A Marked Man

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# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAP.</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. DUNSTANBOROUGH</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. A REBEL IN THE CAMP</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. HOW DICKY KEPT OUT OF MISCHIEF</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE CREEPING TIDE CREPT UP ALONG THE SAND</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. AT THE COASTGUARD STATION</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. A FAITHFUL WATCHDOG</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. NEW LIGHTS</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. A MISTAKEN POLICY</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX. DEFIANCE</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X. DANGER</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI. CAUGHT</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII. THE END OF THE WEDDING DAY</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIII. DICKY PLAYS THE MAN</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIV. THE SON PROPOSES: THE FATHER DISPOSES</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XV. DICKY STANDS TO HIS WORD OF HONOUR</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XVI. HIS LAST WILD OATS</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XVII. THE IRREVOCABLE DEED</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XVIII. SWIFT REPENTANCE</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIX. A LAST CHANCE</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XX. GOOD-BYE</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXI. FIVE-AND-TWENTY YEARS AFTER</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXII. IN THE NEXT GENERATION</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXIII. MOONLIGHT CONFI DENCES</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXIV. THE CAMP OF REFUGE</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXV. NOEL RUTLEDGE</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## CONTENTS

**CHAP.** | **PAGE**
--- | ---
XXVI. Sue Shows Her Defective Education | 169
XXVII. An Old Story | 177
XXVIII. A Sequel to the Story | 183
XXIX. Love and Duty | 189
XXX. Sue Takes a Message | 197
XXXI. How the Message Was Answered | 202
XXXII. The Skeleton Is Locked Up | 208
XXXIII. Three Months Later | 215
XXXIV. A Camp Meeting | 220
XXXV. Her Father's Daughter | 227
XXXVI. The Court of Final Appeal | 232
XXXVII. How Lord Boyton Overdid It | 240
XXXVIII. The Broken Bonds | 249
XXXIX. Nature Unadorned | 254
XL. His Misfortune, Not His Fault | 261
XLI. The New Departure | 266
XLII. "We" | 272
XLIII. The Goal | 279
XLIV. The Prodigal's Return | 285
XLV. "Evening Coloured with the Dying Sun" | 291
XLVI. "Like a Basking Hound" | 299
XLVII. Two Years Afterwards | 305
XLVIII. "While Darkness Is Quick Hastening" | 311
XLIX. The Wages of Love | 318
L. The Wild Beast's Lair | 323
LI. The Bo'Sun Hauls Down the Lantern | 329
A MARKED MAN:
SOME EPISODES IN HIS LIFE.

CHAPTER I.
DUNSTANBOROUGH.

On the east coast of England there is a village which I will call Dunstanborough, though it is not thus named in the Directory. On the east coast it lies, its shallow beach washed by the waves of the German Ocean; and yet, such is the conformation of that coast, that you can see the sun setting straight before your eyes—shining upon the red and white face of the chalk cliffs, and the white column of the lighthouse above, and the great rectangular boulders, draped with seaweed, below—when you stand in the summer evenings looking seawards from the shore. The sea which ebbs and flows there with such a long sweep of tide is not altogether open sea, though very nearly; it is the mouth of a broad and shallow inlet, across which you can see the faint line of the opposite shore—that shore wherefrom no sea-setting sun is visible—when the day is very bright or you happen to have a good telescope. And, years ago, that strip of westward shore on the eastward coast, sea-beach and village and park and farms, over all of which one man held manorial rights—cum vrecca et cum omnibus pertinentibus suis et portum cum applicatione navium, cum soctra et sacra, et Tot et Theam Infangtheof, et cum omnibus libertatibus et liberis consuetudinibus, in bosco et plano, in pratis et in pascuis, in aquis et molendinis, in vivariis et piscariis, infra et extra Burgum et in omnibus locis et in omnibus rebus—as the old dog Latin of the eleventh century
charter so liberally defined them—was a peaceful, pretty, rural place, unknown to fame or fashion.

A sleepy land where, under the same wheel,
The same old rut would deepen year by year.

There were old families at the farms, whose tenancy of their lands was hereditary, and, in a way, historical; and the humbler folk lived in their ancient cottages, amongst the hollyhocks and cabbage roses of their plenteous gardens, from generation to generation. It was the ideal English village. The lower classes knew their place and kept it, dropping the loyal curtsey to their lord and lady and the young sirs and misses, not only in the street but in the church—out of which none would have ventured to budge when divine service was over until the Delavel pew was empty; and the great people looked well after the health and welfare, moral and physical, of their vassals—examining the children in needlework and the catechism at the national school, comforting the sick and aged with port wine and flannel petticoats, and distributing the best advice to young and old for their guidance in the small difficulties of their unimportant lives.

It was but a little village of one long, straggling street, half-a-dozen farms, and intersecting lanes bordered with high hedgerows and briar-tangled ditches—a place of no consequence whatever in itself. Its sole title to importance was its immemorial association with the Delavel family, with the old Hall which had housed the family's head for so many centuries, and with the old church where so much of the family's mortal dust reposed—where floors and walls and dusky windows were covered with the records of its great alliances and its famous deeds.

This latter edifice was an example of Early Decorated, much quoted by archaeological experts, and, like many other English rural churches, would have held the entire parish two or three times over. In it the effigies of dead and gone Delavels, male and female, knelt under arched recesses and pinnacled canopies, with rows of little Delavels in graduated sizes behind them; or lay prone on their altar tombs in helmet and wimple, with toes turned up and palms pressed together—a congregation to whom the church seemed to belong far more than it did to its living worshippers. The rectory was a stately and spacious house, fronting the church on the opposite side of the road, only its fluted chimneys showing over the trees and
shrubs that curtained it from vulgar eyes. A cadet of the family, the Rev. Maxwell Delavel-Pole, was the rector; a young man to whom the benefice had been assigned when he was a baby in the cradle, and for whom it had been kept and nursed by decrepid curates during his ecclesiastical minority. He had happened to take kindly to the profession chosen for him, and at the time of which I am speaking was doing the work of the new broom at Dunstanborough, whither he had come fresh from Oxford and his school-books only a year or two before, with commendable zeal and conscientiousness. He had matins every morning, winter and summer, and full services on saints' days; the congregation consisting for the most part of the inferior members of his own establishment, the parish clerk, and the old people of the almshouses—the latter sighing and groaning over their devotions in the deadly chill of the dank church when it rained and snowed, and their rheumatics were bad, but aware that they could only stay away at the risk of losing all the rewards of good conduct—their tea and tobacco, their coals and blankets, their soup and wine, the little comforts of their poor dependent lives. The farmers and well-to-do village folk, though most anxious to oblige, felt that life was not long enough for weekday church-going, and were in a position to indulge somewhat in the courage of their opinions.

Between the church and the rectory, on the side farthest from the village, the road continued a road for a hundred yards or so, wide, with grassy margins and overshadowing elm trees, and then it ended in a gateway—two prodigious square stone pillars, on which heraldic monsters of more than heroic size sat on their discoloured haunches, lifting weather-worn noses to the sky. These guarded two wrought-iron gates of a later period, with smaller gates on either side of them. Just within stood a venerable lodge covered with ivy to the chimney tops. This was one of the entrances to Dunstanborough Park and the Hall—the one used by the Delavel household and the village in their intercourse with each other. There was a private gate in the churchyard, but this was very private indeed, for the family only (when they chose to walk to church, as they mostly did), and not for servants, or tradespeople, or common folk of any sort. Within the green enclosure of the park, which was large enough for a considerable herd of deer to live in, with all the luxuries of shade and quiet to which those aristocratic creatures are accustomed,
stood the ancient house which was the pride of the Delavels and the archaeological societies—a solid, wide-spreading, majestic, quadrangular building, with an unwholesome duck-weedy moat all round it, and outside that a belt of gardens, not very well kept, but quaint and picturesque, with a good many yew trees about them, and tall hedges clipped into shapes of birds and beasts. The walls were of all ages, and some of them of a thickness suggesting the monumental stability of the Egyptian Pyramids. These portions were pierced with apparently unfathomable narrow slits, or had square stone-mullioned windows, in which sombre old stained glass or bottle-green discs and diamonds in leaden lattices scantily revealed the light and shut out the air; but later portions of the house displayed rows of tall Queen Anne sashes, and even a French casement here and there, set in a flat, dark surface of closely-trimmed ivy. Every kind of architectural irregularity was to be seen around the courtyard—once the scene of jousts and tournaments, afterwards paved with stone, but now grassed and gravelled like a college quadrangle—examples of many periods, from the unrestorable ruin of an almost prehistoric time to the French-windowed wall aforesaid, which only a learned person could describe in the proper terms; and this courtyard was entered by a vast gateway, like a railway tunnel, over the arched roof of which were vaulted chambers of stone, reached by spiral staircases, the grey outer walls being encrusted with crumbling shields chiselled with the numerous quarterings of the Delavel house—the carved work worn away by time and weather, so that it was matter of guess-work which was which.

Within doors the house was a museum of treasures to the artist and antiquary. It was a fortunate thing that for several generations the Delavels had been hampered for money; for thus, though they had indulged themselves in new fashions from time to time, they had done so moderately, and had never made that clean sweep of old ones which might have taken place more than once had they been able to afford it. So there were still oak panels black with age, and chimney-pieces carved from floor to ceiling, and roofs upheld by open beams or ribbed with stone like a cathedral crypt. There were still tapestries and leather hangings, whereon stories sacred and pagan had been figured once and had faded away, and fine old Jacobean presses and settles that went out of favour with
the Stuart kings. There were Louis Quatorze boule work and William of Orange marquetry, florid, pot-bellied, spindle-legged; and delicate Chippendale from the hand of the original Thomas, claw-footed, with slender, shining curves, and fine, flat carvings, wrought in that beautiful Spanish mahogany which is so rarely used in modern cabinetmaking. Some of them you may see at this day in the loan exhibitions, with crowds of would-be possessors gloating on their antique charms. But in those earlier days of which I am writing they were sequestered and undervalued treasures, mouldering in unused rooms in different parts of the house—rooms beautiful and stately enough in their way, but also unappreciated, and, to say the truth, so comfortless and inconvenient as to be unfit for the requirements of nineteenth century life. The domestics had quarters in the old parts of the house, and the servants' hall was a glorious Gothic chamber with an arched stone roof fit for a royal chapel. There were also some ghostly bedrooms, kept in habitable order with frequent fires and a great abundance of candles, where guests were put on the rare occasions of their entertainment, and where they invariably had bad dreams. But the family, in its ordinary life, confined itself to the wing with the sash windows, and there lived very much like other people, sitting on chintz-covered sofas, and enjoying the little comforts of that inartistic day.

The reigning Delavel was a tall, thin, high-nosed, stately man of sixty, the embodiment of all the feudal traditions of his race—a "remnant," like his village, of a condition of things that had gone by without his knowing it. Lady Susan, his wife, was undignifiedly stout, a soft, simple, smiling woman, quite unlike her spouse; for which reason, possibly, it was that their three sons and two daughters were exceptionally strong young shoots of the family tree, which had put forth but feebly of late generations. Roger, the heir of the house, and the seventeenth Delavel of Dunstanborough in direct line, was a handsome young man of twenty-five, a cadet in the diplomatic service. The second son, Keppel, a year younger, was a lieutenant in the Guards. And the youngest son, Richard, was a fine lad of twenty, still keeping terms at Oxford. The daughters, Barbara and Katherine, were children of sixteen and twelve, in the hands of a governess.

These seven individuals comprised the family—the great
family which within a certain radius was honoured and worshipped in a manner that Hapsburgs and Hohenzollerns might have envied. And the black sheep of the flock was Richard, the youngest son.

CHAPTER II.

A REBEL IN THE CAMP.

Dicky, as he was called in those days, came home from Oxford to spend his long vacation at Dunstanborough. He had been very anxious to spend it elsewhere (with a college chum who had made arrangements for his inclusion in a mountaineering party), but there were three, if not four, good reasons for refusing him his wish. In the first place, he had failed for his degree, and was in disgrace, and did not deserve to enjoy himself; and secondly, his brothers, Roger and Keppel, were making their pleasures in the world so costly that economy was necessary in the case of one who could be compelled to save; and thirdly, Mr. Delavel considered that his youngest son was too unsteady to be trusted with independence, and could only be kept safe and out of mischief under his father's eye. The fourth reason had reference to certain supposed good influences that might be brought to bear upon him if he stayed at home.

