly owned a single genteel private house. There was the parsonage, indeed, which stood apart from its neighbours, inside great tall slate-coloured gates, and which had a garden of its own. But except the clergyman, who had no choice in the matter, nobody who was anybody lived at Lowtown. There were three or four factories there, – in and out of which troops of girls would be seen passing twice a day, in their ragged, soiled, dirty mill dresses, all of whom would come out on Sunday dressed with a magnificence that would lead one to suppose that trade at Loring was doing very well. Whether trade did well or ill, whether wages were high or low, whether provisions were cheap in price, whether there were peace or war between capital and labour, still there was the Sunday magnificence. What a blessed thing it is for women, – and for men too certainly, – that there should be a positive happiness to the female sex in the possession, and in exhibiting the possession, of bright clothing! It is almost as good for the softening of manners, and the not permitting of them to be ferocious, as is the faithful study of the polite arts. At Loring the manners of the mill hands, as they were called, were upon the whole good, – which I believe was in a great degree to be attributed to their Sunday magnificence.

The real West-end of Loring was understood by all men to lie in Paragon Crescent, at the back of St. Botolph's Church. The whole of this Crescent was built, now some twenty years ago, by Mrs. Fenwick's father, who had been clever enough to see that as mills were made to grow in the low town, houses for wealthy people to live in ought to be made to grow in the high town. He therefore built the Paragon, and a certain small row of very pretty houses near the end of the Paragon, called Balfour Place, – and had done very well, and had made money; and now lay asleep in the vaults below St. Botolph's Church. No inconsiderable proportion of the comfort of Bullhampton parsonage is due to Mr. Balfour's success in that achievement of Paragon Crescent. There were none of the family left at Loring. The widow had gone away to live at Torquay with a sister, and the only other child, another daughter, was married to that distinguished barrister on the Oxford circuit, Mr. Quickenham. Mr. Quickenham and our friend the parson were very good friends; but they did not see a great deal of each other, Mr. Fenwick not going up very often to London, and Mr. Quickenham being unable to use the Vicarage of Bullhampton when on his own circuit. As for the two sisters, they had very strong ideas about their husbands' professions; Sophia Quickenham never hesitating to declare that one was life, and the other stagnation; and Janet Fenwick protesting that the difference to her seemed to be almost that between good and evil. They wrote to each other perhaps once a quarter. But the Balfour family was in truth broken up.

Miss Marrable, Mary Lowther's aunt, lived, of course, at Uphill; but not in the Crescent, nor yet in Balfour Place. She was an old lady with very modest means, whose brother had been rector

down at St. Peter's, and she had passed the greatest part of her life within those slate-coloured gates. When he died, and when she, almost exactly at the same time, found that it would be expedient that she should take charge of her niece, Mary, she removed herself up to a small house in Botolph Lane, in which she could live decently on her £300 a year. It must not be surmised that Botolph Lane was a squalid place, vile, or dirty, or even unfashionable. It was narrow and old, having been inhabited by decent people long before the Crescent, or even Mr. Balfour himself, had been in existence; but it was narrow and old, and the rents were cheap, and here Miss Marrable was able to live, and occasionally to give tea-parties, and to provide a comfortable home for her niece, within the limits of her income. Miss Marrable was herself a lady of very good family, the late Sir Gregory Marrable having been her uncle; but her only sister had married a Captain Lowther, whose mother had been first cousin to the Earl of Periwinkle; and therefore on her own account, as well as on that of her niece, Miss Marrable thought a good deal about blood. She was one of those ladies, – now few in number, – who within their heart of hearts conceive that money gives no title to social distinction, let the amount of money be ever so great, and its source ever so stainless. Rank to her was a thing quite assured and ascertained, and she had no more doubt as to her own right to pass out of a room before the wife of a millionaire than she had of the right of a millionaire to spend his own guineas. She always addressed an attorney by letter as Mister, raising up her eyebrows when appealed to on the matter, and explaining that an attorney is not an esquire. She had an idea that the son of a gentleman, if he intended to maintain his rank as a gentleman, should earn his income as a clergyman, or as a barrister, or as a soldier, or as a sailor. Those were the professions intended for gentlemen. She would not absolutely say that a physician was not a gentleman, or even a surgeon; but she would never allow to physic the same absolute privileges which, in her eyes, belonged to law and the church. There might also possibly be a doubt about the Civil Service and Civil Engineering; but she had no doubt whatever that when a man touched trade or commerce in any way he was doing that which was not the work of a gentleman. He might be very respectable, and it might be very necessary that he should do it; but brewers, bankers, and merchants, were not gentlemen, and the world, according to Miss Marrable's theory, was going astray, because people were forgetting their landmarks.

As to Miss Marrable herself nobody could doubt that she was a lady; she looked it in every inch. There were not, indeed, many inches of her, for she was one of the smallest, daintiest, little old women that ever were seen. But now, at seventy, she was very pretty, quite a woman to look at with pleasure. Her feet and hands were exquisitely made, and she was very proud of them. She wore her own grey hair of which she showed very little, but that little was always exquisitely nice. Her caps were the perfection of caps. Her green eyes were bright and sharp, and seemed to say that she knew very well how to take care of herself. Her mouth, and nose, and chin, were all well-formed, small, shapely, and concise, not straggling about her face as do the mouths, noses, and chins of some old ladies – ay, and of some young ladies also. Had it not been that she had lost her teeth, she would hardly have looked to be an old woman. Her health was perfect. She herself would say that she had never yet known a day's illness. She dressed with the greatest care, always wearing silk at and after luncheon. She dressed three times a day, and in the morning would come down in what she called a merino gown. But then, with her, clothes never seemed to wear out. Her motions were so slight and delicate, that the gloss of her dresses would remain on them when the gowns of other women would almost have been worn to rags. She was never seen of an afternoon or evening without gloves, and her gloves were always clean and apparently new. She went to church once on Sundays in winter, and twice in summer, and she had a certain very short period of each day devoted to Bible reading; but at Loring she was not reckoned to be among the religious people. Indeed, there were those who said that she was very worldly-minded, and that at her time of life she ought to devote herself to other books than those which were daily in her hands. Pope, Dryden, Swift, Cowley, Fielding, Richardson, and Goldsmith, were her authors. She read the new novels as

they came out, but always with critical comparisons that were hostile to them. Fielding, she said, described life as it was; whereas Dickens had manufactured a kind of life that never had existed, and never could exist. The pathos of Esmond was very well, but Lady Castlemaine was nothing to Clarissa Harlowe. As for poetry, Tennyson, she said, was all sugar-candy; he had neither the common sense, nor the wit, nor, as she declared, to her ear the melody of Pope. All the poets of the present century, she declared, if put together, could not have written the Rape of the Lock. Pretty as she was, and small, and nice, and lady-like, I think she liked her literature rather strong. It is certain that she had Smollett's novels in a cupboard up-stairs, and it was said that she had been found reading one of Wycherley's plays.

The strongest point in her character was her contempt of money. Not that she had any objection to it, or would at all have turned up her nose at another hundred a year had anybody left to her such an accession of income; but that in real truth she never measured herself by what she possessed, or others by what they possessed. She was as grand a lady to herself, eating her little bit of cold mutton, or dining off a tiny sole, as though she sat at the finest banquet that could be spread. She had no fear of economies, either before her two handmaids or anybody else in the world. She was fond of her tea, and in summer could have cream for twopence; but when cream became dear, she saved money and had a pen'north of milk. She drank two glasses of Marsala every day, and let it be clearly understood that she couldn't afford sherry. But when she gave a tea-party, as she did, perhaps, six or seven times a year, sherry was always handed round with cake before the people went away. There were matters in which she was extravagant. When she went out herself she never took one of the common street flies, but paid eighteen pence extra to get a brougham from the Dragon. And when Mary Lowther, – who had only fifty pounds a year of her own, with which she clothed herself and provided herself with pocket-money, – was going to Bullhampton, Miss Marrable actually proposed to her to take one of the maids with her. Mary, of course, would not hear of it, and said that she should just as soon think of taking the house; but Miss Marrable had thought that it would, perhaps, not be well for a girl so well-born as Miss Lowther to go out visiting without a maid. She herself very rarely left Loring, because she could not afford it; but when, two summers back, she did go to Weston-super-Mare for a fortnight, she took one of the girls with her.

Miss Marrable had heard a great deal about Mr. Gilmore. Mary, indeed, was not inclined to keep secrets from her aunt, and her very long absence, – so much longer than had at first been intended, – could hardly have been sanctioned unless some reason had been given. There had been many letters on the subject, not only between Mary and her aunt, but between Mrs. Fenwick and her very old friend Miss Marrable. Of course these latter letters had spoken loudly the praises of Mr. Gilmore, and Miss Marrable had become quite one of the Gilmore faction. She desired that her niece should marry; but that she should marry a gentleman. She would have infinitely preferred to see Mary an old maid, than to hear that she was going to give herself to any suitor contaminated by trade. Now Mr. Gilmore's position was exactly that which Miss Marrable regarded as being the best in England. He was a country gentleman, living on his own acres, a justice of the peace, whose father and grandfather and great-grandfather had occupied exactly the same position. Such a marriage for Mary would be quite safe; and in those days one did hear so often of girls making, she would not say improper marriages, but marriages which in her eyes were not fitting! Mr. Gilmore, she thought, exactly filled that position which entitled a gentleman to propose marriage to such a lady as Mary Lowther.

"Yes, my dear, I am glad to have you back again. Of course I have been a little lonely, but I bear that kind of thing better than most people. Thank God, my eyes are good."

"You are looking so well, Aunt Sarah!"

"I am well. I don't know how other women get so much amiss; but God has been very good to me."

"And so pretty," said Mary, kissing her.

"My dear, it's a pity you're not a young gentleman."

"You are so fresh and nice, aunt. I wish I could always look as you do."

"What would Mr. Gilmore say?"

"Oh, Mr. Gilmore, Mr. Gilmore, Mr. Gilmore! I am so weary of Mr. Gilmore."

"Weary of him, Mary?"

"Weary of myself because of him – that is what I mean. He has behaved always well, and I am not at all sure that I have. And he is a perfect gentleman. But I shall never be Mrs. Gilmore, Aunt Sarah."

"Janet says that she thinks you will."

"Janet is mistaken. But, dear aunt, don't let us talk about it at once. Of course you shall hear everything in time, but I have had so much of it. Let us see what new books there are. Cast Iron! You don't mean to say you have come to that?"

"I shan't read it."

"But I will, aunt. So it must not go back for a day or two. I do love the Fenwicks, dearly, dearly, both of them. They are almost, if not quite, perfect. And yet I am glad to be at home."

CHAPTER X. CRUNCH'EM CAN'T BE HAD

Mr. Fenwick had intended to have come home round by Market Lavington, after having deposited Miss Lowther at the Westbury Station, with the view of making some inquiry respecting the gentleman with the hurt shoulder; but he had found the distance to be too great, and had abandoned the idea. After that there was not a day to spare till the middle of the next week; so that it was nearly a fortnight after the little scene at the corner of the Vicarage garden wall before he called upon the Lavington constable and the Lavington doctor. From the latter he could learn nothing. No such patient had been to him. But the constable, though he had not seen the two men, had heard of them. One was a man who in former days had frequented Lavington, Burrows by name, generally known as Jack the Grinder, who had been in every prison in Wiltshire and Somersetshire, but who had not, – so said the constable, – honoured Lavington for the last two years, till this his last appearance. He had, however, been seen there in company with another man, and had evidently been in a condition very unfit for work. He had slept one night at a low public-house, and had then moved on. The man had complained of a fall from the cart, and had declared that he was black and blue all over; but it seemed to be clear that he had no broken bones. Mr. Fenwick therefore was all but convinced that Jack the Grinder was the gentleman with whom he had had the encounter, and that the grinder's back had withstood that swinging blow from the life-preserver. Of the Grinder's companions nothing could be learned. The two men had taken the Devizes road out of Lavington, and beyond that nothing was known of them. When the parson mentioned Sam Brattle's name in a whisper, the Lavington constable shook his head. He knew all about old Jacob Brattle. A very respectable party was old Mr. Brattle in the constable's opinion. Nevertheless the constable shook his head when Sam Brattle's name was mentioned. Having learned so much, the parson rode home.

Two days after this, on a Friday, Fenwick was sitting after breakfast in his study, at work on his sermon for next Sunday, when he was told that old Mrs. Brattle was waiting to see him. He immediately got up, and found his own wife and the miller's seated in the hall. It was not often that Mrs. Brattle made her way to the Vicarage, but when she did so she was treated with great consideration. It was still August, and the weather was very hot, and she had walked up across the water mead, and was tired. A glass of wine and a biscuit were pressed upon her, and she was encouraged to sit and say a few indifferent words, before she was taken into the study and told to commence the story which had brought her so far. And there was a most inviting topic for conversation. The mill and the mill premises were to be put in order by the landlord. Mrs. Brattle affected to be rather dismayed than otherwise by the coming operations. The mill would have lasted their time, she thought, "and as for them as were to come after them, – well! she didn't know. As things was now, perhaps, it might be that after all Sam would have the mill." But the trouble occasioned by the workmen would be infinite. How were they to live in the mean time, and where were they to go? It soon appeared, however, that all this had been already arranged. Milling must of course be stopped for a month or six weeks. "Indeed, sir, feyther says that there won't be no more grinding much before winter." But the mill was to be repaired first, and then, when it became absolutely necessary to dismantle the house, they were to endeavour to make shift, and live in the big room of the mill itself, till their furniture should be put back again. Mrs. Fenwick, with ready good nature, offered to accommodate Mrs. Brattle and Fanny at the Vicarage; but the old woman declined with many protestations of gratitude. She had never left her old man yet, and would not do so now. The weather would be mild for awhile, and she thought that they could get through. By this time the glass of wine had been sipped to the bottom, and the parson, mindful of his sermon, had led the visitor into his study. She had come to tell that Sam at last had returned home.

"Why didn't you bring him up with you, Mrs. Brattle?" Here was a question to ask of an old lady, whose dominion over her son was absolutely none! Sam had become so frightfully independent that he hardly regarded the word of his father, who was a man pre-eminently capable of maintaining authority, and would no more do a thing because his mother told him than because the wind whistled.