At this time the boy was overflowing with young life and vigour and ideas. He was a tall, slim, eager-looking lad, graceful and agile as a deer, and with the mettle of a young blood-horse, full of generous impulses and without a particle of meanness in him; and to call him unsteady was to express the purely conventional view of his character. The term was a label affixed to him by his high and mighty father, and therefore generally accepted as properly describing him, because of a certain startling and subversive tendency to think and choose for himself which he had developed with his growth to manhood, and which an otherwise irresistible paternal authority had been unable to put down. Being the youngest son, he was naturally destined for the Church (though the family living had been pledged to other uses before he was born, there were others as good to be had for the asking),
and he had assumed from a child that such was his inevitable career; but on a recent return from Oxford, and quite suddenly, without giving any valid reason for it, he had calmly announced that he had changed his mind—as if the family politics had ever taked his mind into account—and deliberately refused to prepare for orders on conscientious grounds, to the intense wrath and indignation of his father, who called him an impudent young puppy to set up for opinions of his own at his age, and asked him how the devil he proposed to support himself.

Mr. Delavel was sure that somebody had instigated his son to this unheard-of rebellion. And of course somebody had. The prototypical black sheep, but for whom our hero might possibly have been a lawn-sleeved bishop at this day, was a fiery-souled and frail-bodied young deacon—a curate-missionary to the Oxford slums—with a transcendental conscience and the zeal and courage of an early martyr, who, when the time for taking full orders arrived, which was during a period of close and affectionate intercourse with Dicky, came to the conclusion, after a hard struggle, that it would be wrong for him to become a priest. It does not sound a large matter to us, but in those old days, when Colenso was the infamous person of the time, it meant a great deal. The rebel made no parade of his rebelliousness; he did not seek to justify himself in public statements, like another person (then an innocent baby cutting its milk-teeth) who, many years later, was associated with Dicky under almost identical circumstances; yet he became a "marked" man, at a disadvantage with the world. His honest scruples were ascribed to what a Yankee would call "pure cussedness," to the promptings of a wicked heart, to demoniacal possession; like his more illustrious episcopal fellow-culprit, he was about thirty years before his time, and had to pay the fine that society imposes in all such cases. He was shunned as an "infected" person, a sort of moral leper—practically excommunicated from the congregation of the elect.

Under these circumstances, Dicky, if he had been any one but Dicky—"marked" himself with the seal of a distinct individuality—would have dropped the discreditable acquaintance. Instead of that, he cherished it more and more as it became less and less socially desirable, and naturally became more and more like-minded with the friend beside whom he stood and fought, and for whose cause he suffered. It was a brief if pregnant episode.
Simultaneously with the laying down of his clerical frock, the young deacon laid down his life, at enmity with the Church but at perfect peace with himself, having, it was popularly believed, done an immense amount of mischief and wickedness in his few years—having, at any rate, inoculated Richard Delavel with his high-minded eccentricity, whether for harm or good. The boy saw his friend laid in the grave—over which no clergyman could be found to read the words of hope, which were considered to have no applicability in this case, and straightway went home, with a new sternness in his young face, to tell his father that he had changed his mind with regard to his future profession. When asked why he so suddenly objected to enter the Church, he merely said that his conscience was against it, the absurd reason that drove his parent to frenzy. For was not the head of the house the hereditary keeper of the conscience of the family? And what business had a gentleman and a Delavel to have any ideas that were not those of his class? And what business had a boy barely out of his teens with ideas at all?

Mr. Delavel refused to listen to him for a moment, and continued to believe that the natural order of things would proceed without serious interruption. Nevertheless, as time wore on and the stiffnecked boy showed no sign of yielding, the father began to realise that strong measures might be necessary. As the result of an interview that took place in this particular month of July, he resorted to the orthodox device for compelling a son to do his duty. He said to Lady Susan that the fellow should not have another penny until he "came to his senses."

Lady Susan was a soft-hearted mother, who always took her children's part. She thought Dicky entirely in the wrong, and yet she could not bear to see him thwarted. And she said she didn't see why he shouldn't go into the army, if he preferred it—the army, of course, being the only alternative present to her mind—especially as he had so fine a figure for a uniform.

Mr. Delavel begged to inform her that it was as much as he could do to keep one son in the army. She must know as well as he did that to make allowances and pay debts for two would be out of the question.

"Dicky is not given to running into debt," the mother remarked. "Both Roger and Keppel, when they were at Christchurch, had three times as many debts as he."
The father gave him no credit for this convenient virtue, but went on to say that Roger and Keppel, whatever their faults, were true Delavels, and that he sometimes thought Richard must have been changed in the cradle. "I suppose he takes after your people," said the old man calmly; "he certainly does not take after his own family."

"Is not my family his own too?" inquired Lady Susan pathetically.

Her husband evaded that question. In marrying the daughter of an earl whose grandfather had been a money-lender, he had married much beneath him—in fact, Lady Susan's family was no family at all in his sense; and, though it was a constant wonder and irritation to him that she would not see it, he was too polite to wound her with explanations. But emphatically he did not allow her to be more than the wild stem on which the fine flower of his race was grafted.

Dicky, then, came home to Dunstanborough, to spend the long vacation where he would be out of mischief. There were great rejoicings at the Hall over his return—though he did come without his degree—particularly amongst the female members of the establishment; and for a day or two he stayed about the house and made himself a delightful companion. He chatted to his mother and escorted her about the garden, and put pillows at her back and footstools under her feet. He had his tea in the schoolroom, and conducted himself in various ways that were subversive of the usual discipline in that department, nevertheless charming the heart of the governess, who at forty-five was still susceptible to the fascinations of his sex. He teased his sisters, as women of all ages delight to be teased by the men they love, and he "carried on" with the housekeeper, a venerable and obese person who had nursed him when a baby in long clothes, in such a manner that she declared with suffocating giggles that she would have to tell his ma if he didn't behave himself. The Hall was quite a cheerful place for the first few days after the black sheep's return.

Then a dreamy taciturnity came over him. Life at Dunstanborough did not yield him that spiritual sustenance which his large and growing appetite required. It was petty and monotonous, and he felt lonely, nursing great thoughts of his own with no one to confide them to, and building air castles which, in the present standstill stage of his career, he saw
no chance of realising. So he left his family to their normal dulness and wandered away to remote coverts of the park; and there he lay amongst the bracken fern on the flat of his back, his long legs thrown one over the other, and his hands clasped under his head, and gazed into the branches above him for hours together.

On the fifth day he thought he would go and see his cousin Maxwell, by way of a change. Max was his brother Roger's friend rather than his, but they had all been boys together, and he thought it would be interesting to see how the young parson, as a full-blown rector and householder, was shaking down. On former occasions Mr. Delavel-Pole's mother had been at the head of affairs—an aunt towards whom Dicky entertained the most undutiful sentiments; and that young man had given the rectory a wide berth and kept himself in careful ignorance of all that went on there. Now he heard that Max was his own master in his own house, and he thought he would go and ask him how he liked it. It was early in the morning when this impulse seized him. He was taking an aimless stroll before breakfast in the direction of the village, and chanced to hear the church bell ring for eight o'clock prayers.

"Matins," said Dicky to himself. "They're going on still. Well, it's rough on those poor old things to make them trudge to church at this time of day. He forgets they are not so young as he is."

Then he made up his mind to go and speak to the old things, and ask them how their rheumatics and asthmases were getting on, and thought he might as well have breakfast with Max when he was there.

He strolled towards the hedge that divided two sides of the churchyard from the park, passed through the private gate, and stepped lightly round the church to the south door, by which all save the great family went in and out; and here he sat down on one of the two stone benches built into the side walls of the porch, and waited till the service was over. He could hear the rector monotoning the prayers with breathless rapidity in a low voice, and he knew he should not have to wait long.

In a few minutes the congregation came out. It numbered seven souls all told, of whom five were aged pensioners from the almshouses, hobbling along in various stages of decrepitude, who all curtseyed to the ground at the unexpected apparition of the young gentleman from the Hall, and seemed over-
whelmed by the affability of his behaviour. The sixth was the parson's under-housemaid—the only one of the rectory servants who could be spared from his or her domestic duties. The seventh was a very pretty young girl.

Dicky Delavel was chatting to Sally Finch—old Sally, who had had seventy years' hard experience of life, yet looked up with cringing humility to the boy who had had almost none—when the seventh member of the congregation came out into the summer sunshine from the dusk of the church. The rector in his cassock was walking by her side, speaking to her as if he knew her very well, while she moved along with a fluttering gesture, her modest eyes cast down. Mr. Delavel-Pole was in no hurry, though he had not had his breakfast. Nor was she. Not until he noticed the old people grouping on the footpath and caught sight of his cousin, did he shake hands with her, but then he dismissed her with little ceremony.

"Come to me at five o'clock," he said; "then we can talk it over. How do, Dicky? You are out early."

"How do, Max?" said Dicky. His eyes were following the vanishing figure of number seven with an evident recognition of its unfamiliar charms, and he spoke a little abruptly. Indeed, the greeting was not overpoweringly warm on either side. "Is it one of the privileges of a parson to have young ladies come to see you at five o'clock? Very pleasant sort of parish work that, I should think."

"My dear fellow," said Mr. Delavel-Pole, with a little smile of disdain, "there are no young ladies in Dunstanborough." And his voice and manner implied his opinion that this was a very vulgar style of pleasantry.

"No? I didn't know that Dunstanborough was so bad as that," rejoined Dicky. "This is a visitor, then?"

"This? Who? Oh, you mean Annie Morrison. Didn't you know her? She has shot up a good deal lately. She helps me with the Sunday-school. She is a good little thing, but you would hardly mistake her for a lady, I think, if you looked at her closely."

"I did look at her closely," said Dicky. "If she isn't a lady, she's an uncommon good imitation of one."

"A very good imitation," said Mr. Delavel-Pole indifferently. "That is boarding-school. She has taken the veneer very well; it looks quite natural at a little distance. You are coming in to breakfast, Dicky? Oh yes, you must come in—you haven't been to see me for an age."
They had paused in the middle of the road, with their faces turned in the direction of the lane which was swallowing up the girl’s figure—a trim and pretty figure neatly clad in blue cotton. The rector made a movement to enter his gate, and Dicky, mumbling thanks for the invitation, followed with rather an absent air. “So that is Annie Morrison,” he said presently, as he rubbed his boots on the rectory door-mat. “She wore a holland pinafore the last time I saw her.”

They entered the rich gloom of the house, and a man-servant came up softly, took off his master’s cassock, and glided away with it. Then the two young men passed from the hall to the breakfast-room—a charming apartment, lighted by a deep-seated mullioned window that “gave” upon a sweet green lawn, and solidly furnished with oak and leather, Turkey carpet, and dark wool curtains spangled with the cross and fleur de lis—where stood the rector’s breakfast table, appointed like a lord’s. ScarceIy had they entered when the footman appeared with his silver dishes, and the young host sat down to entertain his hungry guest.

“How’s poor old Woodford?” asked Dicky, when he had taken the first edge from his appetite with a couple of devilled kidneys that melted in his mouth. Woodford was the man who had turned out of Dunstanborough to let Delavel-Pole come in, now perpetual curate of the adjoining parish—a poor, lean, shabby old man, who had an invalid wife, eight children, and an income of £200 a year.

“I have not the least idea,” said the rector. “I have not seen him for months.”

“Seems hard lines for him, eh?”

“What could he expect?” rejoined Delavel-Pole indifferently. “His father was a miller, and he ought to have been a miller too. Bennet,” to the footman, with a severe face, “go and ask the cook what she means by sending me in burnt toast.”

Dicky stayed with his cousin most of the forenoon. He was taken over the house to look at various improvements which had been made since he was there before; and he lingered long about the stables, looking at Max’s new horse, and giving his opinion upon broughams and dogcarts. Then they went into the study, where, while he finished his morning pipe, they had a chat about Oxford and other interesting subjects. The rector talked much of his parish—the state in which Woodford had left it, and the uphill struggle on which he him-
self had embarked—and made serious inquiries concerning Dicky's views and prospects.

"I can't believe," said Mr. Delavel-Pole, who held a commission from his uncle to reason with this perverse and headstrong boy, "that you are the sort of fellow to put your hand to the plough and then look back."

Dicky's bright and friendly face clouded immediately. "I am not aware that I am," he said stiffly.

"What do you call it, then?" pursued the other. "You have known all along what you were intended for."

"I am not responsible for other people's intentions."

"You never made any objections till now. Why did you not?"

"Because I never properly thought of it till now." There was a little pause, and he added, looking up, "Is there anything more you wish to know?"

The rector walked uneasily about the room. "If it is that you fancy you are not fit for it," he said, "I honour you for the feeling. But that should not be a hindrance—that's a matter in your own hands. I did not feel fit for it once."

"I should think you didn't," replied Dicky, with a chuckle.

"But," proceeded Mr. Delavel-Pole, flushing a little, "as time went on I saw that it was my vocation—I saw that I was called to it. Everything pointed that way, as it does in your case. And I obeyed the call, and I have never regretted it."

"I don't want to judge others," said the boy rather doggedly, as he knocked the ashes from his pipe. "No doubt you felt it was all right. You and I are different."

"I felt it was all right—yes. When the finger of Providence points out your path for you so clearly as that—when duty to God means duty to your parents as well—it seems to me there is not much room for doubt as to the right and wrong of it, Dicky."

Dicky looked up at his cousin's thin, solemn, high-nosed face—the regular Delavel face, unsoftened by any touch of the genial spirit that irradiated his own—and said "Ah!" in a meditative tone. The effect of this vague ejaculation was to raise a restive temper in the rector's breast.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded sharply.

"Oh, nothing—nothing," said Dicky, with an irritating
chuckle; "I was only thinking of the finger of Providence—that's all."

"Are you going to deny that there is a Providence?"

"Not at all. But I do say it is a queer thing, when you come to think of it. I wonder how it strikes old Woodford?"

His keen sense of amusement at his own train of thought, and at the spectacle of his companion's disgust and irritation, overmastered him, and he laughed aloud. "I think you'd better not try to come the parson over me, old boy," said he, rising, as he perceived that it was time to take his leave. "It answers well enough, no doubt, with pretty young farmers' daughters, but I can't believe in you as they do. I'm very sorry, but I can't. Some men might influence me, perhaps, but not you, Max—not you. You'd better give it up for a bad job at once."

"I have given it up long ago," said Delavel-Pole haughtily. "No, you haven't, for you are trying it on now. And look here—just you drop it"—his face changing into a nearer likeness to Max's own. "I have got my own conscience, which is as good as yours—or my father's either. And I have made up my mind that I will not enter the Church to please either of you—not if the finger of Providence points to a bishopric and ten thousand a year. I'm not over particular, but I draw the line at—well, at that sort of thing. I just warn you, you know."

"You're a true Delavel for temper," said Max, when rage would let him speak.

"You're another," retorted Dicky.

And presently they parted, loving each other about as much as they had always done, since the days when they fought and kicked in their aristocratic nurseries as irreconcilable little boys.

CHAPTER III.

HOW DICKY KEPT OUT OF MISCHIEF.

When lunch was over Dicky took an early opportunity to escape from his parents—who, pleased with his visit to that good young man, their nephew, seemed anxious to find out if it had had any effect—and disappeared, no one knowing
whither. The warm morning had cooled; a film of coppery grey cloud was spreading like a veil over the clear sky; and a wind, that had risen in short little puffs, was beginning to moan bleakly in the tree tops. But these signs of coming rain and storm, which kept the girls and their governess in the house, did not keep him. With his terrier frisking at his heels, he strode at a rapid pace through unfrequented paths of the garden to the woods, where now the branches were dark and thick overhead, and the brushwood underfoot a lovely tangle of wild vines in flower, taking no notice of the delicate life that teemed around him. The crash and swish of his long-legged stride, in that midsummer solitude, when even the birds were silent, suggested the amateur poacher overtaken by untimely daylight.

He left the woods for the highroad at a point where it skirted the seashore, and gave off a lane that led to the Morrisons' farm. From the top of the park wall, which he reached by climbing an adjacent tree, he could see the farmhouse about a mile inland—or, rather, the stacks and garden foliage that marked its site; and, having dropped himself over, he took that road and lane, and shortly arrived at that house. He considered with himself that it would be a kind thing to go and have a chat with the old people. He had not seen old Morrison for ages—had, in fact, neglected him shamefully. And he was curious to see little Annie again; to shake hands with her and ask her how she did, and to apologise for not recognising her at the church door. He was afraid she might think him above noticing "the likes of her," as doubtless many Delavels would be; and if there was a thing he abhorred more than another, it was to be suspected of class snobbery of that sort.

The farmhouse was a long, low building, with a honey-suckled porch, a steep, thatched roof, broken by an irregular line of dormer windows, and an air of old-fashioned neatness pervading it and its surroundings that was pleasant to see. The garden was fragrant with lavender and sweet peas and cabbage roses, and full of the sleepy hum of bees; the hay was in cocks in its surrounding meadow, and the cornfields beyond yellowing for the harvest. An old sheepdog, dozing on the doorstep, lifted his head and pricked his ears and growled a guttural growl under his breath at the approach of the intruders; and Billy the terrier responded in characteristic manner as he crept up at his master's heels.
Hearing the noise, Mrs. Morrison—a comely, broad-faced dame, who waddled heavily as she walked—came out from the "keeping room," as they called it, into the porch; where she stood aghast at Rover's presumption and her own remissness in having delayed to put on her afternoon gown and cap.

"Lord save us, Master Richard," she piously ejaculated, "you don't mean to say that's you, sir!" And she drove the old dog from the mat with contumelious kicks and threats, and besought her illustrious visitor to step in, backing into a corner to allow him room to cross the tiny entry and walk into the sitting-room before her. Following him, she hurried to open the door of the parlour within (it was superfluously termed the "spare parlour" in those parts—a painful apartment, perfumed with beeswax and turpentine, and wonderfully adorned with bead and wool work and white antimacassars), but he would not notice the invitation. He had no sense of dignity, as a Delavel should have had, and preferred to plant himself in the Windsor chair from which she had risen to admit him. This was just opposite another chair in which the farmer, her husband, sat tightly wedged—his spotted handkerchief over his head, his empty churchwarden beside him, his gaitered legs as far apart as possible, his hands folded placidly over his stomach—sleeping the sleep of the just after his noonday dinner.

The old man, being unceremoniously shaken and shouted at, roused himself with difficulty, and in his turn stared with astonishment at his visitor.

"What, Master Richard, sir, is it you?" he exclaimed; and when Dicky had again asserted his identity, Mr. Morrison, collecting his faculties, supposed the squire had made his son the bearer of some message about "them gates."

"No," said Dicky airily; "I just happened to be taking a walk this way, and I thought I'd drop in and see how you all were. How are you, Morrison? Keeping pretty well?"

"Thank ye kindly, sir," his gratified host responded; "I'm as well as I can expect to be at my time o' life; and how's yourself?"

An interesting dialogue ensued, under cover of which Mrs. Morrison escaped to attire herself smartly and get out her cake and wine. Dicky heard the whole history of "them gates," of the state of the crops, of the danger threatening the hay, which "might ha' been all got in in a couple o' days if it had held fine." And so on and so on.
But there was no sign of Annie. In pauses of the conversation, and even when there were no pauses, Dicky listened with ears alert for the faintest sound of her step and rustle of her gown. Since he had entered the house without seeing her, he thought of her as upstairs in her chamber in the roof, braiding up her hair and putting on her best frock, perhaps, in honour of his visit. But time went on, and she did not come down, and the old people did not seem to expect her. Mrs. Morrison returned, bringing in fruit and cakes and the best decanters; and when she required assistance in her hospitable ministrations she called one Eliza to her aid. At last Dicky's impatience got the better of a resolve he had made not to betray his sudden interest in the farmer's daughter. He felt that he must find out whether or not he had any chance of seeing her. So "How are the young people?" he asked abruptly, in the middle of a long description of the surpassing merits of a new pony.

The father declared that the young people were fine and hearty, and that John, his son, was going to be married to Rhody Appleton, at the Coastguards.

"Indeed," Dicky ejaculated, feigning an interest in what was evidently considered an event of importance.

"What, didn't my lady tell you? She was very kind to Rhody. She went to see her to wish her joy, and said she'd give her her teaspoons when she was married."

"She goes to the Hall to sew sometimes," added Mrs. Morrison, as she poured half-a-pint of yellow cream over a huge plate of raspberries, "and a beautiful needlewoman she is—I must say that for her." The potential mother-in-law gave a little sigh, as of regret that she could say no more.

"They're to be married next month," said the old man, who appeared more satisfied with the prospect, "and they're going to live with us. There's room enough for us all, and Rhody'll brighten the house up. She's a smart gal, is Rhody, and as busy as a bee. You see we don't want to lose John, sir; and anyhow, the place will be his own afore long, in the course of nature, as one may say."

"Just so," responded Dicky, who, if he had properly heard what was said to him, would have told the farmer that he trusted it would be many a long day before John would step into his father's shoes. "And how is Annie?"

Mrs. Morrison replied that Annie was nicely. "She's half a head over me now—looks down on her poor mother, I tell
her. I never saw a girl grow as she's done the last couple o' years."

"I think I caught sight of her this morning," mumbled Dicky, his mouth full of raspberries and cream; "at least Max—my cousin Delavel-Pole—said it was she. I didn't know her a bit. I thought it was a visitor at church."

"Oh, was it at church?" inquired the mother, a shade anxiously. "Yes, she goes to them early services whenever I can spare her. I don't mind in the summer, but I tell her she'll have to stop it when the winter comes. It's a long way, and I won't have her out in the dark mornings in the rain and slush, a-shivering in that cold church, with her clothes wet, and an empty stomach. I can't allow it, sir, and so I told Mr. Delavel-Pole plump and plain. 'Growing girls,' I says, 'are ticklish in their constitutions; and she's the only one we've got, and we don't want her to die o' consumption, nor yet rheumatic fever.' He says she won't take no harm when she's doing her duty, but that's as may be. I don't hold with some folks' notions of duty, and Mr. Delavel-Pole don't understand growing girls."

"Delavel-Pole's an ass," said Dicky, with irrepressible irritation, as he set down his empty plate. "Don't you pay any regard to what he says."

He spoke, of course, without remembering to whom he was speaking, and a moment of silent embarrassment ensued.

Then the old farmer began to chuckle and shake with an enjoyment that plainly betokened sympathy. He did not presume to think his rector an ass, of course, but he had the average male parishioner's instinctive grudge against the "clerical sex"—it existed even in those remote days—and was delighted to share it with another, and such another.

"Oh, come now, young master, draw it mild," he cackled, affecting to protest. "Parson mustn't be spoke of like that, you know—Squire's nevy and all."

"Of course not," said Dicky. "I was wrong to speak so. What I meant was that—that there were many things of which Mrs. Morrison must be a better judge than he. For instance, she knows what's best for her own daughter. Of course Mr. Delavel-Pole must be listened to—in his place."

The farmer continued to regard his visitor with tears of laughter in his old eyes. For many a long day would he remember this delicious joke and repeat it to his cronies whenever the rector's name was mentioned—"'Delavel-Pole's
an ass,' says he, just as cool as if 'twas that there dawg he was a-talkin’ on. ‘Don’t you pay no regard to what he says,’ says he. ‘You keep ’m in his place,’ says he.” And so on. But Mrs. Morrison was honestly scandalised by Master Richard’s plain-speaking and her husband’s want of manners. She dutifully abstained from laughing.

“I’m sure I don’t know whatever Annie would say—Annie thinks such a lot of Mr. Delavel-Pole,” she said presently; and by that innocent remark she restored a decorous gravity at once. The farmer ceased to gurgle in his throat and wipe tears of mirth on his spotted handkerchief; a hint of constitutional moroseness obscured his jolly grin, and Dicky’s face, like a mirror, reflected the change.

“The women’s all like that,” remarked the old man, “if the parson’s young and good-looking and takes notice on ’em. ’Spose they think a man isn’t flesh and blood when he puts a long-tailed coat on. And seems to me the parson knows how soft they are, and makes his account of it. That is, some of them do” (the farmer said “du”)—“not Mr. Delavel-Pole in particular, you understand, sir.”

“Oh, I understand,” said Dicky viciously; “and I quite agree with you.” And then he told himself that it would be very improper to pursue that subject, and pulled himself up.

“Where is Annie?” he asked, point-blank.

Then Mrs. Morrison told him that Annie had gone out for a walk. “She said she was going to the beach to look for sea anemones while the tide was out. But I wish she was safe back,” said the mother, gazing anxiously out of the window. “I told her to mind the weather, but she don’t mind anything when she’s after them things for her aquarium, and it’s going to pour directly.”

Dicky rose, looked at his watch, and said he was awfully sorry, but he would have to be running home. His people did not know where he was—it was later than he had supposed—it would be as well to escape the coming shower, if possible. He refused cake and wine, on the ground that he had filled himself with raspberries, but his hostess was so crestfallen when he proposed to leave without taking any substantial refreshment that he asked her for a glass of beer—which she brought him foaming in a pewter tankard, and cool from the cellar, with great pride. He took it off at a draught, without drawing breath, and wiping his young moustache as he set down the mug, told her, with the air of giving a very
weighty opinion, that there was no beer in Oxford to beat that. And then she was satisfied.

"Good-bye, Morrison," he said to the old farmer. "I shall come and see you again soon."

"You're very good, sir," replied Morrison, wondering. "I take it very kind of you, Master Richard."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Morrison. Next time you must show me the aquarium, and your beehives, and—and the other things. Remember me to John. Tell him I wish him good luck, and that I'll come to the wedding if Miss Appleton asks me."

"Perhaps my lady wouldn't like her to take such a liberty," said the farmer's wife, perplexed and pleased, and thinking that certainly Master Richard was the flower of the flock.