"I axed him to come up, not just with me, but of hisself, Mr. Fenwick; but he said as how you would know where to find him if you wanted him."

"That's just what I don't know. However, if he's there now I'll go to him. It would have been better far that he should have come to me."

"I told 'un so, Mr. Fenwick, I did, indeed."

"It does not signify. I will go to him; only it cannot be to-day, as I have promised to take my wife over to Charlicoats. But I'll come down immediately after breakfast to-morrow. You think he'll be still there?"

"I be sure he will, Mr. Fenwick. He and feyther have taken on again, till it's beautiful to see. There was none of 'em feyther ever loved like he, – only one." Thereupon the poor woman burst out into tears, and covered her face with her handkerchief. "He never makes half so much account of my Fan, that never had a fault belonging to her."

"If Sam will stick to that it will be well for him."

"He's taken up extraordinary with the repairs, Mr. Fenwick. He's in and about and over the place, looking to everything; and feyther says he knows so much about it, he b'lieves the boy could do it all out o' his own head. There's nothing feyther ever liked so much as folks to be strong and clever."

"Perhaps the Squire's tradesmen won't like all that. Is Mitchell going to do it?"

"It ain't a doing in that way, Mr. Fenwick. The Squire is allowing £200, and feyther is to get it done. Mister Mitchell is to see that it's done proper, no doubt."

"And now tell me, Mrs. Brattle, what has Sam been about all the time that he was away?"

"That's just what I cannot tell you, Mr. Fenwick."

"Your husband has asked him, I suppose?"

"If he has, he ain't told me, Mr. Fenwick. I don't care to come between them with hints and jealousies, suspecting like. Our Fan says he's been out working somewhere Lavington way; but I don't know as she knows."

"Was he decent looking when he came home?"

"He wasn't much amiss, Mr. Fenwick. He has that way with him that he most always looks decent; – don't he, sir?"

"Had he any money?"

"He had a some'at, because when he was working, moving the big lumber as though for bare life, he sent one of the boys for beer, and I see'd him give the boy the money."

"I'm sorry for it. I wish he'd come back without a penny, and with hunger like a wolf in his stomach, and with his clothes all rags, so that he might have had a taste of the suffering of a vagabond's life."

"Just like the Prodigal Son, Mr. Fenwick?"

"Just like the Prodigal Son. He would not have come back to his father had he not been driven by his own vices to live with the swine." Then, seeing the tears coming down the poor mother's cheeks, he added in a kinder voice, "Perhaps it may be all well as it is. We will hope so at least, and to-morrow I will come down and see him. You need not tell him that I am coming, unless he should ask where you have been." Then Mrs. Brattle took her leave, and the parson finished his sermon.

That afternoon he drove his wife across the county to visit certain friends at Charlicoats, and, both going and coming, could not keep himself from talking about the Brattles. In the first place, he thought that Gilmore was wrong not to complete the work himself.

"Of course he'll see that the money is spent and all that, and no doubt in this way he may get the job done twenty or thirty pounds cheaper; but the Brattles have not interest enough in the place to justify it."

"I suppose the old man liked it best so."

"The old man shouldn't have been allowed to have his way. I am in an awful state of alarm about Sam. Much as I like him, – or at any rate did like him, – I fear he is going, or perhaps has gone, to the dogs. That those two men were housebreakers is as certain as that you sit there; and I cannot doubt but that he has been with them over at Lavington or Devizes, or somewhere in that country."

"But he may, perhaps, never have joined them in anything of that kind."

"A man is known by his companions. I would not have believed it if I had not found him with the men, and traced him and them about the county together. You see that this fellow whom they call the Grinder was certainly the man I struck. I tracked him to Lavington, and there he was complaining of being sore all over his body. I don't wonder that he was sore. He must be made like a horse to be no worse than sore. Well, then, that man and Sam were certainly in our garden together."

"Give him a chance, Frank."

"Of course, I will give him a chance. I will give him the very best chance I can. I would do anything to save him, – but I can't help knowing what I know."

He had made very little to his wife of the danger of the Vicarage being robbed, but he could not but feel that there was danger. His wife had brought with her, among other plenishing for their household, a considerable amount of handsome plate, more than is, perhaps, generally to be found in country parsonages, and no doubt this fact was known, at any rate, to Sam Brattle. Had the men simply intended to rob the garden, they would not have run the risk of coming so near to the house windows. But then it certainly was true that Sam was not showing them the way. The parson did not quite know what to think about it, but it was clearly his duty to be on his guard.

That same evening he sauntered across the corner of the churchyard to his neighbour the farmer. Looking out warily for Bone'm, he stood leaning upon the farm gate. Bone'm was not to be seen or heard, and therefore he entered, and walked up to the back door, which indeed was the only door for entrance or egress that was ever used. There was a front door opening into a little ragged garden, but this was as much a fixture as the wall. As he was knocking at the back door, it was opened by the farmer himself. Mr. Fenwick had called to inquire whether his friend had secured for him, – as half promised, – the possession of a certain brother of Bone'm's, who was supposed to be of a very pugnacious disposition in the silent watches of the night.

"It's no go, parson."

"Why not, Mr. Trumbull?"

"The truth is, there be such a deal of talk o' thieves about the country, that no one likes to part with such a friend as that. Muster Crickly, over at Imber, he have another big dog it's true, a reg'lar mastiff, but he do say that Crunch'em be better than the mastiff, and he won't let 'un go, parson, – not for love nor money. I wouldn't let Bone'm go, I know; not for nothing." Then Mr. Fenwick walked back to the Vicarage, and was half induced to think that as Crunch'em was not to be had, it would be his duty to sit up at night, and look after the plate box himself.

CHAPTER XI.

DON'T YOU BE AFEARD ABOUT ME

On the following morning Mr. Fenwick walked down to the mill. There was a path all along the river, and this was the way he took. He passed different points as he went, and he thought of the trout he had caught there, or had wished to catch, and he thought also how often Sam Brattle had been with him as he had stood there delicately throwing his fly. In those days Sam had been very fond of him, had thought it to be a great thing to be allowed to fish with the parson, and had been reasonably obedient. Now Sam would not even come up to the Vicarage when he was asked to do so. For more than a year after the close of those amicable relations the parson had behaved with kindness and almost with affection to the lad. He had interceded with the Squire when Sam was accused of poaching, – had interceded with the old miller when Sam had given offence at home, – and had even interceded with the constable when there was a rumour in the wind of offences something worse than these. Then had come the occasion on which Mr. Fenwick had told the father that unless the son would change his course evil would come of it; and both father and son had taken this amiss. The father had told the parson to his face that he, the parson, had led his son astray; and the son in his revenge had brought housebreakers down upon his old friend's premises.

"One hasn't to do it for thanks," said Mr. Fenwick, as he became a little bitter while thinking of all this. "I'll stick to him as long as I can, if it's only for the old woman's sake, – and for the poor girl whom we used to love." Then he thought of a clear, sweet, young voice that used to be so well known in his village choir, and of the heavy curls, which it was a delight to him to see. It had been a pleasure to him to have such a girl as Carry Brattle in his church, and now Carry Brattle was gone utterly, and would probably never be seen in a church again. These Brattles had suffered much, and he would bear with them, let the task of doing so be ever so hard.

The sound of workmen was to be already heard as he drew near to the mill. There were men there pulling the thatch off the building, and there were carts and horses bringing laths, lime, bricks, and timber, and taking the old rubbish away. As he crossed quickly by the slippery stones he saw old Jacob Brattle standing before the mill looking on, with his hands in his breeches pockets. He was too old to do much at such work as this, – work to which he was not accustomed – and was looking up in a sad melancholy way, as though it were a work of destruction, and not one of reparation.

"We shall have you here as smart as possible before long, Mr. Brattle," said the parson.

"I don't know much about smart, Muster Fenwick. The old place was a'most tumbling down, – but still it would have lasted out my time, I'm thinking. If t' Squire would 'a done it fifteen years ago, I'd 'a thanked un; but I don't know what to say about it now, and this time of year and all, just when the new grist would be coming in. If t' Squire would 'a thought of it in June, now. But things is contrary – a'most allays so." After this speech, which was made in a low, droning voice, bit by bit, the miller took himself off and went into the house.

At the back of the mill, perched on an old projecting beam, in the midst of dust and dirt, assisting with all the energy of youth in the demolition of the roof, Mr. Fenwick saw Sam Brattle. He perceived at once that Sam had seen him; but the young man immediately averted his eyes and went on with his work. The parson did not speak at once, but stepped over the ruins around him till he came immediately under the beam in question. Then he called to the lad, and Sam was constrained to answer "Yes, Mr. Fenwick, I am here; – hard at work, as you see."

"I do see it, and wish you luck with your job. Spare me ten minutes, and come down and speak to me."

"I am in such a muck now, Mr. Fenwick, that I do wish to go on with it, if you'll let me."

But Mr. Fenwick, having taken so much trouble to get at the young man, was not going to be put off in this way. "Never mind your muck for a quarter of an hour," he said. "I have come here on purpose to find you, and I must speak to you."

"Must!" said Sam, looking down with a very angry lower on his face.

"Yes, – must. Don't be a fool now. You know that I do not wish to injure you. You are not such a coward as to be afraid to speak to me. Come down."

"Afeard! Who talks of being afeard? Stop a moment, Mr. Fenwick, and I'll be with you; – not that I think it will do any good." Then slowly he crept back along the beam and came down through the interior of the building. "What is it, Mr. Fenwick? Here I am. I ain't a bit afeard of you at any rate."

"Where have you been the last fortnight, Sam?"

"What right have you to ask me, Mr. Fenwick?"

"I have the right of old friendship, and perhaps also some right from my remembrance of the last place in which I saw you. What has become of that man, Burrows?"

"What Burrows?"

"Jack the Grinder, whom I hit on the back the night I made you prisoner. Do you think that you were doing well in being in my garden about midnight in company with such a fellow as that, – one of the most notorious jailbirds in the county? Do you know that I could have had you arrested and sent to prison at once?"

"I know you couldn't – do nothing of the kind."

"You know this, Sam, – that I've no wish to do it; that nothing would give me more pain than doing it. But you must feel that if we should hear now of any depredation about the county, we couldn't, – I at least could not, – help thinking of you. And I am told that there will be depredations, Sam. Are you concerned in these matters?"

"No, I am not," said Sam, doggedly.

"Are you disposed to tell me why you were in my garden, and why those men were with you?"

"We were down in the churchyard, and the gate was open, and so we walked up; – that was all. If we'd meant to do anything out of the way we shouldn't 'a come like that, nor yet at that hour. Why, it worn't midnight, Mr. Fenwick."

"But why was there such a man as Burrows with you? Do you think he was fit company for you, Sam?"

"I suppose a chap may choose his own company, Mr. Fenwick?"

"Yes, he may, and go to the gallows because he chooses it, as you are doing."

"Very well; if that's all you've got to say to me, I'll go back to my work."

"Stop one moment, Sam. That is not quite all. I caught you the other night where you had no business to be, and for the sake of your father and mother, and for old recollections, I let you go. Perhaps I was wrong, but I don't mean to hark back upon that again."

"You are a-harking back on it, ever so often."

"I shall take no further steps about it."

"There ain't no steps to be taken, Mr. Fenwick."

"But I see that you intend to defy me, and therefore I am bound to tell you that I shall keep my eye upon you."

"Don't you be afeard about me, Mr. Fenwick."

"And if I hear of those fellows, Burrows and the other, being about the place any more, I shall give the police notice that they are associates of yours. I don't think so badly of you yet, Sam, as to believe you would bring your father's grey hairs with sorrow to the grave by turning thief and housebreaker; but when I hear of your being away from home, and nobody knowing where you are, and find that you are living without decent employment, and prowling about at nights with

robbers and cut-throats, I cannot but be afraid. Do you know that the Squire recognised you that night as well as I?"

"The Squire ain't nothing to me, and if you've done with me now, Mr. Fenwick, I'll go back to my work." So saying, Sam Brattle again mounted up to the roof, and the parson returned discomfited to the front of the building. He had not intended to see any of the family, but, as he was crossing the little bridge, meaning to go home round by the Privets, he was stopped by Fanny Brattle.

"I hope it will be all right now, Mr. Fenwick," the girl said.

"I hope so too, Fanny. But you and your mother should keep an eye on him, so that he may know that his goings and comings are noticed. I dare say it will be all right as long as the excitement of these changes is going on; but there is nothing so bad as that he should be in and out of the house at nights and not feel that his absence is noticed. It will be better always to ask him, though he be ever so cross. Tell your mother I say so."

CHAPTER XII. BONE'M AND HIS MASTER

After leaving the mill Mr. Fenwick went up to the Squire, and, in contradiction, as it were, of all the hard things that he had said to Sam Brattle, spoke to the miller's landlord in the lad's favour. He was hard at work now, at any rate; and seemed inclined to stick to his work. And there had been an independence about him which the parson had half liked, even while he had been offended at it. Gilmore differed altogether from his friend. "What was he doing in your garden? What was he doing hidden in Trumbull's hedge? When I see fellows hiding in ditches at night, I don't suppose that they're after much good." Mr. Fenwick made some lame apology, even for these offences. Sam had, perhaps, not really known the extent of the iniquity of the men with whom he had associated, and had come up the garden probably with a view to the fruit. The matter was discussed at great length, and the Squire at last promised that he would give Sam another chance in regard to his own estimation of the young man's character.

On that same evening, – or, rather, after the evening was over, for it was nearly twelve o'clock at night, – Fenwick walked round the garden and the orchard with his wife. There was no moon now, and the night was very dark. They stopped for a minute at the wicket leading into the churchyard, and it was evident to them that Bone'm, from the farmyard at the other side of the church, had heard them, for he commenced a low growl, with which the parson was by this time well acquainted.

"Good dog, good dog," said the parson, in a low voice. "I wish we had his brother, I know."

"He would only be tearing the maids and biting the children," said Mrs. Fenwick. "I hate having a savage beast about."

"But it would be so nice to catch a burglar and crunch him. I feel almost bloodthirsty since I hit that fellow with the life-preserver, and find that I didn't kill him."

"I know, Frank, you're thinking about these thieves more than you like to tell me."