"What a dear young gentleman!" she ejaculated, as she stood in the porch to watch his departure. "No pride about him. How nice he did speak of our John! And how he did enjoy his beer!"

"He always took notice o' John," said the farmer.

It is, perhaps, needless to say that Dicky did not go straight home. No desire to allay his mother's possible anxiety as to his whereabouts, or kind wish to relieve the tedium of the schoolroom for his sisters, prompted his hurried leave-taking. He plunged down the lane up which he had come, and followed the cliff road in the direction of the village until he came to a place that allowed him, at the risk of his neck, to descend to the beach below. He would not yet abandon his mission of apology to Annie, after all the trouble he had taken, and he might, he thought, come across her somewhere in this locality before it was time for her appointment with Max. In his secret heart he was more bent on forestalling and circumventing his cousin than anxious to see her for his own pleasure.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CREEPING TIDE CREPT UP ALONG THE SAND.

The beach at Dunstanborough was spacious and level and firm—everything that a beach should be, but so seldom is—and provided a variety of opportunities for adventurous
infancy and youth. When the tide went out it went a very long way out, and left a miscellaneous and interesting assortment of the treasures of the deep behind it. At high-water mark there was a drift of foam and seaweed always thickly studded with them, and at low-water they lay strewn in lavish abundance over the wide sweep of wet and wrinkled sands. Close in shore the dark boulders, which were once the bases of rocks long since worn away, and now so curiously resembled the crowded table tombs of an old churchyard (say Haworth, in Yorkshire, for instance), though covered to the very wall of the red cliff at one point, when the tide was at the full, were left by the ebb naked but for their veiling of what looked like fine green hair, and intersected by the loveliest little clear pools that never went dry, each one of which was an aquarium more rich and varied in its furnishings than any glass tank that I ever saw. And even better than these pools for the curiosity hunter were the mussel beds—two or three irregularly shaped dark blue patches on the shining sands; but these lay so far out that they were seldom visited. Here was the place for finding sea anemones in perfection—flowering in the little runnels and basins between the spiky chunks of the shellfish, in every shade of delicate translucent colour, lilac, and rose, and orange, and silver grey—the full hearts expanded in clustering tentacles that waved in the transparent water. But those who went hunting to the mussel beds had need to keep a careful watch for the returning tide, which had a way of stealing a march upon the unwary, and surrounding them completely before they noticed its approach. Not far from high-water mark there was a wide channel that was always filled first and emptied (but never quite emptied) last. It was here that the bathing machines stopped when the tide was high; when it was going out they were taken further on, over shallow levels, into the gradually deepening mid-sea, or rather mid-estuary, water—often a long drive beyond call of the beach proper, where still the bathers might be left high and dry in a few minutes. The channel might be likened to a tightened bow-string, and the tide came up in the shape of the drawn bow; so that while a great plain of sand and the distant mussel beds remained uncovered, two strong currents were rushing swiftly round the arc behind, and into the line of the channel before them, isolating them from the mainland, and converting them into an island doomed in a very short space of time to be sunk deep beneath the sea.
Accidents used to happen frequently from inattention to this peculiarity of the Dunstanborough coast, even to those who were perfectly familiar with it; and when Dicky Delavel reached the shore after his visit to the Morrisons' farm, one of those accidents was imminent.

By this time the sky was so dark, and the general aspect of things so cheerless, that the score or so of visitors who had spent the morning on the sands were no longer to be seen there; they had taken refuge in their lodgings up in the village from the threatening storm. The boy had walked a mile or two, swinging along as if life and death depended on his rate of speed, and had not seen a living soul. Even the coastguardsman, who should have been parading the top of the cliff with his telescope, was invisible.

"I have missed her," thought Dicky; "she has gone home by the road." And he glanced up at the heavy sky and prepared to follow her example.

Suddenly he stopped. He had caught sight of a figure moving over the distant mussel beds—moving slowly in a stooping posture from place to place—and he could just see that it was a woman's. At the same moment he saw that the enemy was creeping upon her, and that she was too much absorbed in her occupation to notice it. Could that be Annie Morrison? Surely not. Annie was Dunstanborough born, and knew the ways of the sea as well as he did; she would never let herself be entrapped by the tide. Still, though it were only an ignorant visitor, in whom he could not be expected to feel the slightest interest, she had to be rescued, and he only was there to do it. Already it was too late for her to escape unaided. As he stripped off his coat the two currents came running up as fast as a fleet horse could gallop, and met together in the channel at his feet, where they began to rise and flow backward over the as yet large island of naked sand. Usually a boat was lying away on that island, with its anchor thrown out—perhaps on purpose for emergencies like the present; but boats were few at Dunstanborough, and this was now otherwise engaged. Moment by moment the gulf between him and that lone little figure grew wider and deeper, and in a few minutes he knew that sands and mussel beds would disappear beneath the waves. There was no time for hesitation. He kicked off his boots, flung coat and waistcoat above reach of the tide, looked up and down in a vain search for help, and then, accompanied by the faithful Billy, splashed
through the tumbling waters of the channel, which washed his knees, and, reaching the dry sand, ran at his utmost speed towards the mussel beds, where the woman now stood upright and evidently aware of her predicament.

"Come along!" he roared, wildly waving his arms. "Throw away your basket and run—run, I tell you!" And then, as she obeyed him and came speeding over the sands like a lapwing, he saw that it was really Annie Morrison after all.

There was no time for greetings, however. A flash of elation lit up his handsome face for a moment, and then it became strained and anxious as before. He snatched her hand, and dragged her back across the sands as fast as her legs could carry her; and as they ran the tide ran to meet them, followed them and surrounded them, so that when they came to the brink of the channel it was no longer a channel, and the dry land on which they stood was no bigger than a good-sized tennis lawn.

Now he stood still, breathless, and looked at her, still holding her hand in his, to which she clung in abject fright and helplessness. She was not a heroine in her behaviour at this moment, but she certainly was uncommonly pretty.

"Look here," he said, trying to encourage her, "walk as far as you can, and when it gets too deep don't be frightened—I can swim and take you with me. It won't be far. Do what I tell you and we shall get through all right. Hold my hand tight—I will take care of you."

They entered the water together—or, rather, the water ran round them and drew them in—and, thanks to the even smoothness of that sandy floor, they were able to struggle along on foot until the tide reached up to Annie's shoulder. Then the girl lost her head and began to sway and flounder about and to shriek and cling to her companion in a way that made him clench his teeth and turn a little pale.

"We shall both be swamped," he exclaimed, holding himself as still as he could for a moment while he tried to steady her. "Do try and be brave—only for one second. Let me get a free stroke without pulling me down, and then put your hand on me somewhere—catch hold of my shoulder—my shirt sleeve—anything—and let yourself float; that's all you have to do. Otherwise we shall be drowned to a dead certainty."

But she was beside herself with terror, and heard not a word. Desperate, he shook her off for a moment to take his
and she screamed, and her head went down and her feet went up, and she clutched at him wildly—fortunately without getting hold of him; then she was dragged heavily to the surface by his hand under her arm, and his teeth in her frock; and thus, straining and struggling, and with such difficulty as taxed his strength and energy to the utmost, he managed to pull her through, by which time she was nearly insensible and lying a dead weight in his arms.

He made for the nearest point where he could get a foothold again, and this was under a jutting crag of cliff and amongst the fallen rocks—a rough landing place, where they were a good deal buffeted by breakers and bruised against the submerged boulders, but where they were past all danger of drowning. Up a steep slope of débris from the wave-worn cliff he scrambled, puffing and panting, and weighed down with his burden in her soaked garments; and he placed her in a niche in the red wall, where she would be sheltered from the now cutting wind and could draw breath again in peace. Here she leaned against him, with her eyes shut, and sobbed and moaned herself out of her stupefaction. In point of fact, she made an ignominious exhibition of herself. But this was not the way her conduct affected Dicky. Had she been like his sister Katherine, who had once thought it great fun to be precipitated into deep water with her best clothes on, he would not have found her half so interesting. Dear little timid, feminine creature! He had been nearly drowned through her cowardice, but he did not mind that now, as he sat beside her, trying to revive and comfort her. She made him feel so delightfully masculine and superior.

By-and-by she regained some sort of self-possession, lifted herself away from him, modestly drew her dripping clothes about her, and generally resumed her normal attitude, which, towards her "betters," was entirely what the catechism inculcated, boarding-school notwithstanding. For the first time they looked at each other with leisure to understand their temporary relations and what had happened to them. Dicky, with his wet shirt clinging to his strong young limbs and body, and his hair plastered to his head, was yet a handsome fellow for women's eyes to gaze upon. He had the fine-cut features peculiar to the Delavel family, with bright, straightforward eyes and a square and resolute jaw that were all his own, and with his cheek flushed and his chest heaving, filled with the triumph of his successful exploit, he was a lad that any mother
would have been proud of, and that any girl must have admired. Annie was a deplorable little object, with her drenched petticoats clinging to the steels of her crinoline, her brown hair in rats' tails round her face, her battered hat hanging by its sodden ribbons to her neck; still she, too, had her surviving attractions—limpid brown eyes and soft pink lips and a bloom on her fair and healthy skin that terror and sea water could not quite wash out. She was the first to speak, and did so with much agitation.

"Sir, you will catch your death of cold! Oh, what will Mr. Delavel and my lady say to me? Sir, do sit here, where you can be out of the wind."

"Pooh," he laughed. "As if a wetting could hurt a strong fellow like me! It is you who will catch your death of cold, I am afraid. I wish I had my coat here to put over you. Sit a moment to recover yourself, and then we'd better get home as fast as we can. See, here is the storm. I thought it was not far off."

The strong wind brought up the slanting rain, and it beat on their faces like a shower of bullets. Annie put down her head, and Dicky planted himself in front of her and spread himself as much as possible. It lightened and thundered, it hissed and howled; the grey plain of the sea was blurred, and the horizon was swallowed up in mist. The boy's whole body was exposed to the storm in order to protect his companion, who, however, could not well be wetter than she was; and the stinging of the violent rain upon his flesh and the trickle of cold streams inside his film of shirt were delightful sensations. Little did he think when he set forth in search of Annie Morrison that he was to be rewarded with such success as this.

Annie, in her sheltering niche, was filled with distress at the spectacle of the squire's son thus sacrificing himself for the likes of her. Such a thing had never been heard or thought of in Dunstanborough before.

"Oh, sir," she protested again and again, "do—do go home and make yourself dry. If anything should happen to you, the squire and my lady would never forgive me. Do take care of yourself—never mind me."

"Don't talk nonsense," he retorted, much gratified by her solicitude on his behalf, absurd as it was. "What am I here for, if not to mind you? It's—it's the greatest bit of luck I ever had in my life." She made no comment on this, and
he said presently, "Won't your father and mother be very anxious about you?"

"They will think I am at the coastguards' with Rhody," she replied.

"I hope they will; that would be one trouble the less for us. What made you stay out at the mussel beds so long? Didn't you know it was time for the tide to come in?"

"Yes, sir, I knew, but I had forgotten. I was so taken up with some sea anemones that I wanted for my aquarium that I did not notice the time. I shall never forgive myself for having caused you"

"Oh bother! I like it—I'm tremendously glad—I wouldn't have had anybody else do it for the world."

"There was nobody else, sir—only you. And you saved my life—with God's help."

"Bosh! rubbish! you make too much of a trifle. But"—as she did not immediately protest against this view—"though I say it that shouldn't, I believe you would have been at the bottom of the sea at this minute if it had not been for me."

He had turned his back to the rain, and was looking at her, and as he spoke he laid his hand on her shoulder, with the idea of presently slipping it round her waist. He had been known to flirt with barmaids in his day and to kiss a pretty housemaid behind her pantry door, and, having had time to realise the present situation, it seemed to him that it afforded an opportunity for a little sentimental diversion. He almost felt as if he had a right to it after all he had gone through.

But Annie, in the midst of fervent protestations of gratitude, drew herself back, gently but resolutely, and looked at him with eyes in which he read disappointment and reproach. In a moment he withdrew his hand, and withdrew himself an inch or two, with a slight flush on his cheek and a sensation of manly respect for her in his heart. If she had been the most finished coquette, designing to lead him on to admire her, she could not have done it more effectually than by this delicate repulse.

"The rain doesn't seem likely to hold up yet, and the tide is rising fast," he said, after a little conscious silence. "If we don't go now the water round the point will be too deep for us to get past, and we shall have to sit here till the tide goes down again. We had better fight through it and have done with it, hadn't we?"

She assented eagerly at the suggestion of this second danger
that she had overlooked, and they rose together and hurried over the rocks and into the sea again, which, though not deep enough to drown them this time, was well up to Dicky’s waist.

“You had better give me your hand,” he said politely, “so that I can steady you a bit. And don’t be in a hurry, or you will lame yourself amongst these stones.”

She gave him her cold hand, which he took loosely, but soon held in a firm clasp, for she required his support. Her dependence on him in the deep water amongst the stones seemed to imply that confidence in him was restored, and he ventured to say again how glad he was that he had happened to see her in time. “Strange to say, I had been thinking of you all day,” he made bold to remark; “ever since I saw you at church this morning.”

He looked at her, and she was not displeased. Her teeth chattered, but her expression was not cold; it was more feminine than he had seen it yet. “Did you see me this morning?” she murmured. The provocative question encouraged him wonderfully.

“I thought you were some beautiful young lady visitor that my cousin had scraped acquaintance with. It must be years since I saw you, Annie—I feel quite afraid to call you Annie now—for I only remember you as a little girl.”

“I spent some of my holidays in London, sir. And you were away sometimes.”

“Don’t call me ‘sir,’ Annie. I say, mind that rock—there, I told you so! Lean on me, Annie—let me guide you.” He boldly put his arm round her waist this time, and, as they were in rather a deep place, he did thereby hold her up and support her; but the moment this help became unnecessary she firmly dispensed with it.

“Thank you, sir—Mr. Richard—I can get along quite well now,” she said, and drew away from him with her modest dignity, that was as charming as her pretty deference, and all the more so because he saw there was no offence in it. It just kept him in his place, without snubbing him. It compelled his respect, without damping his sentimental impulse.

They had not far to wade before they came to a point where the cliff receded landward, and a little strip of shingle was left for them to walk upon. Then they gained the open beach, recovered Dicky’s clothes, and turned their faces towards a flight of wooden steps that led up the cliff to the village.
"Take my arm," said Dicky, presenting it. "It is heavy work getting up here, and you look dead beat."

"No, thank you, sir," said Annie. She put one foot on the bottom step of the steep staircase, and stood, panting, to muster her strength for the ascent. Then she looked at him with her soft eyes, and he promptly drew her hand within his arm and held it there firmly as they marched up. He even laid his own palm over it, so sure did he feel that she had no inward objection to his attentions—within bounds.

"You must go to the coastguards', dear, and Rhoda Appleton will give you some of her things to put on, and I'll send a message to your mother to tell her you are all right, and I shall make Mrs. Appleton give you some brandy and water and put you to bed," he said, trying to cover his young tenderness with an elderly air.

Annie murmured something to the effect that he was too good, and he pressed the hand on his arm. Upon which she gently drew it away, but without causing him to regret having pressed it.

Separately they made their way along the footpath at the top of the cliff to a gate leading into a narrow lane, which lane had a right of way through a yard in front of the Delavel Arms (happily deserted at this moment on account of the rain), and led into a road across which, on a slight eminence, stood the tall flagstaff and neat white cottages of the coastguard station; and they brought their tired and muddy feet to a standstill on Mrs. Appleton's spotless doorstep. Dicky knocked at the door, and it was opened by Miss Rhoda—familiarly called Rhody—who was keeping house in her mother's absence.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE COASTGUARD STATION.

Miss Appleton, a young person whose chignon and crinoline were much larger than Lady Susan considered suitable to a coastguardsman's daughter, opened the door with an airy flourish, revealing behind her an exquisitely neat apartment, brilliant with polished surfaces, its only litter the materials of
an unmade dress, upon which she had evidently been at work. On recognising her visitors and their dilapidated condition, her careless face and manner underwent a change.

"Annie!" she cried, with a long emphasis on the first syllable of the name, and an accent of mingled dismay and amusement—the amusement predominating—that set Dicky's teeth on edge. "Whatever have you been doing?" Then, turning to the young man with an effort to be respectfully serious, but still giggling under her breath, "Oh, Mr. Richard, sir!—goodness gracious, what a mess you are in, to be sure!"

"So would you be in a mess, Miss Appleton, if you had gone through what we have," said Dicky brusquely. "Miss Morrison was caught by the tide at the mussel beds, and I happened to be walking on the beach, fortunately, and saw her, and fished her out. Do take her in, please, and make her dry, and get her something hot; she is chilled through and through, and will be laid up with a fever if we don't mind. I think she had better go to bed, with a lot of blankets over her."

The young lady looked with some alarm at Annie's boots and petticoats, and the spotless floor and furniture; then thriftily pinned her own dress skirt round her waist and turned up her neat cuffs. "And you too, Mr. Richard," she said sweetly; "you must be attended to. I don't know what Mr. Delavel and my lady would say if you went home like that—and such a long way, too, and your teeth chattering. Will you just come up to father's room, sir, and let me lend you his best suit! T'aint fit for you to put on, I know, but if you wouldn't mind that, I could dry your clothes for you in half an hour."

Dicky thanked her, said he was ashamed to trouble her, but would be grateful for the loan of her father's clothes and a seat in the chimney corner for a little while—presently—when Miss Morrison had been looked after. But Annie would do nothing, and Rhoda would do nothing for her, until he, the illustrious Delavel, had been duly served; seeing which, he consented to mount to a little closet in the roof, there, supplied with all he wanted by the fair hands of his hostess, to make his rough but comfortable toilet. While he was washing and rubbing and clothing himself he could hear the girls moving about the house briskly. Miss Appleton's tongue never ceased going for a moment, and at intervals her voice, raised to exclaim or interrogate, reached his ear more dis-
tinctly than she imagined; on which occasions an imploring
"Hush—sh!" betrayed Annie's anxiety and distress lest, in
the honour that was being done them, they should forget their
duty and their manners and what was due to the squire's son.
How different they were, he thought, as, guiltless of eaves-
dropping, he listened to their broken talk. Annie, with her
modest grace, was a little lady in spite of Delavel-Pole's
opinion.

He was a long time dressing himself, for the coastguards-
man's uniform was not made for a tall and slender youth,
and, Delavel though he was, he was not above trying to make
himself look as little ridiculous as might be in the eyes of those
rustic maidens. He came downstairs at last, wearing a pilot
coat over a pair of short and baggy trousers, his feet in blue
worsted socks and gay carpet slippers, his handsome throat
bare—not such a very grotesque figure after all. The wet
clothes that he had put outside his door he found in the
kitchen, some hanging before the fire, and some in the wash-
tub, being rapidly rubbed and rinsed by the young lady of the
house, who well deserved to be called a "smart gal." A
couple of flat-irons were heating at the grate, the kettle was
singing on the hob, and on a deal table, temporarily adorned
with the green and red parlour table-cloth, Annie (in a very
old frock of Rhoda's) was setting out the tea-tray. It was
characteristic of Miss Appleton's good sense that she supposed
Mr. Richard would rather be warm and comfortable in the
kitchen than genteel and cold in the front room—where a
fire was not to be thought of at this season, with the fireplace
full of paper lace and roses; and very cheerful and cosy the
humbler apartment looked as he descended into it, in spite
of the wash-tub and the steaming clothes-horse. But he was
annoyed to see Annie waiting upon him instead of receiving
attention herself.

"Why, what are you doing?" he exclaimed. " Didn't I
tell you to have some brandy and water and go to bed?"

"Oh, she's all right," Miss Appleton interposed, "and she
don't want brandy. There'll be a cup o' tea in two minutes.
Look alive now, Annie, and make a slice o' toast for Mr.
Richard while I clean up. Take this seat, sir," hurrying to
the fireside to place her father's chair for him. "I hope you
are feeling more comfortable?"

Dicky declared he was very comfortable, and politely
protested against the trouble she was taking for him. She
assured him that trouble was a pleasure, turned the coat and trousers on the horse, hung socks and shirt beside them, and whisked out of the kitchen with her heavy tub in her arms before he had time to offer his assistance. In two minutes more she had flown upstairs to "tidy" herself, and he was left alone with Annie.

Annie was kneeling at his feet making toast, according to orders. Some slices of bread lay on a plate on a three-legged footstool beside her, and Billy, his dog, was sniffing at them. For a moment he looked her all over to see what she was really like; it was the first fair chance he had had. And he came to the conclusion that she was charming. Her brown hair was bright and silky, with two or three pretty waves in it, and the way she wore it, without horsehair stuffing, or comb, or ribbons, simply rolled round and round in a large knot, was very becoming. Her face, though not intellectual, was refined and sweet, and her figure was as pretty as her face, her attitude just now showing all its soft and healthy curves and its girlish flexibility to perfection. She was the village maid of romance—the ideal farmer's daughter; and she had grown up here in Dunstanborough without any one finding her out—until he, Dicky Delavel, came, like the Lord of Burleigh, with the seeing eye and the understanding heart, to make the interesting discovery. As for Delavel-Pole, who could not see that she was a lady, and yet had a certain sordid and vulgar apprehension of her charms, Dicky felt that he would like to kick him.

"Get up this moment," he said to her, having fixed the instantaneous photograph upon his memory. In a twinkling he had her sitting in the cushioned chair, which was the seat of honour, and was himself established on the three-legged stool, with the toasting fork in his hand. Annie protested in vain. "Sir, please—Rhody will be so angry when she comes back to see you doing that!" And indeed the spectacle of a Delavel thus engaged, amid such surroundings, was too shocking to witness unmoved. It seemed as if the world was being turned upside down that afternoon. She could only wonder for the fiftieth time what my lady and the squire would say if they knew.

"And if I were to see you faint away before the fire I should be angry," he said lightly. "And do you suppose I can't make toast as well as you?"

At this moment the sound of a loudly-ticking pendulum in
the parlour was interrupted by five reverberating strokes. The recollection of Delavel-Pole's appointment flashed into both the young heads at once. Dicky could not bear to think of it.

"Do you often go to the rectory?" he asked bluntly.

Annie answered, evidently with pride, that she often did, adding in an anxious tone, that she ought to be there now.

"You won't go to-night," he emphatically declared. "You must stay here and rest, and have some tea; and when the rain is over I will take you home." He had already caught a small coastguard boy, and sent him with a message to the farm to say that she was in safe shelter, so that time did not seem of any particular consequence now. "Do you go alone to the rectory? Or is it a class?"

She went alone, she said. It was not a class. The rector expressly desired her to go.

"And what do you do when you get there—if it's not a rude question."

Annie called his attention to the fact that the toast was burning, and as he scraped it rather savagely with a black-handled knife, she explained—again with an air of modest complacency—that Mr. Delavel-Pole arranged the Sunday-school lessons with her, and explained the meaning of obscure passages of Scripture. He told her always to bring her difficulties to him, and when she did so he never failed to solve them. It was a great privilege, she concluded, with an air of returning thanks to the Almighty for it.

"A great privilege for him, no doubt," said Dicky. "And do you go often to those early services of his?"

"Always—when I can," she replied, straightening herself a little, and closing her soft lips firmly. "I would not miss them for anything."

"Your mother says she shan't let you go when the winter comes."

"I must," she returned resolutely.

"What, when she says you mustn't?"

"We must do our duty, sir, even at the risk of displeasing our parents."

"That's Delavel-Pole's doctrine, I suppose. Curiously enough, it's the exact reverse of the advice he gives to me."

"It's the teaching of the Church, Mr. Richard—which commands us to meet together."

"You don't meet together," he interrupted flippantly.
"You only meet Delavel-Pole and the almshouse people, who don't go willingly, but are dragged out of their beds, poor old souls, ill or well, wet or shine, and feel anything but like praying when they get there, I'll be bound."

Hitherto Annie had had little to say for herself, but now she became quite animated, in her decorous fashion, as she protested against these unholy sentiments. She urged, with solemn vehemence, that the services of the Church were the great and only comfort left to the almshouse people in their old age. Life was over for them, and had been all toil and trouble mostly; they should be glad to think of the next world now, and to take these precious opportunities for preparing for it.

"Well, I'm afraid I shouldn't do much preparing under those circumstances—forced to go because I was a pauper and dependent on the parson's bounty; and then to have to hear him rattling through the service with that irreverent gabble of his, as if he were doing it for a wager."

"Sir, you don't suppose the rector takes all that trouble for only his own pleasure?"

"Oh, as to that, I don't give an opinion. But if those old creatures don't come to church in the winter time, you'll see—they'll get no soup and blankets. And they know it. I don't call that worshipping God. It's just show and self-interest and make-believe—and a lot of mean tyranny at the bottom of it. Max wasn't so fond of going to church himself in the old times, I can tell you."

Dicky was quite aware that it was not good form to talk thus of the rector to his parishioner, but he justified himself, nevertheless—as we always can when we want to. He imagined that he saw Max taking a mean advantage of his privileged position, and considered that he had a duty to Annie to perform. The girl listened to him with a kind of soft obstinacy, gazing into the fire and rubbing her hands slowly one over the other on her knee.

"It is a help to me," she said firmly. "When I begin a day like that, I feel that all the rest of it is made better."