"I was thinking just then, that if they were to come and take all the silver it wouldn't do much harm. We should have to buy German plate, and nobody would know the difference."

"Suppose they murdered us all?"

"They never do that now. The profession is different from what it used to be. They only go where they know they can find a certain amount of spoil, and where they can get it without much danger. I don't think housebreakers ever cut throats in these days. They're too fond of their own." Then they both agreed that if these rumours of housebreakings were continued, they would send away the plate some day to be locked up in safe keeping at Salisbury. After that they went to bed.

On the next morning, the Sunday morning, at a few minutes before seven, the parson was awakened by his groom at his bedroom door.

"What is it, Roger?" he asked.

"For the love of God, sir, get up! They've been and murdered Mr. Trumbull."

Mrs. Fenwick, who heard the tidings, screamed; and Mr. Fenwick was out of bed and into his trousers in half a minute. In another half minute Mrs. Fenwick, clothed in her dressing-gown, was up-stairs among her children. No doubt she thought that as soon as the poor farmer had been despatched, the murderers would naturally pass on into her nursery. Mr. Fenwick did not believe the tidings. If a man be hurt in the hunting-field, it is always said that he's killed. If the kitchen flue be on fire, it is always said that the house is burned down. Something, however, had probably happened at Farmer Trumbull's; and down went the parson across the garden and orchard, and through the churchyard, as quick as his legs would carry him. In the farmyard he found quite a crowd of men, including the two constables and three or four of the leading tradesmen in the village.

The first thing that he saw was the dead body of Bone'm, the dog. He was stiff and stark, and had been poisoned.

"How's Mr. Trumbull?" he asked, of the nearest by-stander.

"Laws, parson, ain't ye heard?" said the man. "They've knocked his skull open with a hammer, and he's as dead – as dead."

Hearing this, the parson turned round, and made his way into the house. There was not a doubt about it. The farmer had been murdered during the night, and his money carried off. Upstairs Mr. Fenwick made his way to the farmer's bedroom, and there lay the body. Mr. Crittenden, the village doctor, was there; and a crowd of men, and an old woman or two. Among the women was Trumbull's sister, the wife of a neighbouring farmer, who, with her husband, a tenant of Mr. Gilmore's, had come over just before the arrival of Mr. Fenwick. The body had been found on the stairs, and it was quite clear that the farmer had fought desperately with the man or men before he had received the blow which despatched him.

"I told 'um how it be, – I did, I did, when he would 'a all that money by 'um." This was the explanation given by Mr. Trumbull's sister, Mrs. Boddle.

It seemed that Trumbull had had in his possession over a hundred and fifty pounds, of which the greater part was in gold, and that he kept this in a money-box in his bedroom. One of the two women who lived in his service, – he himself had been a widower without children, – declared that she had always known that at night he took the box out of his cupboard into bed with him. She had seen it there more than once when she had taken him up drinks when he was unwell. When first interrogated, she declared that she did not remember, at that moment, that she had ever told anybody; she thought she had never told anybody; at last, she would swear that she had never spoken a word about it to a single soul. She was supposed to be a good girl, had come of decent people, and was well known by Mr. Fenwick, of whose congregation she was one. Her name was Agnes Pope. The other servant was an elderly woman, who had been in the house all her life, but was unfortunately deaf. She had known very well about the money, and had always been afraid about it; had very often spoken to her master about it, but never a word to Agnes. She had been woken in the night, – that was, as it turned out, about 2 a. m., – by the girl who slept with her, and who declared that she had heard a great noise, as of somebody tumbling, – a very great noise indeed, as though there were ever so many people tumbling. For a long time, for perhaps an hour, they had lain still, being afraid to move. Then the elder woman had lighted a candle, and gone down from the garret in which they slept. The first thing she saw was the body of her master, in his shirt, upon the stairs. She had then called up the only other human being who slept on the premises, a shepherd, who had lived for thirty years with Trumbull. This man had thrown open the house, and had gone for assistance, and had found the body of the dead dog in the yard.

Before nine o'clock the facts, as they have been told, were known everywhere, and the Squire was down on the spot. The man, – or, as it was presumed, men, – had entered by the unaccustomed front door, which was so contrived as to afford the easiest possible mode of getting into the house; whereas, the back door, which was used by everybody, had been bolted and barred with all care. The men must probably have entered by the churchyard and the back gate of the farmyard, as that had been found to be unlatched, whereas the gate leading out on to the road had been found closed. The farmer himself had always been very careful to close both these gates when he let out Bone'm before going to bed. Poor Bone'm had been enticed to his death by a piece of poisoned meat, thrown to him probably some considerable time before the attack was made.

Who were the murderers? That of course was the first question. It need hardly be said with how sad a heart Mr. Fenwick discussed this matter with the Squire. Of course inquiry must be made of the manner in which Sam Brattle had passed the night. Heavens! how would it be with that poor family if he had been concerned in such an affair as this! And then there came across the parson's mind a remembrance that Agnes Pope and Sam Brattle had been seen by him together, on more

Sundays than one. In his anxiety, and with much imprudence, he went to the girl and questioned her again.

"For your own sake, Agnes, tell me, are you sure you never mentioned about the money-box to – Sam Brattle?"

The girl blushed and hesitated, and then said that she was quite sure she never had. She didn't think she had ever said ten words to Sam since she knew about the box.

"But five words would be sufficient, Agnes."

"Then them five words was never spoke, sir," said the girl. But still she blushed, and the parson thought that her manner was not in her favour.

It was necessary that the parson should attend to his church; but the Squire, who was a magistrate, went down with the two constables to the mill. There they found Sam and his father, with Mrs. Brattle and Fanny. No one went to the church from the mill on that day. The news had reached them of the murder, and they all felt, – though no one of them had so said to any other, – that something might in some way connect them with the deed that had been done. Sam had hardly spoken since he had heard of Mr. Trumbull's death; though when he saw that his father was perfectly silent, as one struck with some sudden dread, he bade the old man hold up his head and fear nothing. Old Brattle, when so addressed, seated himself in his arm-chair, and there remained without a word till the magistrate with the constables were among them.

There were not many at church, and Mr. Fenwick made the service very short. He could not preach the sermon which he had prepared, but said a few words on the terrible catastrophe which had occurred so near to them. This man who was now lying within only a few yards of them, with his brains knocked out, had been alive among them, strong and in good health, yesterday evening! And there had come into their peaceful village miscreants who had been led on from self-indulgence to idleness, and from idleness to theft, and from theft to murder! We all know the kind of words which the parson spoke, and the thrill of attention with which they would be heard. Here was a man who had been close to them, and therefore the murder came home to them all, and filled them with an excitement which, alas! was not probably without some feeling of pleasure. But the sermon, if sermon it could be called, was very short; and when it was over, the parson also hurried down to the mill.

It had already been discovered that Sam Brattle had certainly been out during the night. He had himself denied this at first, saying, that though he had been the last to go to bed, he had gone to bed about eleven, and had not left the mill-house till late in the morning; – but his sister had heard him rise, and had seen his body through the gloom as he passed beneath the window of the room in which she slept. She had not heard him return, but, when she arose at six, had found out that he was then in the house. He manifested no anger against her when she gave this testimony, but acknowledged that he had been out, that he had wandered up to the road, and explained his former denial frankly, – or with well-assumed frankness, – by saying that he would, if possible, for his father's and mother's sake, have concealed the fact that he had been away, – knowing that his absence would give rise to suspicions which would well-nigh break their hearts. He had not, however, – so he said, – been any nearer to Bullhampton than the point of the road opposite to the lodge of Hampton Privets, from whence the lane turned down to the mill. What had he been doing down there? He had done nothing, but sat and smoked on a stile by the road side. Had he seen any strangers? Here he paused, but at last declared that he had seen none, but had heard the sound of wheels and of a pony's feet upon the road. The vehicle, whatever it was, must have passed on towards Bullhampton just before he reached the road. Had he followed the vehicle? No; – he had thought of doing so, but had not. Could he guess who was in the vehicle? By this time many surmises had been made aloud as to Jack the Grinder and his companion, and it had become generally known that the parson had encountered two such men in his own garden some nights previously. Sam, when he was pressed, said that the idea had come into his mind that the vehicle

was the Grinder's cart. He had no knowledge, he said, that the man was coming to Bullhampton on that night; – but the man had said in his hearing, that he would like to strip the parson's peaches. He was asked also about Farmer Trumbull's money. He declared that he had never heard that the farmer kept money in the house. He did know that the farmer was accounted to be a very saving man, – but that was all that he knew. He was as much surprised, he said, as any of them at what had occurred. Had the men turned the other way and robbed the parson he would have been less surprised. He acknowledged that he had called the parson a turn-coat and a meddling tell-tale, in the presence of these men.

All this ended of course in Sam's arrest. He had himself seen from the first that it would be so, and had bade his mother take comfort and hold up her head. "It won't be for long, mother. I ain't got any of the money, and they can't bring it nigh me." He was taken away to be locked up at Heytesbury that night, in order that he might be brought before the bench of magistrates which would sit at that place on Tuesday. Squire Gilmore for the present committed him.

The parson remained for some time with the old man and his wife after Sam was gone, but he soon found that he could be of no service by doing so. The miller himself would not speak, and Mrs. Brattle was utterly prostrated by her husband's misery.

"I do not know what to say about it," said Mr. Fenwick to his wife that night. "The suspicion is very strong; but I cannot say that I have an opinion one way or the other." There was no sermon in Bullhampton Church on that Sunday afternoon.

CHAPTER XIII.

CAPTAIN MARRABLE AND HIS FATHER

Only that it is generally conceived that in such a history as is this the writer of the tale should be able to make his points so clear by words that no further assistance should be needed, I should be tempted here to insert a properly illustrated pedigree tree of the Marrable family. The Marrable family is of very old standing in England, the first baronet having been created by James I., and there having been Marrables, – as is well known by all attentive readers of English history, – engaged in the Wars of the Roses, and again others very conspicuous in the religious persecutions of the children of Henry VIII. I do not know that they always behaved with consistency; but they held their heads up after a fashion, and got themselves talked of, and were people of note in the country. They were cavaliers in the time of Charles I. and of Cromwell, – as became men of blood and gentlemen, – but it is not recorded of them that they sacrificed much in the cause; and when William III. became king they submitted with a good grace to the new order of things. A certain Sir Thomas Marrable was member for his county in the reigns of George I. and George II., and enjoyed a lucrative confidence with Walpole. Then there came a blustering, roystering Sir Thomas, who, together with a fine man and gambler as a heir, brought the property to rather a low ebb; so that when Sir Gregory, the grandfather of our Miss Marrable, came to the title in the early days of George III. he was not a rich man. His two sons, another Sir Gregory and a General Marrable, died long before the days of which we are writing, – Sir Gregory in 1815, and the General in 1820. That Sir Gregory was the second of the name, – the second at least as mentioned in these pages. He had been our Miss Marrable's uncle, and the General had been her father, and the father of Mrs. Lowther, – Mary's mother. A third Sir Gregory was reigning at the time of our story, a very old gentleman with one single son, – a fourth Gregory. Now the residence of Sir Gregory was at Dunripple Park, just on the borders of Warwickshire and Worcestershire, but in the latter county. The property was small, – for a country gentleman with a title, – not much exceeding £3000 a year; and there was no longer any sitting in Parliament, or keeping of race-horses, or indeed any season in town for the present race of Marrables. The existing Sir Gregory was a very quiet man, and his son and only child, a man now about forty years of age, lived mostly at home, and occupied himself with things of antiquity. He was remarkably well read in the history of his own country, and it had been understood for the last twenty years by the Antiquarian, Archæological, and other societies that he was the projector of a new theory about Stonehenge, and that his book on the subject was almost ready. Such were the two surviving members of the present senior branch of the family. But Sir Gregory had two brothers, – the younger of the two being Parson John Marrable, the present rector of St. Peter's Lowtown and the occupier of the house within the heavy slate-coloured gates, where he lived a bachelor life, as had done before him his cousin the late rector; – the elder being a certain Colonel Marrable. The Colonel Marrable again had a son, who was a Captain Walter Marrable, – and after him the confused reader shall be introduced to no more of the Marrable family. The enlightened reader will have by this time perceived that Miss Mary Lowther and Captain Walter Marrable were second cousins; and he will also have perceived, if he has given his mind fully to the study, that the present Parson John Marrable had come into the living after the death of a cousin of the same generation as himself, – but of lower standing in the family. It was so; and by this may be seen how little the Sir Gregory of the present day had been able to do for his brother, and perhaps it may also be imagined from this that the present clergyman at Loring Lowtown had been able to do very little for himself. Nevertheless, he was a kindly-hearted, good, sincere old man, – not very bright, indeed, nor peculiarly fitted for preaching the gospel, but he was much liked, and he kept a curate, though his income out of the living was small. Now it so

happened that Captain Marrable, – Walter Marrable, – came to stay with his uncle the parson about the same time that Mary Lowther returned to Loring.

"You remember Walter, do you not?" said Miss Marrable to her niece.

"Not the least in the world. I remember there was a Walter when I was at Dunripple. But that was ten years ago, and boy cousins and girl cousins never fraternise."

"I suppose he was nearly a young man then, and you were a child?"

"He was still at school, though just leaving it. He is seven years older than I am."

"He is coming to stay with Parson John."

"You don't say so, aunt Sarah? What will such a man as Captain Marrable do at Loring?"

Then aunt Sarah explained all that she knew, and perhaps suggested more than she knew. Walter Marrable had quarrelled with his father, the Colonel, – with whom, indeed, everybody of the name of Marrable had always been quarrelling, and who was believed by Miss Marrable to be the very – mischief himself. He was a man always in debt, who had broken his wife's heart, who lived with low company and disgraced the family, who had been more than once arrested, on whose behalf all the family interest had been expended, so that nobody else could get anything, and who gambled and drank and did whatever wicked things a wicked old colonel living at Portsmouth could do. And indeed, hitherto, Miss Marrable had entertained opinions hardly more charitable respecting the son than she had done in regard to the father. She had disbelieved in this branch of the Marrables altogether. Captain Marrable had lived with his father a good deal, – at least, so she had understood, – and therefore could not but be bad. And, moreover, our Miss Sarah Marrable had, throughout her whole life, been somewhat estranged from the elder branches of the family. Her father, Walter, had been, – so she thought, – injured by his brother Sir Gregory, and there had been some law proceedings, not quite amicable, between her brother the parson, and the present Sir Gregory. She respected Sir Gregory as the head of the family, but she never went now to Dunripple, and knew nothing of Sir Gregory's heir. Of the present Parson John she had thought very little before he had come to Loring. Since he had been living there she had found that blood was thicker than water, – as she would say, – and they two were intimate. When she heard that Captain Marrable was coming, because he had quarrelled with his father, she began to think that perhaps it might be as well that she should allow herself to meet this new cousin.