Then a brief silence fell upon them, while Dicky pondered over this statement and questioned its secret import. Was it the influence of the material church—the beautiful "Early Decorated" architecture and stained windows and immemorial associations—upon a young imagination and a reverent mind?
Was it the walk from the farm and back in the delicious early hours of the summer days? Or was it Delavel-Pole?

"At any rate," he said, "you have no business to go to the rectory in this way. If the parson wants to see you, let him call at the farm."

Annie blushed, suddenly aware of his point of view.

"I could not give him that trouble," she murmured.

"Trouble!" he echoed hotly. "Is it for a lady to take trouble to save a man from taking it? That is a new doctrine."

"It is not a case between a lady and a gentleman," said Annie (deeply flattered that he should think it was), "but between a clergyman and his parishioner."

"Well," said Dicky, rising from his stool (for the toast was made), "all I know is, we shouldn't think of letting Barbara go to the rectory by herself—though she's his own cousin—and Max would know better than to ask her. Therefore I say he has no business to ask you, unless it is for a class. Of course, if Mrs. Morrison had time to walk round with you it would be different; but even then"—He broke off as he caught sight of her crimson face, and flushed the same colour himself as he realised that he was in effect accusing this innocent creature of impropriety. "It is not treating you with proper respect," he stammered, in a tone of apology; "that is what annoys me."

At this moment his hostess came sailing downstairs in her Sunday gown and a silk apron. The staircase descended into the kitchen, and from the upper landing she had a view of the young pair below before they knew that they were observed. Dicky was standing by the table, very red, and perturbed by the audacity of which he had been guilty; and Annie was standing near him, also with burning blushes on her face and with her eyes cast down. Preparations for tea were at a standstill. One glance convinced Miss Rhoda that her guests had taken advantage of her absence in the manner she believed customary with young Oxford gentlemen and village maidens when thus conveniently thrown together.

As she advanced to the table she looked from one to the other with a smile that made the Delavel blood boil. All Dicky's gratitude to her for washing his shirt for him was swallowed up in disgusted resentment of her impertinence in standing there and smirking in that abominable manner.

"Come, now, Mr. Richard," she said archly, "I am sure a cup of hot tea will do you good, if you don't mind sitting
down at our humble board. Why, Annie, haven't you got the tea made yet? You lazy girl, I expected to find it drawed by this time." She fetched earthen teapot and rosewood caddy, and soon had the tea stewing on the hob; and then she bustled about to set the chairs round the table. "I'm very sorry I haven't any cake just at present," she said affably. "If I'd only known you'd been coming, Mr. Richard—but that was the last thing I ever expected."

She prattled gaily as she tripped about the room, while Annie stacked the buttered toast in silence. Some instinct prevented Dicky from looking at the embarrassed girl, and also from making any movement to help her or wait upon her; he gave all his attentions to his hostess, who quite revelled in the excitement of the occasion and the important part she filled in her mother's absence. She thought she knew what young college gentlemen were like, and she had heard in the village and at the Hall that Master Richard was even a little more "wild" than usual. This gave great piquancy to her enjoyment, albeit she was a perfectly proper young woman, against whose character no one had a word to say.

The three sat down when tea and toast were ready, and were chatting freely (Dicky and Miss Appleton monopolising the conversation) and apparently enjoying themselves and their repast, when a shadow fell across the kitchen window, and Rhoda jumped up with an ecstatic shriek. "Lor!" she cried, "I do declare there's John."

"I suppose he has come for me," said Annie.

John Morrison, jun., entered heavily, and with a face that did not harmonise with the festive atmosphere of the room. He was a big, solid, coarse-featured, common-looking, though not altogether unhandsome, working farmer—oh, so unlike Annie, Dicky thought, as he gave the new-comer a short nod. "How strange it is that the men of that class are seldom or never superior to it," he reflected, in the rapid moment that he compared brother and sister together. "Well, John, how are you?" he inquired aloud, brightly.

"Good-day, sir," John returned with perfect respect but little enthusiasm, making a movement as if to touch his forehead with the knuckle of his forefinger. Then he submitted gravely to be kissed and interrogated by his sweetheart, and laid his hand upon Annie's shoulder.

"What's this you've been doing on?" he demanded with some sternness.
Annie looked surprised at the tone, flushed and hesitated; whereupon the voluble Rhoda gave the story of the afternoon's adventure in all, and with more than all, its thrilling details—dwelling with fervour upon Dicky's gallant exploit. "If he hadn't happened to be with her, her dead body would just have been floating out to sea at this moment," said Rhody dramatically.

"He was not with me," murmured Annie.

"I happened to be walking on the beach," said Dicky, leaning back in his chair and stretching himself, "and I only saw her after the tide had surrounded her. I never imagined it was a Dunstanborough native. I took her for a visitor." He was driven to say this much, and yet was enraged to find himself accounting for his proceedings, and in a sense defending himself against the man's evident suspicion that he had been too much concerned in the matter. John listened coldly, with an occasional grunt, and, when he had heard all there was to tell, said that he was much obliged to Master Richard, but hoped Annie would know better than to be such a fool again. He was singularly ungracious. Dicky had never seen him like this before—he had always thought him such a pleasant, well-mannered fellow—and the lad began to remember that he was his father's son, and what was due to him as such.

"Be good enough to go over to the inn and order a trap for me, will you?" he said, with the true Delavel air, rising abruptly from his seat. "I am awfully obliged to you, Miss Appleton, but I think I won't wait for my clothes to dry. Your father won't mind my going home in his; they can come back in the trap."

John Morrison went at once to the Delavel Arms and brought a fly, and our hero withdrew from the scene with great dignity. He was even a little cool to Annie—until he took her hand in his to say good-bye; then he could not be cool. He squeezed her fingers until they ached. After all, they had been nearly drowned together, and it was not her fault that her brother was a boor.
CHAPTER VI.

A FAITHFUL WATCHDOG.

When the fly had departed, John turned to his sister and bade her put her things on to go home also. It rained still, but he had brought the gig—an old-fashioned, two-wheeled vehicle, the possession of which had for many years conferred gentility upon the people at the farm—and the gig umbrella, a huge green cotton affair, with a bulbous yellow handle, also of the nature of a family heirloom, and well adapted to the purpose for which it was made; so that there was no risk of her taking harm from the further exposure. "Come on, now," he said testily. "Let's be getting along back. Mother's fidgeting till she sees you, and well she may. You'll have to have a nuss to take you out for walks, Annie—that's what you'll have to have."

"You have no business to speak to me like that," she replied with dignity. "Do you suppose I risked my death on purpose?"

"Oh, there warn't much risk, I s'pose, with people standing there ready to jump into the water after you."

Annie turned her back on him in silence and marched upstairs, and the door of Rhody's bedroom shut rather sharply.

"Why, John," said Rhody, with a nervous laugh, "whatever are you so cross about?"

"I'm not cross," said John—as people always do say when they are in a particularly bad temper; "no more than you are."

"Oh yes, you are, now—you're as cross as two sticks. If you weren't you wouldn't want to be running off like this, before you've hardly set foot in the house, and me all alone, and haven't seen you for two whole days. I don't take it kind of you"—bridling coquettishly. "I suppose you're getting tired of me."

"Don't you be foolish, Rhody," replied her lover, unabashed. "I've got enough to do bothering after Annie—I don't want to have you making a fuss too."

"Oh, I shan't make no fuss—don't you flatter yourself. If you can do without my company, I can do without yours, I'm sure. And as for poor Annie, I can't see that it's any such great crime she's done—that isn't the way her
mother looks at it, I'll be bound. Accidents will happen, and it's just the merest chance that she isn't lying dead and drowned at this moment. Supposing you'd ha' found her stretched out stark and stiff on that there table," said Rhody, pointing with lurid triumph to the half emptied plate of toast. "How do you think you'd ha' felt then, eh?"

"There's worse things than that," said John gloomily.

"Oh, there is, is there? Perhaps you'll tell me what's worse than losing your only sister, the pride of her father and the prop of her mother's declining years?"

"There's other ways o' losing her," said John.

"What ways?" But Rhody now saw, in a flash, what he was driving at, and she dropped her truculent manner and looked at him with intense interest.

There was a momentary silence between them, and the man fixed his eyes solemnly on her eager face. "Look here, Rhody," he said, with impressive sternness, "tell me true now—has he been about with her afore to-day?"

"Not as I know of," she replied. "No, he can't ha' been, for he happened to say as he saw her at church this morning, and didn't know her."

"At church? What did he go to church for?"

"To say his prayers, I s'pose."

"Don't you believe it."

"Well, at any rate, it wasn't to see her. She's been away mostly when he's been at home for the last year or two, and he didn't even know she was grown up."

"He knows it now—worse luck. Look here, Rhody," he repeated, this time clasping her wrist with his horny hand, "tell me now—was he walking about with her this afternoon? Or did he only see her after the tide came round her, as he makes out?"

"Well, John," said she, with earnest candour, "I wasn't there to see no more than you. I can only go by what they say. Mr. Richard declared he had no idea it was her till he got to the mussel beds after the sea had cut her off. And she says the first she saw of him was when he came running and shouting across the sands, in his shirt-sleeves and his stocking-feet, at the very moment when she gave herself up for lost."

"I never knew Annie tell a lie," said John, looking on the floor with his clouded eyes.

"Of course you never did," said Rhody cheerfully, beginning to clear away the soiled cups and plates. "You're just a
suspicious old thing, and that's the best of you. I wonder whether you're going to make a row every time a man speaks to me? And whether you'd let me drown sooner than have me helped out o' the water by another feller, if so be I happened to get caught by the tide when you wasn't there—which I shouldn't be such a fool, I hope. If it had been an old man instead of a young one,“ she went on, laughing: “he mightn't have been strong enough to pull her out, for she's none so light, for all her slim looks—she weighs half a stone more than I do. And they couldn't flirt much while they were being half drowned, first with the sea water and then with the rain—if that's what you are afraid of.” Rhody vividly remembered the guilty looks of the young pair when she surprised them tête-a-tête in the kitchen half an hour ago; but, in John's present temper, she did not consider it expedient to refer to that episode.

“She's grown a very handsome girl,” said the farmer gloomily, after a brief pause.

“Oh, she's handsome enough,” assented Rhody, not with enthusiasm, by any means. “Still I shouldn't think her the sort likely to captivate Mr. Richard”—smiling to herself. “He must see a many girls prettier than she is.”

“I'm not so sure of that,” said John. “She's got that soft way with her; she's tender and delicate like; and I can see they all notice her. Even the rector turns round in the reading-desk to see if she's there, afore he's hardly up from his knees. I've caught him at it times and often.”

“Oh, the rector? He's what they call a celibate. He don't hold with having anything to do with women at all. He's just taking notice of Annie because she's willing to teach in the Sunday-school and give away the tracts. She's useful to him, you see.”

“Oh yes, I see,” said the suspicious brother grimly. “I don't suppose he's much to be afraid of; but Master Richard is different. He's grown to be a man now, and he don't bear the best of characters, if all they say is true.”

“I daresay he's no worse than the rest of 'em,” said Miss Rhody easily; “and I must say you think a lot of Annie if you suppose gentlemen like him and Mr. Delavel-Pole must needs fall in love with her the moment they set eyes on her.”

“Men are men and girls are girls,” said John oracularly. “Master Richard is handsome, too, and he has a sort o'taking way with him”——
"That's true," Miss Appleton broke in, this time with no lack of enthusiasm. "Neither Mr. Roger nor Mr. Keppel can hold a candle to him."

"And he's got scent of her," continued John. "He come round to the house to-day, pretending it was to see father—when he hasn't been near for a matter of two years. And as soon as he hears that Annie is down on the beach, off he goes after her. He must have gone there straight, or he couldn't have been there when the tide came up."

"Well, that was a lucky thing, anyhow, and it shows that he hadn't much time to walk about with her before it happened—doesn't it? He couldn't ha' been in two places at once."

"But he went after her," persisted John. "And if he takes to going after her, it can only mean mischief," he concluded, striking his knee heavily with his clenched fist.

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Rhody, with disdain. "You ought to have a better opinion of your own sister than to suppose she's a girl o' that sort. And as for Mr. Richard, he's got something better to do. If he hasn't lost his heart all the time he's been at Oxford, he won't lose it at Dunstanborough—don't you believe it. You needn't alarm yourself about that." Miss Appleton had not that high opinion of her future sister-in-law's attractions that prevailed with the other sex.

"Tisn't his losing his heart I'm afraid of," muttered John, with a snarling laugh. "His heart's safe enough, I make no doubt."

"I should think it was," said Miss Rhody loftily. "And I'll tell you what it is, John"—here she became as serious as he—"if I was you I'd be a little more careful how I treated my landlord's son—let alone a gentleman as has done the family such a service as to save their only daughter's life. You hardly so much as thanked him for what he'd done, and he went away quite offended, and no wonder. I really was surprised at you. I thought you'd ha' known better—seeing who he was, and that the family's sure to hear of it. You've been at the farm for five generations, I know; but, all the same, Mr. Delavel could turn you out to-morrow if he liked."

"Let him!" retorted John savagely. "I'll have no fine gentlemen meddling with my sister. If Master Richard tries it on he'll have to look out, though he is the squire's son; and so I shall tell him, and I shan't waste no words neither. I know what that sudden friendship for us all means—Oh yes, he may hoodwink the old people, but he don't take in me.
He doesn't go and sit in the keeping-room, and drink his beer with father, just for the sake of cheering the old chap; them are not the ways of gentlemen's sons like him. And he don't ask himself to our wedding for the sake of drinking good luck to you and me, my girl. Don't you believe it."

"What!" ejaculated Rhody, starting backward and nearly dropping the teapot on the floor, "did he say he would come to our wedding? Mr. Richard!"

"He'll get no invitation from me," said John. "I'd like him to keep his place and let us keep ours, as we've always done."

But Rhody set the teapot gently down on the table, and stood looking at her lover, swelling visibly. Visions of the honour and glory certain to accrue to herself from such a condescension on the part of a member of the great family at the Hall thronged her active brain; and, incredible as it may appear, she did not for a moment question the integrity of Mr. Richard's intentions in this particular instance. Why, indeed, should he not invite himself to the wedding for the sake of drinking good luck and showing a kindness to her? He had just been treating her as if she were a born lady (with much more deference than John had ever shown); and in her blue silk bridal dress and orange-blossom wreathed bonnet she felt that she should be quite competent to hold her own against Annie, or any other woman, for special and general attractiveness. John might say what he liked, but if Mr. Richard had a mind to come to her wedding, come he should, or she'd know the reason why. Such a chance as that was not one to be let slip by people who had their families to consider. Oh, what would all the Dunstanborough folks say? And what a glorious inauguration to her reign as the new Mrs. Morrison! What a position in the village it would give her!

"John, dear," she said coaxingly, and with much sound good sense, "don't you go for to be headstrong and rash, now. If you kick up a fuss, it will just be putting things into their heads, when very likely they have no such ideas at all. And it will set people talking about Annie, and do her more harm than ever Mr. Richard would. And if the squire should hear of it, there would be bad blood for certain, and no end of trouble—and you've always got on with him so comfortably all these years. Just you wait, now, till they really do do something, and you really have got something to take hold of."
"That would be too late, Rhody. You can't undo mischief when it's done. I want to prevent it. I'm not going to kick up a fuss, but I'm going to take care of my sister, who's too young and foolish to take care of herself. I shall just speak a word of warning to her to-night—that's all I mean to do at present—till I see how Master Richard behaves himself."

"All!" exclaimed Rhody, throwing up her hands. "Goodness gracious! and enough, too. You're just going to put into her silly head that Master Richard is in love with her, which, of course, will make her think at once that she's in love with him—that's all! Oh, go and do it, pray—it's the cleverest way of taking care of a sister that ever I heard of. Go and shove him down her throat—go and show him that you have to tie her by the leg and keep the doors locked to prevent her from running after him—and see how that will cure them of thinking anything more about each other. Oh, you are a sharp one, John, I must say—that you are!"

John sat silent under this scathing satire, apparently quite unmoved by it. But it had its effect. It shook his confidence in his own wisdom (though he would not have owned it, even to himself) so far that he forbore to say his "word of warning" to Annie as they drove home together. He did what was quite as bad, however—never once opened his lips throughout the journey. Annie knew what the silence meant; it was plainer than speech. And Rhody's prophecies began to come true.

CHAPTER VII.

NEW LIGHTS.

On the doorstep of the farmhouse Annie saw her mother standing, when the gig and the old pony stopped at the garden gate. As Rhody had truly said, Mrs. Morrison's way of taking the news of the afternoon's occurrences was not as John's way. The thought that her darling might have been "lying dead and drowned at that very moment" was uppermost and paramount in her agitated mind; and because Master Richard had averted this catastrophe, at the peril of his own invaluable life, she was in no mood to find fault with
anything else that he had done or might do, but was ready to bless him altogether on bended knees. Maternal solicitude and anxiety were evident in her round face and the attitude of her redundant form, as she stood on the threshold watching and listening, peering through the rain; and the sight of her was comforting to Annie, who did not greatly crave for comfort from that source as a rule. She allowed herself to be wrapped in the tender arms and crooned over by the foolish voice with affectionate condescension.

John went round to the yard, and there put up the gig and the pony, and attended to other matters that his errand to the coastguard station had delayed. The old father came in, heard the tale without much emotion, and hastened out again to his business of the moment, unable to picture the danger he had not seen, and troubled about his hay above everything. And mother and daughter—Annie in a shawl, with her feet on a stool, and a cup of hot spiced elderberry wine beside her—had an interesting tete-à-tete in the keeping-room.

Mrs. Morrison, like her son, saw a possibility looming on her domestic horizon, but it did not inspire her with unmitigated dread. Mothers are daring and ambitious to any extent of folly, and women are proverbially credulous and ridiculously romantic, and some hearts keep young and soft long after the bodies belonging to them are middle-aged; and so this homely matron, who was thought to have plenty of sense, was capable of believing that her child was worthy of any distinction that an aristocratic admirer could confer. It did not seem to her warped judgment that Mr. Richard's fancy—"if so be he had one"—must necessarily mean mischief.

"And to think o' that girl giving you nothing better to put on than that old rag," she said, scornfully regarding the borrowed dress which Annie still wore, "and him there and all! Why didn't you ask for something better? She's got more good frocks than any girl in Dunstanborough."

"She likes to save them," said Annie, "and if she didn't offer them of her own free will I wasn't going to ask her."

"I wouldn't ha' had him seen you such a guy as that for anything," the mortified mother went on. "It was just a bit of Miss Rhody's jealousy. She can't abear anybody to look better than she does."

"Mr. Richard looked rather a guy himself," the girl remarked. "He had to wear Mr. Appleton's clothes."

"Poor dear young gentleman! Well, I suppose there was
nothing else for it. I wish I had been there to attend to him.
I do hope he hasn’t caught a cold or done himself any harm.
Do you think he’s all right, my dear? ’Cause Mr. Delavel
and my lady will blame it on to us if he isn’t.”

Annie reassured her mother on this point, and the old
woman went off into raptures about his manliness and beauty,
his bravery and his affability; his striking superiority to the
rest of his family, sacred beings as they all were. “And I
shouldn’t wonder if we don’t have him coming round to­
morrow to inquire how you are,” she concluded, beaming
upon her daughter like a noonday sun.

Annie answered, with a moonlight kind of smile, that she
shouldn’t wonder either.

“Then we must take care to let him see you looking respect­
able,” said that fond and foolish parent. “You put on your
lilac muslin with the bows.”

Annie said she would.

Tea-time was over before she reached home, and dusk and
supper-time were drawing on, when, for the first time, she
mentioned the rector—till now the most important person in
her mother’s eyes, and the chief topic of their private conver­
sations. “I could not go to the rectory this afternoon, mother,
and I promised Mr. Delavel-Pole to be there at five.”

“My pet, he’s heard by now how it was you couldn’t go.
I suppose he’ll be round by-and-by.”

“Yes. And to-morrow is Saturday. He will want me to
go to-morrow, perhaps; for he likes to arrange the lessons
himself.”

“Well, it’s no matter if he does. You can’t go trapesing
down there if you feel knocked up. If he comes to-morrow,
he can show you the lessons; if he doesn’t, it can’t much sig­
nify. If you ain’t able to teach them little things out of your
own head, it’s a pity—that’s all I can say.”

“I have been thinking,” Annie went on, “that perhaps I
won’t go to the rectory again—not in that way. Though,
how to get out of it now, I don’t know.” She paused, and
Mrs. Morrison waited to hear the reason of so unexpected
a proposal. Annie was eager for Church work, for that re­
ligious, or rather, ecclesiastical usefulness, which is so much
more attractive than the common work of the world to young
people of a serious turn of mind; and hitherto the visits
to Mr. Delavel-Pole had been regarded as very precious pri­
vileges, spiritual and social. “You see,” she went on, “the
rector has no regular teachers' meeting. As far as I know, Miss Cousins and the rest of them never go to him for instruction. He just tells them what to do from Sunday to Sunday. And—and it is like making differences between us, you know."

"So it is," said Mrs. Morrison. "And not very flattering to you, neither. Why, you're about the only one with learning enough to be trusted to teach out of your own head—you and Miss Barbara. It's the others ought to go to the rectory for to have instruction—not you."

"Yes. And Miss Barbara never goes. Mr. Richard was talking of it," said Annie thoughtfully, and with an air of conscious dignity. "He said Miss Barbara never went, and that Lady Susan would never let her—not by herself, I mean—and that Mr. Delavel-Pole would never dream of asking it, because it would not be paying her respect. And then he said the rector ought to do the same by me as by Miss Barbara, because I was a lady, too."

"Mr. Richard is mighty particular," Mrs. Morrison broke in, profoundly flattered, and fain to believe that the young man would do no less than practise what he preached. "Had you been talking to him about it?"

"No; he knew. Probably from Mr. Delavel-Pole himself. I suppose he has been talking to him about me."

"Well, it's by no wish of mine that you go to the rectory by yourself, my dear, and I think it's just as well to stop it—not to have Miss Cousins thinking you're made more of than her, and passing remarks about it."

"But what can I say to Mr. Delavel-Pole?" inquired Annie anxiously. "I can't refuse to go, and give no reason, and I can't tell him the true one."

"You can't, perhaps, but I can. You let me see him, and I'll just say that father and me don't wish you to be going to him by yourself, because he is a young man and hasn't got a wife, and it's just as well to be on the safe side when there's such a lot of gossiping as there is in Dunstanborough. You needn't be supposed to know anything about it. I'll say it's father and me, and if he likes to take offence it'll be with us and not with you. And we shan't mind it."

"Don't let him think I said a word," begged Annie, with almost tragic earnestness. "And, above all, don't bring Mr. Richard's name in."

"You may trust me," said Mrs. Morrison confidently.
Mr. Morrison came in, and after him John; and the supper tray, loaded with that supper which people of their class somehow managed to digest in those days (for what I know, they may do so still), though they mostly went to bed the moment they had swallowed it—bread and cheese and beer, cold pork and pickles, cold puddings and pies, and so on—was brought in by the strong-armed maid-of-all-work, Eliza. The old couple and their son sat down to a hearty, serious meal, as was their wont, barring illness, every night of their lives; but Annie, preferring her own thoughts to their company, and wanting no food after her elderberry wine and toast, took her candle and slipped off to bed.

She slept soundly, for she was tired—"wore out," her mother declared, when she waddled in presently to see that her darling was all right—and in the morning she awoke at an early hour, with her bodily health and strength restored, as if nothing had happened. It was a lovely day, after the rain. She sprang out of bed to open her small lattice—for, like other old-fashioned folks, Mrs. Morrison would have thought it death to leave it open during the night—and curled herself up again for half-an-hour, in company with "The Christian Year," "The Imitation of Christ," and a little book containing a long string of questions as to the state of her spiritual health, which she had bound herself to answer night and morning. As she lay, absorbed in her devotional exercises, her mother bustled to and fro between kitchen and dairy over the rough pavement under the window, and all sorts of busy sounds rose upon the soft, fresh air—the clatter of milk-pails and hob-nailed shoes, the clear ring of Eliza's pattens on the bricks, the cluck and scuffle of feeding fowls, the grunt of hungry pigs in the farmyard, the consequential coo of pigeons and their flapping wings. The Marthas of the world were at work, distributing breakfasts and preparing for to-days and to-morrows; but she, who had been to boarding-school and was one of the elect in grace, was exempt from that homely service. They had to think of others; she needed only to think of herself. Hers was the good part, no doubt; it was likewise the easiest. So she heard all the sounds of activity in the yard below, and heeded them not. Her mind, when it was not occupied with what she was reading, was absorbed in one momentous question—Should she go to morning service, or should she not?

She was especially anxious to go to thank God for His late
mercies vouchsafed to her, and to invoke His blessings upon
the instrument of her deliverance, and it did not occur to her
that she could do this fittingly by any other means. On the
other hand, if she went she would see Mr. Delavel-Pole, and
he would be sure to ask her to go to the rectory—which she
had almost made up her mind not to do again in her new
character of a lady who should be treated with the same
respect as Miss Barbara—and she was not prepared to refuse
in so many words. She might also see Mr. Richard; and,
though not exactly reluctant to meet him, she was very shy
about doing so. He was her saviour and hero, certainly, but
he was also a young man whom it behoved a modest girl to
keep at a certain distance. It was hardly within the bounds
of reason that he should ever want to marry her, so far
beneath him as she was (though she dwelt on this idea); and
it was not in her to contemplate sentimental relations in any
other than a matrimonial sense. She was the most strictly
proper little person that ever owned a pretty face.