"What do you think of your cousin, Walter?" the old clergyman said to his nephew, one evening, after the two ladies, who had been dining at the Rectory, had left them. It was the first occasion on which Walter Marrable had met Mary since his coming to Loring.

"I remember her as well as if it were yesterday, at Dunripple. She was a little girl then, and I thought her the most beautiful little girl in the world."

"We all think her very beautiful still."

"So she is; as lovely as ever she can stand. But she does not seem to have much to say for herself. I remember when she was a little girl she never would speak."

"I fancy she can talk when she pleases, Walter. But you mustn't fall in love with her."

"I won't, if I can help it."

"In the first place I think she is as good as engaged to a fellow with a very pretty property in Wiltshire, and in the next place she hasn't got – one shilling."

"There is not much danger. I am not inclined to trouble myself about any girl in my present mood, even if she had the pretty property herself, and wasn't engaged to anybody. I suppose I shall get over it some day, but I feel just at present as though I couldn't say a kind word to a human being."

"Psha! psha! that's nonsense, Walter. Take things coolly. They're more likely to come right, and they won't be so troublesome, even if they don't." Such was the philosophy of Parson John, – for the sake of digesting which the captain lit a cigar, and went out to smoke it, standing at one of the open slate-coloured gates.

It was said in the first chapter of this story that Mr. Gilmore was one of the heroes whose deeds the story undertakes to narrate, and a hint was perhaps expressed that of all the heroes he was the favourite. Captain Marrable is, however, another hero, and, as such, some word or two must be said of him. He was a better-looking man, certainly, than Mr. Gilmore, though perhaps his personal appearance did not at first sight give to the observer so favourable an idea of his character as did that of the other gentleman. Mr. Gilmore was to be read at a glance as an honest, straightforward, well-behaved country squire, whose word might be taken for anything, who might, perhaps, like to have his own way, but who could hardly do a cruel or an unfair thing. He was just such a man to look at as a prudent mother would select as one to whom she might entrust her daughter with safety. Now Walter Marrable's countenance was of a very different die. He had served in India, and the naturally dark colour of his face had thus become very swarthy. His black hair curled round his head, but the curls on his brow were becoming very thin, as though age were already telling on them, and yet he was four or five years younger than Mr. Gilmore. His eyebrows were thick and heavy, and his eyes seemed to be black. They were eyes which were used without much motion; and when they were dead set, as they were not unfrequently, it would seem as though he were defying those on whom he looked. Thus he made many afraid of him, and many who were not afraid of him, disliked him because of a certain ferocity which seemed to characterise his face. He wore no beard beyond a heavy black moustache, which quite covered his upper lip. His nose was long and straight, his mouth large, and his chin square. No doubt he was a handsome man. And he looked to be a tall man, though in truth he lacked two full inches of the normal six feet. He was broad across the chest, strong on his legs, and was altogether such a man to look at that few would care to quarrel with him, and many would think that he was disposed to quarrel. Of his nature he was not quarrelsome; but he was a man who certainly had received much injury. It need not be explained at length how his money affairs had gone wrong with him. He should have inherited, and, indeed, did inherit, a fortune from his mother's family, of which his father had contrived absolutely to rob him. It was only within the last month that he had discovered that his father had succeeded in laying his hands on certainly the bulk of his money, and it might be upon all. Words between them had been very bitter. The father, with a cigar between his teeth, had told his son that this was the fortune of war, that if justice had been done him at his marriage, the money would have been his own, and that by G – he was very sorry, and couldn't say anything more. The son had called the father a liar and a swindler, – as, indeed, was the truth, though the son was doubtless wrong to say so to the author of his being. The father had threatened the son with his horsewhip; and so they had parted, within ten days of Walter Marrable's return from India.

Walter had written to his two uncles, asking their advice as to saving the wreck, if anything might be saved. Sir Gregory had written back to say that he was an old man, that he was greatly grieved at the misunderstanding, and that Messrs. Block and Curling were the family lawyers. Parson John invited his nephew to come down to Loring Lowtown. Captain Marrable went to Block and Curling, who were by no means consolatory, and accepted his uncle's invitation.

It was but three days after the first meeting between the two cousins, that they were to be seen one evening walking together along the banks of the Lurwell, a little river which at Loring sometimes takes the appearance of a canal, and sometimes of a natural stream. But it is commercial, having connection with the Kennet and Avon navigation; and long, slow, ponderous barges, with heavy, dirty, sleepy bargemen, and rickety, ill-used barge-horses, are common in the neighbourhood. In parts it is very pretty, as it runs under the chalky downs, and there are a multiplicity of locks, and the turf of the sheep-walks comes up to the towing path; but in the close neighbourhood of the town the canal is straight and uninteresting; the ground is level, and there is a scattered community of small, straight-built light-brick houses, which are in themselves so ugly that they are incompatible with anything that is pretty in landscape.

Parson John, always so called to distinguish him from the late parson, his cousin, who had been the Rev. James Marrable, had taken occasion, on behalf of his nephew, to tell the story of his wrong to Miss Marrable, and by Miss Marrable it had been told to Mary. To both these ladies the thing seemed to be so horrible, – the idea that a father should have robbed his son, – that the stern ferocity of the slow-moving eyes was forgiven, and they took him to their hearts, if not for love, at least for pity. Twenty thousand pounds ought to have become the property of Walter Marrable, when some maternal relative had died. It had seemed hard that the father should have none of it, and, on the receipt in India of representations from the Colonel, Walter had signed certain fatal papers, the effect of which was that the father had laid his hands on pretty nearly the whole, if not on the whole, of the money, and had caused it to vanish. There was now a question whether some five thousand pounds might not be saved. If so, Walter would stay in England; if not, he would exchange and go back to India; "or," as he said himself, "to the Devil."

"Don't speak of it in that way," said Mary.

"The worst of it is," said he "that I am ashamed of myself for being so absolutely cut up about money. A man should be able to bear that kind of thing; but this hits one all round."

"I think you bear it very well."

"No, I don't. I didn't bear it well when I called my father a swindler. I didn't bear it well when I swore that I would put him in prison for robbing me. I don't bear it well now, when I think of it every moment. But I do so hate India, and I had so absolutely made up my mind never to return. If it hadn't been that I knew that this fortune was to be mine, I could have saved money, hand over hand."

"Can't you live on your pay here?"

"No!" He answered her almost as though he were angry with her. "If I had been used all my life to the strictest economies, perhaps I might do so. Some men do, no doubt; but I am too old to begin it. There is the choice of two things, – to blow my brains out, or go back."

"You are not such a coward as that."

"I don't know. I ain't sure that it would be cowardice. If there were anybody I could injure by doing it, it would be cowardly."

"The family," suggested Mary.

"What does Sir Gregory care for me? I'll show you his letter to me some day. I don't think it would be cowardly at all to get away from such a lot."

"I am sure you won't do that, Captain Marrable."

"Think what it is to know that your father is a swindler. Perhaps that is the worst of it all. Fancy talking or thinking of one's family after that. I like my uncle John. He is very kind, and has offered to lend me £150, which I'm sure he can't afford to lose, and which I am too honest to take. But even he hardly sees it. He calls it a misfortune, and I've no doubt would shake hands with his brother to-morrow."

"So would you, if he were really sorry."

"No, Mary; nothing on earth shall ever induce me to set my eyes on him again willingly. He has destroyed all the world for me. He should have had half of it without a word. When he used to whine to me in his letters, and say how cruelly he had been treated, I always made up my mind that he should have half the income for life. It was because he should not want till I came home that I enabled him to do what he has done. And now he has robbed me of every cursed shilling! I wonder whether I shall ever get my mind free from it."

"Of course you will."

"It seems now that my heart is wrapped in lead." As they were coming home she put her hand upon his arm, and asked him to promise her to withdraw that threat.

"Why should I withdraw it? Who cares for me?"

"We all care. My aunt cares. I care."

"The threat means nothing, Mary. People who make such threats don't carry them out. Of course I shall go on and endure it. The worst of all is, that the whole thing makes me so unmanly, – makes such a beast of me. But I'll try to get over it."

Mary Lowther thought that, upon the whole, he bore his misfortune very well.

CHAPTER XIV. COUSINHOOD

Mary Lowther and her cousin had taken their walk together on Monday evening, and on the next morning she received the following letter from Mrs. Fenwick. When it reached her she had as yet heard nothing of the Bullhampton tragedy.

Vicarage, Monday, Sept. 1, 186 – .

Dearest Mary,

I suppose you will have heard before you get this of the dreadful murder that has taken place here, and which has so startled and horrified us, that we hardly know what we are doing even yet. It is hard to say why a thing should be worse because it is close, but it certainly is so. Had it been in the next parish, or even further off in this parish, I do not think that I should feel it so much, and then we knew the old man so well; and then, again, – which makes it worst of all, – we all of us are unable to get rid of a suspicion that one whom we knew, and was liked, has been a participator in the crime.

It seems that it must have been about two o'clock on Sunday morning that Mr. Trumbull was killed. It was, at any rate, between one and three. As far as they can judge, they think that there must have been three men concerned. You remember how we used to joke about poor Mr. Trumbull's dog. Well, he was poisoned first, – probably an hour before the men got into the house. It has been discovered that the foolish old man kept a large sum of money by him in a box, and that he always took this box into bed with him. The woman, who lived in the house with him, used to see it there. No doubt the thieves had heard of this, and both Frank and Mr. Gilmore think that the girl, Agnes Pope, whom you will remember in the choir, told about it. She lived with Mr. Trumbull, and we all thought her a very good girl, – though she was too fond of that young man, Sam Brattle.

They think that the men did not mean to do the murder, but that the old man fought so hard for his money that they were driven to it. His body was not in the room, but on the top of the stairs, and his temple had been split open with a blow of a hammer. The hammer lay beside him, and was one belonging to the house. Mr. Gilmore says that there was great craft in their using a weapon which they did not bring with them. Of course they cannot be traced by the hammer.

They got off with £150 in the box, and did not touch anything else. Everybody feels quite sure that they knew all about the money, and that when Mr. Gilmore saw them that night down at the churchyard corner, they were prowling about with a view of seeing how they could get into the farmer's house, and not into the Vicarage. Frank thinks that when he afterwards found them in our place, Sam Brattle had brought them in with a kind of wild idea of taking the fruit, but that the men, of their own account, had come round to reconnoitre the house. They both say that there can be no doubt about the men having been the same. Then comes the terrible question whether Sam Brattle, the son of that dear woman at the mill, has been one of the murderers. He had been at home all the previous day working very hard at the works, – which are being done in obedience to your orders, my dear; but he certainly was out on the Saturday night.

It is very hard to get at any man's belief in such matters, but, as far as I can understand them, I don't think that either Frank or Mr. Gilmore do really believe that he was there. Frank says that it will go very hard with him, and Mr. Gilmore has committed him. The magistrates are to sit to-morrow at Heytesbury, and Mr. Gilmore will be there. He has, as you may be sure, behaved as well as possible, and has quite altered in his manner to the old people. I was at the mill this morning. Brattle himself would not speak to me, but I sat for an hour with Mrs. Brattle and Fanny. It makes it almost the more melancholy having all the rubbish and building things about, and yet the work stopped.

Fanny Brattle has behaved so well! It was she who told that her brother had been out at night. Mr. Gilmore says that when the question was asked in his presence, she answered it in her own quiet, simple way, without a moment's doubt; but since that she has never ceased to assert her conviction that her brother has had nothing to do either with the murder or with the robbery. If it had not been for this, Mrs. Brattle would, I think, have sunk under the load. Fanny says the same thing constantly to her father. He scolds her, and bids her hold her tongue; but she goes on, and I think it has some effect even on him. The whole place does look such a picture of ruin! It would break your heart to see it. And then, when one looks at the father and mother, one remembers about that other child, and is almost tempted to ask why such misery should have fallen upon parents who have been honest, sober, and industrious. Can it really be that the man is being punished here on earth because he will not believe? When I hinted this to Frank, he turned upon me, and scolded me, and told me I was measuring the Almighty God with a foot-rule. But men were punished in the Bible because they did not believe. Remember the Baptist's father. But I never dare to go on with Frank on these matters.

I am so full of this affair of poor Mr. Trumbull, and so anxious about Sam Brattle, that I cannot now write about anything else. I can only say that no man ever behaved with greater kindness and propriety than Harry Gilmore, who has had to act as magistrate. Poor Fanny Brattle has to go to Heytesbury to-morrow to give her evidence. At first they said that they must take the father also, but he is to be spared for the present.

I should tell you that Sam himself declares that he got to know these men at a place where he was at work, brickmaking, near Devizes. He had quarrelled with his father, and had got a job there, with high wages. He used to be out at night with them, and acknowledges that he joined one of them, a man named Burrows, in stealing a brood of pea-fowl which some poulterers wanted to buy. He says he looked on it as a joke. Then it seems he had some spite against Trumbull's dog, and that this man, Burrows, came over here on purpose to take the dog away. This, according to his story, is all that he knows of the man; and he says that on that special Saturday night he had not the least idea that Burrows was at Bullhampton, till he heard the sound of a certain cart on the road. I tell you all this, as I am sure you will share our anxiety respecting this unfortunate young man, – because of his mother and sister.

Good-bye, dearest; Frank sends ever so many loves; – and somebody else would send them too, if he thought that I would be the bearer. Try to think so well of Bullhampton as to make you wish to live here. – Give my kindest love to your aunt Sarah.

*Your most affectionate friend,
Janet Fenwick.*

Mary was obliged to read the letter twice before she completely understood it. Old Mr. Trumbull murdered! Why she had known the old man well, had always been in the habit of speaking to him when she met him either at the one gate or the other of the farmyard, – had joked with him about Bone'm, and had heard him assert his own perfect security against robbers not a week before the night on which he was murdered! As Mrs. Fenwick had said, the truth is so much more real when it comes from things that are near. And then she had so often heard the character of Sam Brattle described, – the man who was now in prison as a murderer! And she herself had given lessons in singing to Agnes Pope, who was now in some sort accused of aiding the thieves. And she herself had asked Agnes whether it was not foolish for her to be hanging about the farmyard, outside her master's premises, with Sam Brattle. It was all brought very near to her!

Before that day was over she was telling the story to Captain Marrable. She had of course told it to her aunt, and they had been discussing it the whole morning. Mr. Gilmore's name had been mentioned to Captain Marrable, but very little more than the name. Aunt Sarah, however, had already begun to think whether it might not be prudent to tell cousin Walter the story of the half-formed engagement. Mary had expressed so much sympathy with her cousin's wrongs, that aunt Sarah had begun to fear that that sympathy might lead to a tenderer feeling, and aunt Sarah was by no means anxious that her niece should fall in love with a gentleman whose chief attraction was the fact that he had been ruined by his own father, even though that gentleman was a Marrable himself. This danger might possibly be lessened if Captain Marrable were made acquainted with the Gilmore affair, and taught to understand how desirable such a match would be for Mary. But aunt Sarah had qualms of conscience on the subject. She doubted whether she had a right to tell the story without leave from Mary; and then there was in truth no real engagement. She knew indeed that Mr. Gilmore had made the offer more than once; but then she knew also that the offer had at any rate not as yet been accepted, and she felt that on Mr. Gilmore's account as well as on Mary's she ought to hold her tongue. It might indeed be admissible to tell to a cousin that which she would not tell to an indifferent young man; but, nevertheless, she could not bring herself to do, even with so good an object, that which she believed to be wrong.

That evening Mary was again walking on the towing-path beside the river with her cousin Walter. She had met him now about five times, and there was already an intimacy between them. The idea of cousinly intimacy to girls is undoubtedly very pleasant; and I do not know whether it is not the fact that the better and the purer is the girl, the sweeter and the pleasanter is the idea. In America a girl may form a friendly intimacy with any young man she fancies, and though she may not be free from little jests and good-humoured joking, there is no injury to her from such intimacy. It is her acknowledged right to enjoy herself after that fashion, and to have what she calls a good time with young men. A dozen such intimacies do not stand in her way when there comes some real adorer who means to marry her and is able to do so. She rides with these friends, walks with them, and corresponds with them. She goes out to balls and picnics with them, and afterwards lets herself in with a latchkey, while her papa and mamma are a-bed and asleep, with perfect security. If there be much to be said against the practice, there is also something to be said for it. Girls on the other hand, on the continent of Europe, do not dream of making friendship with any man. A cousin with them is as much out of the question as the most perfect stranger. In strict families, a girl is hardly allowed to go out with her brother; and I have heard of mothers who thought it indiscreet that a father should be seen alone with his daughter at a theatre. All friendships between the sexes must, under such a social code, be looked forward to as post-nuptial joys. Here in England there is a something betwixt the two. The intercourse between young men and girls is free enough to enable the latter to feel how pleasant it is to be able to forget for awhile conventional restraints, and to acknowledge how joyous a thing it is to indulge in social intercourse in which the simple delight of equal mind meeting equal mind in equal talk is just enhanced by the unconscious remembrance that boys and girls when they meet together may learn to love. There is nothing more sweet in youth

than this, nothing more natural, nothing more fitting, nothing, indeed, more essentially necessary for God's purposes with his creatures. Nevertheless, here with us, there is the restriction, and it is seldom that a girl can allow herself the full flow of friendship with a man who is not old enough to be her father, unless he is her lover as well as her friend. But cousinhood does allow some escape from the hardship of this rule. Cousins are Tom, and Jack, and George, and Dick. Cousins probably know all or most of your little family secrets. Cousins, perhaps, have romped with you, and scolded you, and teased you, when you were young. Cousins are almost the same as brothers, and yet they may be lovers. There is certainly a great relief in cousinhood.

Mary Lowther had no brother. She had neither brother nor sister; – had since her earliest infancy hardly known any other relative save her aunt and old Parson John. When first she had heard that Walter Marrable was at Loring, the tidings gave her no pleasure whatever. It never occurred to her to say to herself: "Now I shall have one who may become my friend, and be to me perhaps almost a brother?" What she had hitherto heard of Walter Marrable had not been in his favour. Of his father she had heard all that was bad, and she had joined the father and the son together in what few ideas she had formed respecting them. But now, after five interviews, Walter Marrable was her dear cousin, with whom she sympathised, of whom she was proud, whose misfortunes were in some degree her misfortunes, to whom she thought she could very soon tell this great trouble of her life about Mr. Gilmore, as though he were indeed her brother. And she had learned to like his dark staring eyes, which now always seemed to be fixed on her with something of real regard. She liked them the better, perhaps, because there was in them so much of real admiration; though if it were so, Mary knew nothing of such liking herself. And now at his bidding she called him Walter. He had addressed her by her Christian name at first, as a matter of course, and she had felt grateful to him for doing so. But she had not dared to be so bold with him, till he had bade her do so, and now she felt that he was a cousin indeed. Captain Marrable was at present waiting, not with much patience, for tidings from Block and Curling. Would that £5000 be saved for him, or must he again go out to India and be heard of no more at home in his own England? Mary was not so impatient as the Captain, but she also was intensely interested in the expected letters. On this day, however, their conversation chiefly ran on the news which Mary had that morning heard from Bullhampton.

"I suppose you feel sure," said the Captain, "that young Sam Brattle was one of the murderers?"

"Oh no, Walter."

"Or at least one of the thieves?"

"But both Mr. Fenwick and Mr. Gilmore think that he is innocent."

"I do not gather that from what your friend says. She says that she thinks that they think so. And then it is clear that he was hanging about the place before with the very men who have committed the crime; and that there was a way in which he might have heard and probably had heard of the money; and then he was out and about that very night."

"Still I can't believe it. If you knew the sort of people his father and mother are." Captain Marrable could not but reflect that, if an honest gentleman might have a swindler for his father, an honest miller might have a thief for his son. "And then if you saw the place at which they live! I have a particular interest about it."

"Then the young man, of course, must be innocent."

"Don't laugh at me, Walter."

"Why is the place so interesting to you?"

"I can hardly tell you why. The father and the mother are interesting people, and so is the sister. And in their way they are so good! And they have had great troubles, – very great troubles. And the place is so cool and pretty, all surrounded by streams and old pollard willows, with a thatched roof that comes in places nearly to the ground; and then the sound of the mill wheel is the pleasantest sound I know anywhere."

"I will hope he is innocent, Mary."

"I do so hope he is innocent! And then my friends are so much interested about the family. The Fenwicks are very fond of them, and Mr. Gilmore is their landlord."

"He is the magistrate?"

"Yes, he is the magistrate."

"What sort of fellow is he?"

"A very good sort of fellow; such a sort that he can hardly be better; a perfect gentleman."

"Indeed! And has he a perfect lady for his wife?"

"Mr. Gilmore is not married."

"What age is he?"

"I think he is thirty-three."

"With a nice estate and not married! What a chance you have left behind you, Mary!"

"Do you think, Walter, that a girl ought to wish to marry a man merely because he is a perfect gentleman, and has a nice estate and is not yet married?"

"They say that they generally do; – don't they?"

"I hope you don't think so. Any girl would be very fortunate to marry Mr. Gilmore – if she loved him."

"But you don't?"

"You know I am not talking about myself, and you oughtn't to make personal allusions."

These cousinly walks along the banks of the Lurwell were not probably favourable to Mr. Gilmore's hopes.

CHAPTER XV. THE POLICE AT FAULT

The magistrates sat at Heytesbury on the Tuesday, and Sam Brattle was remanded. An attorney thus was employed on his behalf by Mr. Fenwick. The parson on the Monday evening had been down at the mill, and had pressed strongly on the old miller the necessity of getting some legal assistance for his son. At first Mr. Brattle was stern, immovable, and almost dumb. He sat on the bench outside his door, with his eyes fixed on the dismantled mill, and shook his head wearily, as though sick and sore with the words that were being addressed to him. Mrs. Brattle the while stood in the doorway, and listened without uttering a sound. If the parson could not prevail, it would be quite out of the question that any word of hers should do good. There she stood, wiping the tears from her eyes, looking on wishfully, while her husband did not even know that she was there. At last he rose from his seat, and hallooed to her. "Maggie," said he, "Maggie." She stepped forward, and put her hand upon his shoulder. "Bring me down the purse, mother," he said.

"There will be nothing of that kind wanted," said the parson.

"Them gentlemen don't work for such as our boy for nothin'," said the miller. "Bring me the purse, mother, I say. There ar'n't much in it, but there's a few guineas as 'll do for that, perhaps. As well pitch 'em away that way as any other."

Mr. Fenwick, of course, declined to take the money. He would make the lawyer understand that he would be properly paid for his trouble, and that for the present would suffice. Only, as he explained, it was expedient that he should have the father's authority. Should any question on the matter arise, it would be better for the young man that he should be defended by his father's aid than by that of a stranger. "I understand, Mr. Fenwick," said the old man, – "I understand; and it's neighbourly of you. But it'd be better that you'd just leave us alone to go out like the snuff of a candle."

"Father," said Fanny, "I won't have you speak in that way, making out our Sam to be guilty before ere a one else has said so."

The miller shook his head again, but said nothing further, and the parson, having received the desired authority, returned to the Vicarage.

The attorney had been employed, and Sam had been remanded. There was no direct evidence against him, and nothing could be done until the other men should be taken, for whom they were seeking. The police had tracked the two men back to a cottage, about fifteen miles distant from Bullhampton, in which lived an old woman, who was the mother of the Grinder. With Mrs. Burrows they found a young woman who had lately come to live there, and who was said in the neighbourhood to be the Grinder's wife.

But nothing more could be learned of the Grinder than that he had been at the cottage on the Sunday morning, and had gone away, according to his wont. The old woman swore that he slept there the whole of Saturday night, but of course the policemen had not believed her statement. When does any policeman ever believe anything? Of the pony and cart the old woman declared she knew nothing. Her son had no pony, and no cart, to her knowing. Then she went on to declare that she knew very little about her son, who never lived with her; and that she had only taken in the young woman out of charity, about two weeks since. The mother did not for a moment pretend that her son was an honest man, getting his bread after an honest fashion. The Grinder's mode of life was too well known for even a mother to attempt to deny it. But she pretended that she was very honest herself, and appealed to sundry brandy-balls and stale biscuits in her window, to prove that she lived after a decent, honest, commercial fashion.

Sam was of course remanded. The head constable of the district asked for a week more to make fresh inquiry, and expressed a very strong opinion that he would have the Grinder and his friend by the heels before the week should be over. The Heytesbury attorney made a feeble request that Sam might be released on bail, as there was not, according to his statement, "the remotest shadow of a tittle of evidence against him." But poor Sam was sent back to gaol, and there remained for that week. On the next Tuesday the same scene was re-enacted. The Grinder had not been taken, and a further remand was necessary. The face of the head constable was longer on this occasion than it had been before, and his voice less confident. The Grinder, he thought, must have caught one of the early Sunday trains, and made his way to Birmingham. It had been ascertained that he had friends at Birmingham. Another remand was asked for a week, with an understanding that at the end of the week it should be renewed if necessary. The policeman seemed to think that by that time, unless the Grinder were below the sod, his presence above it would certainly be proved. On this occasion the Heytesbury attorney made a very loud demand for Sam's liberation, talking of habeas corpus, and the injustice of carceration without evidence of guilt. But the magistrates would not let him go. "When I'm told that the young man was seen hiding in a ditch close to the murdered man's house, only a few days before the murder, is that no evidence against him, Mr. Jones?" said Sir Thomas Charleys, of Charlicoats.

"No evidence at all, Sir Thomas. If I had been found asleep in the ditch, that would have been no evidence against me."

"Yes, it would, very strong evidence; and I would have committed you on it, without hesitation, Mr. Jones."

Mr. Jones made a spirited rejoinder to this; but it was of no use, and poor Sam was sent back to gaol for the third time.

For the first ten days after the murder nothing was done as to the works at the mill. The men who had been employed by Brattle ceased to come, apparently of their own account, and everything was lying there just in the state in which the men had left the place on the Saturday night. There was something inexpressibly sad in this, as the old man could not even make a pretence of going into the mill for employment, and there was absolutely nothing to which he could put his hands, to do it. When ten days were over, Gilmore came down to the mill, and suggested that the works should be carried on and finished by him. If the mill were not kept at work, the old man could not live, and no rent would be paid. At any rate, it would be better that this great sorrow should not be allowed so to cloud everything as to turn industry into idleness, and straitened circumstances into absolute beggary. But the Squire found it very difficult to deal with the miller. At first old Brattle would neither give nor withhold his consent. When told by the Squire that the property could not be left in that way, he expressed himself willing to go out into the road, and lay himself down and die there; – but not until the term of his holding was legally brought to a close. "I don't know that I owe any rent over and beyond this Michaelmas as is coming, and there's the hay on the ground yet." Gilmore, who was very patient, assured him that he had no wish to allude to rent; that there should be no question of rent even when the day came, if at that time money was scarce. But would it not be better that the mill, at least, should be put in order?

"Indeed it will, Squire," said Mrs. Brattle. "It is the idleness that is killing him."

"Hold your jabbering tongue," said the miller, turning round upon her fiercely. "Who asked you? I will see to it myself, Squire, to-morrow or next day."

After two or three further days of inaction at the mill the Squire came again, bringing the parson with him; and they did manage to arrange between them that the repairs should be at once continued. The mill should be completed; but the house should be left till next summer. As to Brattle himself, when he had been once persuaded to yield the point, he did not care how much they pulled down, or how much they built up. "Do it as you will," he said; "I ain't nobody now. The women drives me about my own house as if I hadn't a'most no business there." And so the

hammers and trowels were heard again; and old Brattle would sit perfectly silent, gazing at the men as they worked. Once, as he saw two men and a boy shifting a ladder, he turned round, with a little chuckle to his wife, and said, "Sam'd 'a see'd hisself d – d, afore he'd 'a asked another chap to help him with such a job as that."

As Mrs. Brattle told Mrs. Fenwick afterwards, he had one of the two erring children in his thoughts morning, noon, and night. "When I tell 'un of George," – who was the farmer near Fordingbridge, – "and of Mrs. Jay," – who was the ironmonger's wife at Warminster, – "he won't take any comfort in them," said Mrs. Brattle. "I don't think he cares for them, just because they can hold their own heads up."

At the end of three weeks the Grinder was still missing; and others besides Mr. Jones, the attorney, were beginning to say that Sam Brattle should be let out of prison. Mr. Fenwick was clearly of opinion that he should not be detained, if bail could be forthcoming. The Squire was more cautious, and said that it might well be that his escape would render it impossible for the police even to get on the track of the real murderers. "No doubt, he knows more than he has told," said Gilmore, "and will probably tell it at last. If he be let out, he will tell nothing." The police were all of opinion that Sam had been present at the murder, and that he should be kept in custody till he was tried. They were very sharp in their manœuvres to get evidence against him. His boot, they had said, fitted a footstep which had been found in the mud in the farm-yard. The measure had been taken on the Sunday. That was evidence. Then they examined Agnes Pope over and over again, and extracted from the poor girl an admission that she loved Sam better than anything in the whole wide world. If he were to be in prison, she would not object to go to prison with him. If he were to be hung, she would wish to be hung with him. She had no secret she would not tell him. But, as a matter of fact, – so she swore over and over again, – she had never told him a word about old Trumbull's box. She did not think she had ever told any one; but she would swear on her death-bed that she had never told Sam Brattle. The head constable declared that he had never met a more stubborn or a more artful young woman. Sir Thomas Charleys was clearly of opinion that no bail should be accepted. Another week of remand was granted with the understanding that, if nothing of importance was elicited by that time, and if neither of the other two suspected men were then in custody, Sam should be allowed to go at large upon bail – a good, substantial bail, himself in £400, and his bailsmen in £200 each.

"Who'll be his bailsmen?" said the Squire, coming away with his friend the parson from Heytesbury.

"There will be no difficulty about that, I should say."

"But who will they be, – his father for one?"

"His brother George, and Jay, at Warminster, who married his sister," said the parson.

"I doubt them both," said the Squire.

"He sha'n't want for bail. I'll be one myself, sooner. He shall have bail. If there's any difficulty, Jones shall bail him; and I'll see Jones safe through it. He sha'n't be persecuted in that way."

"I don't think anybody has attempted to persecute him, Frank."

"He will be persecuted if his own brothers won't come forward to help him. It isn't that they have looked into the matter, and that they think him guilty; but that they go just the way they're told to go, like sheep. The more I think of it, the more I feel that he had nothing to do with the murder."

"I never knew a man change his opinion so often as you do," said Gilmore.

During three weeks the visits made by Head Constable Toffy to the cottage in which Mrs. Burrows lived were much more frequent than were agreeable to that lady. This cottage was about four miles from Devizes, and on the edge of a common, about half a mile from the high road which leads from that town to Marlborough. There is, or was a year or two back, a considerable extent of unenclosed land thereabouts, and on a spot called Pycroft Common there was a small collection of cottages, sufficient to constitute a hamlet of the smallest class. There was no house there of greater

pretensions than the very small beershop which provided for the conviviality of the Pycroftians; and of other shops there was none, save a baker's, the owner of which seldom had much bread to sell, and the establishment for brandy-balls, which was kept by Mrs. Burrows. The inhabitants were chiefly labouring men, some of whom were in summer employed in brick making; and there was an idea abroad that Pycroft generally was not sustained by regular labour and sober industry. Rents, however, were paid for the cottages, or the cottagers would have been turned adrift; and Mrs. Burrows had lived in hers for five or six years, and was noted in the neighbourhood for her outward neatness and attention to decency. In the summer there were always half-a-dozen large sunflowers in the patch of ground called a garden, and there was a rose-tree, and a bush of honeysuckle over the door, and an alder stump in a corner, which would still put out leaves and bear berries. When Head Constable Toffy visited her there would be generally a few high words, for Mrs. Burrows was by no means unwilling to let it be known that she objected to morning calls from Mr. Toffy.

It has been already said that at this time Mrs. Burrows did not live alone. Residing with her was a young woman, who was believed by Mr. Toffy to be the wife of Richard Burrows, alias the Grinder. On his first visit to Pycroft no doubt, Mr. Toffy was mainly anxious to ascertain whether anything was known by the old woman as to her son's whereabouts, but the second, third, and fourth visits were made rather to the younger than to the older woman. Toffy had probably learned in his wide experience that a man of the Grinder's nature will generally place more reliance on a young woman than on an old; and that the young woman will, nevertheless, be more likely to betray confidence than the older, – partly from indiscretion, and partly, alas! from treachery. But, if the presumed Mrs. Burrows, junior, knew aught of the Grinder's present doings, she was neither indiscreet nor treacherous. Mr. Toffy could get nothing from her. She was sickly, weak, sullen, and silent. "She didn't think it was her business to say where she had been living before she came to Pycroft. She hadn't been living with any husband, and had got no husband that she knew of. If she had she wasn't going to say so. She hadn't any children, and she didn't know what business he had to ask her. She came from Lunnun. At any rate, she came from there last, and she didn't know what business he had to ask her where she came from. What business was it of his to be asking what her name was? Her name was Anne Burrows, if he liked to call her so. She wouldn't answer him any more questions. No; she wouldn't say what her name was before she was married."

Mr. Toffy had his reasons for interrogating this poor woman, but he did not for a while let any one know what those reasons were. He could not, however, obtain more information than what is contained in the answers above given, which were, for the most part, true. Neither the mother nor the younger woman knew where was to be found, at the present moment, that hero of adventure who was called the Grinder, and all the police of Wiltshire began to fear that they were about to be outwitted.

"You never were at Bullhampton with your husband, I suppose?" asked Mr. Toffy.

"Never," said the supposed Grinder's wife; "but what does it matter to you where I was?"

"Don't answer him never another word," said old Mrs. Burrows.

"I won't," said the other.

"Were you ever at Bullhampton at all?" asked Mr. Toffy.

"Oh dear, oh dear," said the younger woman.

"I think you must have been there once," said Mr. Toffy.

"What business is it of yourn?" demanded Mrs. Burrows, senior. "Drat you; get out of this. You ain't no right here, and you shan't stay here. If you ain't out of this, I'll brain yer. I don't care for perlice nor anything. We ain't done nothing. If he did smash the gen'leman's head, we didn't do it; neither she nor me."

"All the same, I think that Mrs. Burrows has been at Bullhampton," said the policeman.

Not another word after this was said by Mrs. Burrows, junior, so called, and constable Toffy soon took his departure. He was convinced, at any rate, of this; – that wherever the murderers

might be, the man or men who had joined Sam Brattle in the murder, – for of Sam's guilt he was quite convinced, – neither the mother, nor the so-called wife knew of their whereabouts. He, in his heart, condemned the constabulary of Warwickshire, of Gloucestershire, of Worcestershire, and of Somersetshire, because the Grinder was not taken. Especially he condemned the constabulary of Warwickshire, feeling almost sure that the Grinder was in Birmingham. If the constabulary in those counties would only do their duty as they in Wiltshire did theirs, the Grinder and his associates would soon be taken. But by him nothing further could be learned, and Mr. Toffy left Pycroft Common with a heavy heart.

CHAPTER XVI. MISS LOWTHER ASKS FOR ADVICE

All these searchings for the murderers of Mr. Trumbull, and these remandings of Sam Brattle, took place in the month of September, and during that same month the energy of other men of law was very keenly at work on a widely different subject. Could Messrs. Block and Curling assure Captain Marrable that a portion of his inheritance would be saved for him, or had that graceless father of his in very truth seized upon it all? There was no shadow of doubt but that if aught was spared, it had not been spared through any delicacy on the part of the Colonel. The Colonel had gone to work, paying creditors who were clamorous against him, the moment he had got his hand upon the money, and had gone to work also gambling, and had made assignments of money, and done his very best to spend the whole. But there was a question whether a certain sum of £5000, which seemed to have got into the hands of a certain lady who protested that she wanted it very badly, might not be saved. Messrs. Block and Curling thought that it might, but were by no means certain. It probably might be done, if the Captain would consent to bring the matter before a jury; in which case the whole story of the father's iniquity must, of course, be proved. Or it might be that by threatening to do this, the lady's friends would relax their grasp on receiving a certain present out of the money.

"We would offer them £50, and perhaps they would take £500," said Messrs. Block and Curling.

All this irritated the Captain. He was intensely averse to any law proceedings by which the story should be made public.

"I won't pretend that it is on my father's account," said he to his uncle. Parson John shrugged his shoulders, and shook his head, meaning to imply that it certainly was a bad case, but that as Colonel Marrable was a Marrable, he ought to be spared, if possible. "It is on my own account," continued the Captain, "and partly, perhaps, on that of the family. I would endure anything rather than have the filth of the transaction flooded through the newspapers. I should never be able to join my mess again if I did that."

"Then you'd better let Block and Curling compromise and get what they can," said Parson John, with an indifferent and provoking tone, which clearly indicated that he would regard the matter when so settled as one arranged amicably and pleasantly between all the parties. His uncle's calmness and absence of horror at the thing that had been done was very grievous to Captain Marrable.

"Poor Wat!" the parson had once said, speaking of his wicked brother; "he never could keep two shillings together. It's ever so long since I had to determine that nothing on earth should induce me to let him have half-a-crown. I must say that he did not take it amiss when I told him."

"Why should he have wanted half-a-crown from you?"

"He was always one of those thirsty sandbags that swallow small drops and large alike. He got £10,000 out of poor Gregory about the time that you were born, and Gregory is fretting about it yet."

"What kills me is the disgrace of it," said the young man.

"It would be disagreeable to have it in the newspapers," said Parson John. "And then he was such a pleasant fellow, and so handsome. I always enjoyed his society when once I had buttoned up my breeches' pocket."

Yet this man was a clergyman, preaching honesty and moral conduct, and living fairly well up to his preaching, too, as far as he himself was concerned! The Captain almost thought that the earth and skies should be brought together, and the clouds clap with thunder, and the mountains

be riven in twain at the very mention of his father's wickedness. But then sins committed against oneself are so much more sinful than any other sins.

The Captain had much more sympathetic listeners in Uphill Lane; not that either of the ladies there spoke severely against his father, but that they entered more cordially into his own distresses. If he could save even £4500 out of the wreck, the interest on the money would enable him to live at home in his regiment. If he could get £4000 he would do it.

"With £150 per annum," he said, "I could just hold my head up and get along. I should have to give up all manner of things; but I would never cry about that."

Then, again, he would declare that the one thing necessary for his happiness was, that he should get the whole business of the money off his mind. "If I could have it settled, and have done with it," said he, "I should be at ease."

"Quite right, my dear," said the old lady. "My idea about money is this, that whether you have much or little, you should make your arrangements so that it be no matter of thought to you. Your money should be just like counters at a round game with children, and should mean nothing. It comes to that when you once get things on a proper footing."

They thus became very intimate, the two ladies in Uphill Lane and the Captain from his uncle's parsonage in the Lowtown; and the intimacy on his part was quite as strong with the younger as with the elder relative, – quite as strong, and no doubt more pleasant. They walked together constantly, as cousins may walk, and they discussed every turn that took place in the correspondence with Messrs. Block and Curling. Captain Marrable had come to his uncle's house for a week or ten days, but had been pressed to remain on till this business should be concluded. His leave of absence lasted till the end of November, and might be prolonged if he intended to return to India. "Stay here till the end of November," said Parson John. "What's the use of spending your money at a London hotel? Only don't fall in love with cousin Mary." So the Captain did stay, obeying one half of his uncle's advice, and promising obedience to the other half.

Aunt Sarah also had her fears about the falling in love, and spoke a prudent word to Mary. "Mary, dear," she said, "you and Walter are as loving as turtle doves."

"I do like him so much," said Mary, boldly.

"So do I, my dear. He is a gentleman, and clever, and, upon the whole, he bears a great injury well. I like him. But I don't think people ought to fall in love when there is a strong reason against it."

"Certainly not, if they can help it."

"Pshaw! That's missish nonsense, Mary, and you know it. If a girl were to tell me she fell in love because she couldn't help it, I should tell her that she wasn't worth any man's love."

"But what's your reason, Aunt Sarah?"

"Because it wouldn't suit Mr. Gilmore."

"I am not bound to suit Mr. Gilmore."

"I don't know about that. And then, too, it would not suit Walter himself. How could he marry a wife when he has just been robbed of all his fortune?"

"But I have not the slightest idea of falling in love with him. In spite of what I said, I do hope that I can help it. And then I feel to him just as though he were my brother. I've got almost to know what it would be to have a brother."

In this Miss Lowther was probably wrong. She had now known her cousin for just a month. A month is quite long enough to realise the pleasure of a new lover, but it may be doubted whether the intimacy of a brother does not take a very much longer period for its creation.

"I think if I were you," said Miss Marrable, after a pause, "that I would tell him about Mr. Gilmore."

"Would you, Aunt Sarah?"

"I think I would. If he were really your brother you would tell him."

It was probably the case, that when Miss Marrable gave this advice, her opinion of Mr. Gilmore's success was greater than the circumstances warranted. Though there had been much said between the aunt and her niece about Mr. Gilmore and his offers, Mary had never been able quite to explain her own thoughts and feelings. She herself did not believe that she could be brought to accept him, and was now stronger in that opinion than ever. But were she to say so in language that would convince her aunt, her aunt would no doubt ask her, why then had she left the man in doubt? Though she knew that at every moment in which she had been called upon to act, she had struggled to do right, yet there hung over her a half-conviction that she had been weak, and almost selfish. Her dearest friends wrote to her and spoke to her as though she would certainly take Mr. Gilmore at last. Janet Fenwick wrote of it in her letters as of a thing almost fixed; and Aunt Sarah certainly lived as though she expected it. And yet Mary was very nearly sure that it could not be so. Would it not be better that she should write to Mr. Gilmore at once, and not wait till the expiration of the weary six months which he had specified as the time at the end of which he might renew his proposals? Had Aunt Sarah known all this, – had she been aware how very near Mary was to the writing of such a letter, – she would not probably have suggested that her niece should tell her cousin anything about Mr. Gilmore. She did think that the telling of the tale would make Cousin Walter understand that he should not allow himself to become an interloper; but the tale, if told as Mary would tell it, might have a very different effect.

Nevertheless Mary thought that she would tell it. It would be so nice to consult a brother! It would be so pleasant to discuss the matter with some one that would sympathise with her, – with some one who would not wish to drive her into Mr. Gilmore's arms simply because Mr. Gilmore was an excellent gentleman, with a snug property! Even from Janet Fenwick, whom she loved dearly, she had never succeeded in getting the sort of sympathy that she wanted. Janet was the best friend in the world, – was actuated in this matter simply by a desire to do a good turn to two people whom she loved. But there was no sympathy between her and Mary in the matter.

"Marry him," said Janet, "and you will adore him afterwards."

"I want to adore him first," said Mary.

So she resolved that she would tell Walter Marrable what was her position. They were again down on the banks of the Lurwell, sitting together on a slope which had been made to support some hundred yards of a canal, where the river itself rippled down a slightly rapid fall. They were seated between the canal and the river, with their feet towards the latter, and Walter Marrable was just lighting a cigar. It was very easy to bring the conversation round to the affairs of Bullhampton, as Sam was still in prison, and Janet's letters were full of the mystery which shrouded the murder of Mr. Trumbull.

"By the bye," said she, "I have something to tell you about Mr. Gilmore."

"Tell away," said he, as he turned the cigar round in his mouth, to complete the lighting of the edges in the wind.

"Ah, but I shan't, unless you will interest yourself. What I am going to tell you ought to interest you."

"He has made you a proposal of marriage?"

"Yes."

"I knew it."

"How could you know it? Nobody has told you."

"I felt sure of it from the way in which you speak of him. But I thought also that you had refused him. Perhaps I was wrong there?"

"No."

"You have refused him?"

"Yes."

"I don't see that there is very much of a story to be told, Mary."

"Don't be so unkind, Walter. There is a story, and one that troubles me. If it were not so I should not have proposed to tell you. I thought that you would give me advice, and tell me what I ought to do."

"But if you have refused him, you have done so, – no doubt rightly, – without my advice; and I am too late in the field to be of any service."

"You must let me tell my own story, and you must be good to me while I do so. I think I shouldn't tell you if I hadn't almost made up my mind; but I shan't tell you which way, and you must advise me. In the first place, though I did refuse him, the matter is still open, and he is to ask me again, if he pleases."

"He has your permission for that?"

"Well, – yes. I hope it wasn't wrong. I did so try to be right."

"I do not say you were wrong."

"I like him so much, and think him so good, and do really feel that his affection is so great an honour to me, that I could not answer him as though I were quite indifferent to him."

"At any rate, he is to come again?"

"If he pleases."

"Does he really love you?"

"How am I to say? But that is missish and untrue. I am sure he loves me."

"So that he will grieve to lose you?"

"I know he will grieve. I ought not to say so. But I know he will."

"You ought to tell the truth, as you believe it. And you yourself, – do you love him?"

"I don't know. I do love him; but if I heard he was going to marry another girl to-morrow it would make me very happy."

"Then you can't love him?"

"I feel as though I should think the same of any man who wanted to marry me. But let me go on with my story. Everybody I care for wishes me to take him. I know that Aunt Sarah feels quite sure that I shall at last, and that she thinks I ought to do so at once. My friend, Janet Fenwick, cannot understand why I should hesitate, and only forgives me because she is sure that it will come right, in her way, some day. Mr. Fenwick is just the same, and will always talk to me as though it were my fate to live at Bullhampton all my life."

"Is not Bullhampton a nice place?"

"Very nice; I love the place."

"And Mr. Gilmore is rich?"

"He is quite rich enough. Fancy my inquiring about that, with just £1200 for my fortune."

"Then why, in God's name, don't you accept him?"

"You think I ought?"

"Answer my question; – why do you not?"

"Because – I do not love him – as I should hope to love my husband."

After this Captain Marrable, who had been looking her full in the face while he had been asking these questions, turned somewhat away from her, as though the conversation were over. She remained motionless, and was minded so to remain till he should tell her that it was time to move, that they might return home. He had given her no advice; but she presumed she was to take what had passed as the expression of his opinion that it was her duty to accept an offer so favourable and so satisfactory to the family. At any rate, she would say nothing more on the subject till he should address her. Though she loved him dearly as her cousin, yet she was, in some slight degree, afraid of him. And now she was not sure but that he was expressing towards her, by his anger, some amount of displeasure at her weakness and inconsistency. After a while he turned round suddenly, and took her by the hand.

"Well, Mary!" he said.

"Well, Walter!"

"What do you mean to do, after all?"

"What ought I to do?"

"What ought you to do? You know what you ought to do. Would you marry a man for whom you have no more regard than you have for this stick, simply because he is persistent in asking you? No more than you have for this stick, Mary. What sort of a feeling must it be, when you say that you would willingly see him married to any other girl to-morrow? Can that be love?"

"I have never loved any one better."

"And never will?"

"How can I say? It seems to me that I haven't got the feeling that other girls have. I want some one to love me; – I do. I own that. I want to be first with some one; but I have never found the one yet that I cared for."

"You had better wait till you find him," said he, raising himself up on his arm. "Come, let us get up and go home. You have asked me for my advice, and I have given it you. Do not throw yourself away upon a man because other people ask you, and because you think you might as well oblige them and oblige him. If you do, you will soon live to repent it. What would you do, if after marrying this man you found there was some one you could love?"

"I do not think it would come to that, Walter."

"How can you tell? How can you prevent its coming to that, except by loving the man you do marry? You don't care two straws for Mr. Gilmore; and I cannot understand how you can have the courage to think of becoming his wife. Let us go home. You have asked my advice, and you've got it. If you do not take it, I will endeavour to forget that I gave it you."

Of course she would take it. She did not tell him so then; but, of course, he should guide her. With how much more accuracy, with how much more delicacy of feeling had he understood her position, than had her other friends! He had sympathised with her at a word. He spoke to her sternly, severely, almost cruelly. But it was thus that she had longed to be spoken to by some one who would care enough for her, would take sufficient interest in her, to be at the trouble so to advise her. She would trust him as a brother, and his words should be sweet to her, were they ever so severe.

They walked together home in silence, and his very manner was stern to her; but it might be just thus that a loving brother would carry himself who had counselled his sister wisely, and had not as yet been assured that his counsel would be taken.

"Walter," she said, as they neared the town, "I hope you have no doubt about it."

"Doubt about what, Mary?"

"It is quite a matter of course that I shall do as you tell me."

CHAPTER XVII. THE MARQUIS OF TROWBRIDGE

By the end of September it had come to be pretty well understood that Sam Brattle must be allowed to go out of prison, unless something in the shape of fresh evidence should be brought up on the next Tuesday. There had arisen a very strong feeling in the county on the subject; – a Brattle feeling, and an anti-Brattle feeling. It might have been called a Bullhampton feeling and an anti-Bullhampton feeling, were it not that the biggest man concerned in Bullhampton, with certain of his hangers-on and dependents, were very clearly of opinion that Sam Brattle had committed the murder, and that he should be kept in prison till the period for hanging him might come round. This very big person was the Marquis of Trowbridge, under whom poor Farmer Trumbull had held his land, and who now seemed to think that a murder committed on one of his tenants was almost as bad as insult to himself. He felt personally angry with Bullhampton, had ideas of stopping his charities to the parish, and did resolve, then and there, that he would have nothing to do with a subscription for the repair of the church, at any rate for the next three years. In making up his mind on which subject he was, perhaps, a little influenced by the opinions and narratives of Mr. Puddleham, the Methodist minister in the village.

It was not only that Mr. Trumbull had been murdered. So great and wise a man as Lord Trowbridge would, no doubt, know very well, that in a free country, such as England, a man could not be specially protected from the hands of murderers, or others, by the fact of his being the tenant, or dependent, – by his being in some sort the possession of a great nobleman. The Marquis's people were all expected to vote for his candidates, and would soon have ceased to be the Marquis's people had they failed to do so. They were constrained, also in many respects, by the terms of their very short leases. They could not kill a head of game on their farms. They could not sell their own hay off the land, nor, indeed, any produce other than their corn or cattle. They were compelled to crop their land in certain rotation; and could take no other lands than those held under the Marquis without his leave. In return for all this, they became the Marquis's people. Each tenant shook hands with the Marquis perhaps once in three years; and twice a year was allowed to get drunk at the Marquis's expense – if such was his taste – provided that he had paid his rent. If the duties were heavy, the privileges were great. So the Marquis himself felt; and he knew that a mantle of security, of a certain thickness, was spread upon the shoulders of each of his people by reason of the tenure which bound them together. But he did not conceive that this mantle would be proof against the bullet of the ordinary assassin, or the hammer of the outside ruffian. But here the case was very different. The hammer had been the hammer of no outside ruffian. To the best of his lordship's belief, – and in that belief he was supported by the constabulary of the whole county, – the hammer had been wielded by a man of Bullhampton, – had been wielded against his tenant by the son of "a person who holds land under a gentleman who has some property in the parish." It was thus the Marquis was accustomed to speak of his neighbour, Mr. Gilmore, who, in the Marquis's eyes, was a man not big enough to have his tenants called his people. That such a man as Sam Brattle should have murdered such a one as Mr. Trumbull, was to the Marquis an insult rather than an injury; and now it was to be enhanced by the release of the man from prison, and that by order of a bench of magistrates on which Mr. Gilmore sat!

And there was more in it even than all this. It was very well known at Turnover Park, – the seat of Lord Trowbridge, near Westbury, – that Mr. Gilmore, the gentleman who held property in his lordship's parish of Bullhampton, and Mr. Fenwick, who was vicar of the same, were another Damon and Pythias. Now the ladies at Turnover, who were much devoted to the Low Church, had heard and doubtless believed, that our friend, Mr. Fenwick, was little better than an infidel.

When first he had come into the county, they had been very anxious to make him out to be a High Churchman, and a story or two about a cross and a candlestick were fabricated for their gratification. There was at that time the remnant of a great fight going on between the Trowbridge people and another great family in the neighbourhood on this subject; and it would have suited the Ladies Stowte, – John Augustus Stowte was the Marquis of Trowbridge, – to have enlisted our parson among their enemies of this class; but the accusation fell so plump to the ground, was so impossible of support, that they were obliged to content themselves with knowing that Mr. Fenwick was – an infidel! To do the Marquis justice, we must declare that he would not have troubled himself on this score, if Mr. Fenwick would have submitted himself to become one of his people. The Marquis was master at home, and the Ladies Sophie and Carolina would have been proud to entertain Mr. Fenwick by the week together at Turnover, had he been willing, infidel or believer, to join that faction. But he never joined that faction, and he was not only the bosom friend of the "gentleman who owned some land in the parish;" but he was twice more rebellious than that gentleman himself. He had contradicted the Marquis flat to his face, – so the Marquis said himself, – when they met once about some business in the parish; and again, when, in the Vicar's early days in Bullhampton, some gathering for school-festival purposes was made in the great home field behind Farmer Trumbull's house, Mrs. Fenwick misbehaved herself egregiously.

"Upon my word, she patronised us," said Lady Sophie, laughing. "She did, indeed! And you know what she was. Her father was just a common builder at Loring, who made some money by a speculation in bricks and mortar."

When Lady Sophie said this she was, no doubt, ignorant of the fact that Mr. Balfour had been the younger son of a family much more ancient than her own, that he had taken a double-first at Oxford, had been a member of half the learned societies in Europe, and had belonged to two or three of the best clubs in London.

From all this it will be seen that the Marquis of Trowbridge would be disposed to think ill of whatever might be done in regard to the murder by the Gilmore-Fenwick party in the parish. And then there were tales about for which there was perhaps some foundation, that the Vicar and the murderer had been very dear friends. It was certainly believed at Turnover that the Vicar and Sam Brattle had for years past spent the best part of their Sundays fishing together. There were tales of rat-killing matches in which they had been engaged, – originating in the undeniable fact of a certain campaign against rats at the mill, in which the Vicar had taken an ardent part. Undoubtedly the destruction of vermin, and, in regard to one species, its preservation for the sake of destruction, – and the catching of fish, – and the shooting of birds, – were things lovely in the Vicar's eyes. He, perhaps, did let his pastoral dignity go a little by the board, when he and Sam stooped together, each with a ferret in his hand, grovelling in the dust to get at certain rat-advantages in the mill. Gilmore, who had seen it, had told him of this. "I understand it all, old fellow," Fenwick had said to his friend, "and know very well I have got to choose between two things. I must be called a hypocrite, or else I must be one. I have no doubt that as years go on with me I shall see the advantage of choosing the latter." There were at that time frequent discussions between them on the same subject, for they were friends who could dare to discuss each other's modes of life; but the reader need not be troubled further now with this digression. The position which the Vicar held in the estimation of the Marquis of Trowbridge will probably be sufficiently well understood.

The family at Turnover Park would have thought it a great blessing to have had a clergyman at Bullhampton with whom they could have cordially co-operated; but, failing this, they had taken Mr. Puddleham, the Methodist minister, to their arms. From Mr. Puddleham they learned parish facts and parish fables, which would never have reached them but for his assistance. Mr. Fenwick was well aware of this, and used to declare that he had no objection to it. He would protest that he could not see why Mr. Puddleham should not get along in the parish just as well as himself, he having, and meaning to keep to himself, the slight advantages of the parish church, the vicarage-

house, and the small tithes. Of this he was quite sure, that Mr. Puddleham's religious teaching was better than none at all; and he was by no means convinced, – so he said, – that, for some of his parishioners, Mr. Puddleham was not a better teacher than he himself. He always shook hands with Mr. Puddleham, though Mr. Puddleham would never look him in the face, and was quite determined that Mr. Puddleham should not be a thorn in his side.

In this matter of Sam Brattle's imprisonment and now intended liberation, tidings from the parish were doubtless conveyed by Mr. Puddleham to Turnover, – probably not direct, but still in such a manner that the great people at Turnover knew to whom they were indebted. Now Mr. Gilmore had certainly, from the first, been by no means disposed to view favourably the circumstances attaching to Sam Brattle on that Saturday night. When the great blow fell on the Brattle family, his demeanour to them was changed, and he forgave the miller's contumacy; but he had always thought that Sam had been guilty. The parson had from the first regarded the question with great doubt, but, nevertheless, his opinion too had at first been averse to Sam. Even now, when he was so resolute that Sam should be released, he founded his demand, not on Sam's innocence, but on the absence of any evidence against him.

"He's entitled to fair play, Harry," he would say to Gilmore, "and he is not getting it, because there is a prejudice against him. You hear what that old ass, Sir Thomas, says."

"Sir Thomas is a very good magistrate."

"If he don't take care, he'll find himself in trouble for keeping the lad locked up without authority. Is there a juryman in the country would find him guilty because he was lying in the old man's ditch a week before?" In this way Gilmore also became a favourer of Sam's claim to be released; and at last it came to be understood that on the next Tuesday he would be released, unless further evidence should be forthcoming.

And then it came to pass that a certain very remarkable meeting took place in the parish. Word was brought to Mr. Gilmore on Monday, the 5th October, that the Marquis of Trowbridge was to be at the Church Farm, – poor Trumbull's farm, – on that day at noon, and that his lordship thought that it might be expedient that he and Mr. Gilmore should meet on the occasion. There was no note, but the message was brought by Mr. Packer, a sub-agent, one of the Marquis's people, with whom Mr. Gilmore was very well acquainted.

"I'll walk down about that time, Packer," said Mr. Gilmore, "and shall be very happy to see his lordship."

Now the Marquis never sat as a magistrate at the Heytesbury bench, and had not been present on any of the occasions on which Sam had been examined; nor had Mr. Gilmore seen the Marquis since the murder, – nor, for the matter of that, for the last twelve months. Mr. Gilmore had just finished breakfast when the news was brought to him, and he thought he might as well walk down and see Fenwick first. His interview with the parson ended in a promise that he, Fenwick, would also look in at the farm.

At twelve o'clock the Marquis was seated in the old farmer's arm-chair, in the old farmer's parlour. The house was dark and gloomy, never having been altogether opened since the murder. With the Marquis was Packer, who was standing, and the Marquis was pretending to cast his eye over one or two books which had been brought to him. He had been taken all over the house; had stood looking at the bed where the old man lay when he was attacked, as though he might possibly discover, if he looked long enough, something that would reveal the truth; had gazed awe-struck at the spot on which the body had been found, and had taken occasion to remark to himself that the house was a good deal out of order. The Marquis was a man nearer seventy than sixty, but very hale, and with few signs of age. He was short and plump, with hardly any beard on his face, and short grey hair, of which nothing could be seen when he wore his hat. His countenance would not have been bad, had not the weight of his marquisate always been there; nor would his heart have been bad, had it not been similarly burdened. But he was a silly, weak, ignorant man, whose own

capacity would hardly have procured bread for him in any trade or profession, had bread not been so adequately provided for him by his fathers before him.

"Mr. Gilmore said he would be here at twelve, Packer?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And it's past twelve now?"

"One minute, my lord."

Then the peer looked again at poor old Trumbull's books.

"I shall not wait, Packer."

"No, my lord."

"You had better tell them to put the horses to."

"Yes, my lord."

But just as Packer went out into the passage for the sake of giving the order he met Mr. Gilmore, and ushered him into the room.

"Ha! Mr. Gilmore; yes, I am very glad to see you, Mr. Gilmore;" and the Marquis came forward to shake hands with his visitor. "I thought it better that you and I should meet about this sad affair in the parish; – a very sad affair, indeed."

"It certainly is, Lord Trowbridge; and the mystery makes it more so."

"I suppose there is no real mystery, Mr. Gilmore? I suppose there can be no doubt that that unfortunate young man did, – did, – did bear a hand in it at least?"

"I think that there is very much doubt, my lord."

"Do you, indeed? I think there is none, – not the least. And all the police force are of the same opinion. I have considerable experiences of my own in these matters; but I should not venture, perhaps, to express my opinion so confidently, if I were not backed by the police. You are aware, Mr. Gilmore, that the police are – very – seldom wrong?"

"I should be tempted to say that they are very seldom right – except when the circumstances are all under their noses."

"I must say I differ from you entirely, Mr. Gilmore. Now, in this case – " The Marquis was here interrupted by a knock at the door, and, before the summons could be answered, the parson entered the room. And with the parson came Mr. Puddleham. The Marquis had thought that the parson might, perhaps, intrude; and Mr. Puddleham was in waiting as a make-weight, should he be wanting. When Mr. Fenwick had met the minister hanging about the farmyard, he had displayed not the slightest anger. If Mr. Puddleham chose to come in also, and make good his doing so before the Marquis, it was nothing to Mr. Fenwick. The great man looked up, as though he were very much startled and somewhat offended; but he did at last condescend to shake hands, first with one clergyman and then with the other, and to ask them to sit down. He explained that he had come over to make some personal inquiry into the melancholy matter, and then proceeded with his opinion respecting Sam Brattle. "From all that I can hear and see," said his lordship, "I fear there can be no doubt that this murder has been due to the malignity of a near neighbour."

"Do you mean the poor boy that is in prison, my lord?" asked the parson.

"Of course I do, Mr. Fenwick. The constabulary are of opinion – "

"We know that, Lord Trowbridge."

"Perhaps, Mr. Fenwick, you will allow me to express my own ideas. The constabulary, I say, are of opinion that there is no manner of doubt that he was one of those who broke into my tenant's house on that fatal night; and, as I was explaining to Mr. Gilmore when you did us the honour to join us, in the course of a long provincial experience I have seldom known the police to be in error."

"Why, Lord Trowbridge – !"

"If you please, Mr. Fenwick, I will go on. My time here cannot be long, and I have a proposition which I am desirous of making to Mr. Gilmore, as a magistrate acting in this part of

the county. Of course, it is not for me to animadvert upon what the magistrates may do at the bench to-morrow."

"I am sure your lordship would make no such animadversion," said Mr. Gilmore.

"I do not intend it, for many reasons. But I may go so far as to say that a demand for the young man's release will be made."

"He is to be released, I presume, as a matter of course," said the parson.

The Marquis made no allusion to this, but went on. "If that be done, – and I must say that I think no such step would be taken by the bench at Westbury, – whither will the young man betake himself?"

"Home to his father, of course," said the parson.

"Back into this parish, with his paramour, to murder more of my tenants."

"My lord, I cannot allow such an unjust statement to be made," said the parson.

"I wish to speak for one moment; and I wish it to be remembered that I am addressing myself especially to your neighbour, Mr. Gilmore, who has done me the honour of waiting upon me here at my request. I do not object to your presence, Mr. Fenwick, or to that of any other gentleman," and the Marquis bowed to Mr. Puddleham, who had stood by hitherto without speaking a word; "but, if you please, I must carry out the purpose that has brought me here. I shall think it very sad indeed, if this young man be allowed to take up his residence in the parish after what has taken place."

"His father has a house here," said Mr. Gilmore.

"I am aware of the fact," said the Marquis. "I believe that the young man's father holds a mill from you, and some few acres of land?"

"He has a very nice farm."

"So be it. We will not quarrel about terms. I believe there is no lease? – though, of course, that is no business of mine."

"I must say that it is not, my lord," said Mr. Gilmore, who was waxing wrothy and becoming very black about the brows.

"I have just said so; but I suppose you will admit that I have some interest in this parish? I presume that these two gentlemen, who are God's ministers here, will acknowledge that it is my duty, as the owner of the greater part of the parish, to interfere?"

"Certainly, my lord," said Mr. Puddleham.

Mr. Fenwick said nothing. He sat, or rather leant, against the edge of a table, and smiled. His brow was not black, like that of his friend; but Gilmore, who knew him, and who looked into his face, began to fear that the Marquis would be addressed before long in terms stronger than he himself, Mr. Gilmore, would approve.

"And when I remember," continued his lordship, "that the unfortunate man who has fallen a victim had been for nearly half a century a tenant of myself and of my family, and that he was foully murdered on my own property, – dragged from his bed in the middle of the night, and ruthlessly slaughtered in this very house in which I am sitting, and that this has been done in a parish of which I own, I think, something over two-thirds –"

"Two thousand and two acres out of two thousand nine hundred and ten," said Mr. Puddleham.

"I suppose so. Well, Mr. Puddleham, you need not have interrupted me."

"I beg pardon, my lord."

"What I mean to say is this, Mr. Gilmore, – that you should take steps to prevent that young man's return among our people. You should explain to the father that it cannot be allowed. From what I hear, it would be no loss if the whole family left the parish. I am told that one of the daughters is a – prostitute."

"It is too true, my lord," said Mr. Puddleham.

The parson turned round and looked at his colleague, but said nothing. It was one of the principles of his life that he wouldn't quarrel with Mr. Puddleham; and at the present moment he certainly did not wish to waste his anger on so weak an enemy.

"I think that you should look to this, Mr. Gilmore," said the Marquis, completing his harangue.

"I cannot conceive, my lord, what right you have to dictate to me in such a matter," said Mr. Gilmore.

"I have not dictated at all; I have simply expressed my opinion," said the Marquis.

"Now, my lord, will you allow me for a moment?" said Mr. Fenwick. "In the first place, if Sam Brattle could not find a home at the mill, – which I hope he will do for many a long year to come, – he should have one at the Vicarage."

"I dare say," said the Marquis.

Mr. Puddleham held up both hands.

"You might as well hold your tongue, Frank," said Gilmore.

"It is a matter on which I wish to say a word or two, Harry. I have been appealed to as one of God's ministers here, and I acknowledge my responsibility. I never in my life heard any proposition more cruel or inhuman than that made by Lord Trowbridge. This young man is to be turned out because a tenant of his lordship has been murdered! He is to be adjudged to be guilty by us, without any trial, in the absence of all evidence, in opposition to the decision of the magistrates – "

"It is not in opposition to the magistrates, sir," said the Marquis.

"And to be forbidden to return to his own home, simply because Lord Trowbridge thinks him guilty! My lord, his father's house is his own, to entertain whom he may please, as much as is yours. And were I to suggest to you to turn out your daughters, it would be no worse an offence than your suggesting to Mr. Brattle that he should turn out his son."

"My daughters!"

"Yes, your daughters, my lord."

"How dare you mention my daughters?"

"The ladies, I am well aware, are all that is respectable. I have not the slightest wish that you should ill-use them. But if you desire that your family concerns should be treated with reserve and reticence, you had better learn to treat the family affairs of others in the same way."

The Marquis by this time was on his feet, and was calling for Packer, – was calling for his carriage and horses, – was calling on the very gods to send down their thunder to punish such insolence as this. He had never heard of the like in all his experience. His daughters! And then there came across his dismayed mind an idea that his daughters had been put upon a par with that young murderer, Sam Brattle, – perhaps even on a par with something worse than this. And his daughters were such august persons, – old and ugly, it is true, and almost dowerless in consequence of the nature of the family settlements and family expenditure. It was an injury and an insult that Mr. Fenwick should make the slightest allusion to his daughters; but to talk of them in such a way as this, as though they were mere ordinary human beings, was not to be endured! The Marquis had hitherto had his doubts, but now he was quite sure that Mr. Fenwick was an infidel. "And a very bad sort of infidel, too," as he said to Lady Carolina on his return home. "I never heard of such conduct in all my life," said Lord Trowbridge, walking down to his carriage. "Who can be surprised that there should be murderers and prostitutes in the parish?"

"My lord, they don't sit under me," said Mr. Puddleham.

"I don't care who they sit under," said his lordship.

As they walked away together, Mr. Fenwick had just a word to say to Mr. Puddleham. "My friend," he said, "you were quite right about his lordship's acres."

"Those are the numbers," said Mr. Puddleham.

"I mean that you were quite right to make the observation. Facts are always valuable, and I am sure Lord Trowbridge was obliged to you. But I think you were a little wrong as to another statement."

"What statement, Mr. Fenwick?"

"What you said about poor Carry Brattle. You don't know it as a fact."

"Everybody says so."

"How do you know she has not married, and become an honest woman?"

"It is possible, of course. Though as for that, – when a young woman has once gone astray – "

"As did Mary Magdalene, for instance!"

"Mr. Fenwick, it was a very bad case."

"And isn't my case very bad, – and yours? Are we not in a bad way, – unless we believe and repent? Have we not all so sinned as to deserve eternal punishment?"

"Certainly, Mr. Fenwick."

"Then there can't be much difference between her and us. She can't deserve more than eternal punishment. If she believes and repents, all her sins will be white as snow."

"Certainly, Mr. Fenwick."

"Then speak of her as you would of any other sister or brother, – not as a thing that must be always vile because she has fallen once. Women will so speak, – and other men. One sees something of a reason for it. But you and I, as Christian ministers, should never allow ourselves to speak so thoughtlessly of sinners. Good morning, Mr. Puddleham."

CHAPTER XVIII. BLANK PAPER

Early in October Captain Marrable was called up to town by letters from Messrs. Block and Curling, and according to promise wrote various letters to Mary Lowther, telling her of the manner in which his business progressed. All of these letters were shown to Aunt Sarah, – and would have been shown to Parson John were it not that Parson John declined to read them. But though the letters were purely cousinly, – just such letters as a brother might write, – yet Miss Marrable thought that they were dangerous. She did not say so; but she thought that they were dangerous. Of late Mary had spoken no word of Mr. Gilmore; and Aunt Sarah, through all this silence, was able to discover that Mr. Gilmore's prospects were not becoming brighter. Mary herself, having quite made up her mind that Mr. Gilmore's prospects, so far as she was concerned, were all over, could not decide how and when she should communicate the resolve to her lover. According to her present agreement with him, she was to write to him at once should she accept any other offer; and was to wait for six months if this should not be the case. Certainly, there was no rival in the field, and therefore she did not quite know whether she ought or ought not to write at once in her present circumstances of assured determination. She soon told herself that in this respect also she would go to her new-found brother for advice. She would ask him, and do just as he might bid her. Had he not already proved how fit a person he was to give advice on such a subject?

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