Seven o'clock was the farmhouse breakfast hour, and she
joined her parents at the early meal without having come to
a decision. Her mother was still thinking of her household
cares, and therefore talked about them, and her father was
still engrossed with his hay. They said little to their daughter
beyond complimenting her on her good looks, and the girl
wrestled in silence with the now intensely urgent question—
Should she go, or shouldn't she?

At twenty minutes to eight something had to be done. She
therefore put on her hat and set forth, leaving herself the
interval before service began in which to decide the matter—
which seemed to her of more consequence than all the hay
and butter and market prices that were the objects of her
parents' solicitude. It was an exquisite morning to be out in,
and the walk (if she had had time to attend to it) delightful.
The light spring tints were gone, and trees and hedges in full
leaf and richness. Families of young birds swarmed every­
where, rooks cawing in the pastures and skylarks singing
overhead. Sweetbriar scented the dewy lanes, where the pink
dog-rose flowered, mixing with the perfume of beans and red
clover and drying hay in the fields; and the blue sky, and
the vapours of delicate mist that melted in the sun, and the
colours of the landscape, and the distant glitter of the sea
that was too dazzling to look at, were altogether delicious.
But Annie Morrison only listened to the tinkle tinkle of the
matin bell at the park gates, and only looked at the great
tower that peeped above the trees.

After all, she did not go to service. Within a stone’s-throw
of the church she suddenly turned back, and retraced her
steps to the farm. “They will miss me,” she thought; “they
will come to see me by-and-by if they don’t see me now.”

Meanwhile the rector had heard of the accident of the
previous day, and at morning prayers looked out for his young
parishioner with some anxiety. She was not there, but Dicky
was—Dicky the scoffer and scapegrace, with a grave face and
his prayer-book in his hand. Mr. Delavel-Pole did not for a
moment believe that his cousin had come to church for any
good—like John Morrison, he scented mischief in such fair
behaviour—and a little reflection convinced him that but one
feature of the early service could have any attraction for a
young man of his low tastes.

“If he takes to dangling after the girls of the village,” said
the rector to himself angrily, as he passed from the vestry to
his stall, “it will become my duty to inform his father of it.”

To himself his duty at that hour seemed somewhat flat and
flavourless. He shut his eyes and folded his hands and recited
his solemn formula in the usual manner, looking very stern
and rigid; but all the time he was conscious of the empty
place where a fair girl’s face should have been, and missed
the soft and solemn voice that was wont to chime with his
rapid utterance. He seemed to have no audience. The old
people sat and stood like dilapidated automatons, expressing
nothing but patient endurance, regarding their week-day
churchgoing as a part of their hard and humble lot in life;
and the antipathetic young Delavel, who alone represented
the higher classes, was worse than no one. He affected the
clergyman much as the presence of a sceptic affects the medium
in a spiritualistic séance. Dicky looked upon the service as
a formal and soulless performance, and was disgusted with
himself for taking part in it. He had, of course, not done so
from any proper motive, and therefore felt himself a hypocrite.
He didn’t want to praise and pray—how could he, in Max’s
company? He only wanted to see Annie Morrison and ask
her how she felt. Annie was not there, and he had his
trouble for nothing.

Service being over, he hurried out of church by the family
door in the chancel without waiting to be asked questions by
his cousin, and went home to breakfast through the delicious
morning sunshine as fast as his long legs could travel. At the Hall he said nothing of where he had been. Entering the house by a back way, he found an idle stable-boy, and despatched him quietly to the farm with "Mr. Richard's compliments, and please how was Miss Morrison this morning?" about which proceeding also he said nothing, but slipped out when he had had his breakfast to watch for and intercept his returning messenger, who brought him Mrs. Morrison's duty, and the satisfactory assurance that Annie was quite well. His anxieties on that head being set at rest, he took a book under his arm and went out to read all the morning under the yew trees in the garden. He would have liked to pay a visit to the Morrisons himself, but reflected that, after John's behaviour at the coastguards', it would be hardly expedient to do so. Moreover, the old people would want to thank him for saving their daughter's life, and he did not wish to put himself in the way of that.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MISTAKEN POLICY.

While Dicky lay on a bed of soft grass that sloped down into the moat at his feet, half reading and half meditating, the shadow of those dark umbrellas over his head, and the bubbles and ripples made by the carp and the swans on the still waters glinting in the sunshine a few yards distant, and sending dazzling reflections into his half-shut eyes, his cousin, Delavel-Pole, was bestirring himself on his and Annie Morrison's behalf. As early as eleven o'clock the rector set forth to the farm to make inquiries after his protégée, and to learn, if possible, the facts of the affair of the accident and rescue, the story of which had come to his ears in various contradictory shapes.

Annie and her mother were together in the kitchen, making those elaborate preparations for the Sunday meals which were customary on Saturday morning—stuffing and trussing fowls, baking pastry and cakes, and so on—when he arrived. He was not accustomed to consult the convenience of his parishioners when making his calls—it was one of his ways of
marking their social unimportance—and the Morrisons were
used to receiving him in the midst of washing, cooking, or
jam-making, or when their dinners and teas were growing
cold on the table, at which, of course, he never sat down him­
self; so the farmer's wife merely sighed in a worried way
when Eliza announced his presence in the parlour, and bade
Annie see to the kitchen business while she went in to talk
to him.

"Yes, sir," she said, in answer to his inquiries, "she's
pretty well, I thank you. Not but what it was a great shock
she had, poor dear, and very trying to a growing girl—first
nearly drowned in the sea, and then soaked through and
through with the rain. Hours she must ha' been without a
dry stitch to her back, and the wind blowing all the time. I
expected no less than to have her in a high fever after all she
went through, for she's none so strong, isn't Annie. She's
not like them hearty, bouncing girls, that takes naturally to
roughness and knocking about, as one may say—she's a tender
young creature, and she can't stand it. Howsoever, it might
ha' been worse, Lord knows. If Master Richard hadn't
happened to be there, dead and drowned she would ha' been,
bless her, at this very minute!" concluded Mrs. Morrison,
quoting Rhody's formula, and putting the corner of her apron
to her eyes.

"God would have sent some other instrument," said the
rector piously, "since it was His will that she should be spared.
Still, I am very glad that Mr. Richard was able to make him­
self useful. He is not an ill-disposed lad, by any means, but
it is not often he does anything so well worth doing as that
was. He has grown sadly idle and dissipated of late, I am
sorry to say, and gives his parents a good deal of anxiety.
Of course, this is between ourselves, Mrs. Morrison. You
must not talk of it, you know. And I have no doubt he will
steady down when he gets older," said the rector hopefully.

"It was a noble act," said Mrs. Morrison, ignoring the
proffered confidence, "and I, for one, shall bless him for it to
my dying day. You don't know what it was, Mr. Delavel-
Pole—with a frightened girl, dressed in all her clothes, clinging
to him, and dragging him down in the deep water, and as
much as the length o' this garden to struggle through, inch
by inch, as one may say. Annie says she looks back and
wonders he didn't shake her off and leave her then and there.
For his life was just as much in danger as ever hers was, she
A MISTAKEN POLICY.

says, while she was hanging to him and he trying to swim, with little kicks and jumps, and his head under half the time."

"Oh no," said the rector, with an amused, indulgent smile. "You and Annie don't understand what a good swimmer can do, how easy it really is. The boy is like a fish, nothing comes amiss to him in the water. I've seen him do feats compared with which this was mere child's-play, just for the fun of the thing. It was serious for poor Annie, of course, but as far as he was concerned, he would simply enjoy the chance of exercising himself."

"Well, sir," said Mrs. Morrison, "we don't make so light of it, I can tell you. We've lived in Dunstanborough all our lives, and we know the tides, and we've Annie's word for it that he had a hard job to pull through. The best swimmer is no better than the worst when his arms and legs are tied—and they might as well ha' been. He saved our dear child's life, sir—say what you will—and we are grateful to him accordingly, and ever shall be. Heaven bless him, and send him such a friend as he's been to us whenever he wants one!"—beginning to weep in her apron.

"Far be it from me," said the rector eagerly, "to undervalue his bravery. His presence on the beach, in the nick of time, and when, strangely enough, no one else happened to be there, was most opportune, most providential. And though he could do no less than go to Annie's help, his promptness and perseverance were praiseworthy in the extreme. You ought indeed to be grateful for the service he was privileged to render you, and still more grateful to the Higher Power in whose hands he was but the humble instrument. I suppose Annie will like to return thanks in the church to-morrow?"

"Sir, we've been returning thanks all the time, I think."

"But I mean publicly, properly, as the Church directs," said the rector, with his most severe professional air.

Mrs. Morrison looked dubious and uncomfortable. She was not religious enough to enjoy making a public show of her religion, she would have said, could she have expressed her thoughts. To hear her daughter's name called aloud in church, and to see all the village gossips turning round to stare at her, seemed a sort of indelicacy to this rustic woman. Annie would probably thus desire to testify to her undoubted orthodoxy, but the old-fashioned mother shrank from the idea of it. She said nothing, and, with a touch of impatience, the
rector desired that Annie herself should be summoned, that he might speak to her about it.

"Well, sir," said Annie's mother, drying her eyes and becoming watchful and business-like, "I'm afraid I must ask you to excuse her just now."

"Is she not well enough?"

"Oh yes, she's well enough. But she's very much engaged. She wished me to ask you to excuse her coming in. Saturday morning is rather a busy time, you know, sir."

"Well, she will be at leisure in the afternoon, I suppose. Ask her if she will step down to the rectory at about five o'clock. Then we can talk it over, and see about the school lessons at the same time."

The rector rose and took up his hat. Mrs. Morrison also rose, twisting her apron round her fingers. He put out his hand to bid her a stately good-morning, but her eyes were fixed on the carpet, and she did not notice the gesture.

"Now that we're upon the subject, sir," she said, as if with a sudden burst of candour, but in that tremulous, hurried, deprecating manner which told him she had long premeditated what she was going to say, "now that we're speaking of it, sir, I think I'd better tell you that her father and me don't quite like her going down to the rectory by herself. You see"—temporising weakly—"it's rather late when she gets home, and the roads are lonesome."

"Let her come earlier then," suggested Mr. Delavel-Pole affably, jumping to the unfounded conclusion that the old people were afraid of Dicky being abroad on those lonesome roads—which, however, were light enough at six or seven o'clock in June. "She can come as early as two o'clock if she likes. I have finished my lunch by two."

"I thank you, sir. But—but, we've hardly cleared away and got straightened by that time. And, to tell the truth, that isn't the only thing. You see you don't have a class for the teachers, sir, and it's like to make Miss Cousins jealous, and to say nasty things of Annie. Especially as you are kind o' young, you know, sir," falteringly, and with an air of cringing apology for suggesting such a thing, "and there isn't no lady at the rectory like there used to be."

Mr. Delavel-Pole wondered whether he could have heard aright, and stiffened with offended dignity. "Will you kindly inform me, Mrs. Morrison," he inquired, with terrible deliberation, "whether you have heard Miss Cousins, or any
one else, say nasty things, as you call it, of Annie, because she comes to the rectory by herself?"

"Oh no, sir!"—reassuringly—"not a word. Not a breath."

"Then may I ask who has put such a preposterous idea into your head?"

"Sir," replied the matron, nettled, "I have my own ideas, and I don't think it's right and proper for a girl so young and pretty as Annie—for pretty she is, though I say it that shouldn't, to go alone to bachelor gentlemen's houses"

"That will do, Mrs. Morrison." He interrupted her in a tone that made her jump and gasp. "I don't think you mean to be impertinent, but, at the same time, you are sadly forgetting yourself—forgetting to whom you are speaking," said he, quite pale with wrath. "Be good enough," he continued, "to tell me why this insulting, this—this coarse and disgusting idea, has only now occurred to you, and then I wish to hear no more. Has Annie asked you to speak to me? I can scarcely believe she would be guilty of such atrocious bad taste—that she would take such an outrageous liberty."

"Annie, sir?—of course not!" returned Mrs. Morrison, rallying under the stimulus of these hard words. "I don't take advice from her—nor from anybody, for that matter—as to what I think is for her good."

"Has anybody been speaking to her about it?" he continued, rapidly and angrily, with a sudden intuition.

Mrs. Morrison was ready to go through fire and water for her child, but she had scruples about telling a lie in so many words. She hung her head.

"Has Richard Delavel been meddling?" demanded the rector, with a savage intonation that savoured of pre-sacerdotal days.

"Oh, not meddling, sir—he never thought of meddling, I'm sure. He merely said that—that Miss Barbara wouldn't go and see you by herself."

"Miss Barbara!" The rector burst into a brief and sudden laugh, a laugh that sent the colour into the old woman's cheeks. The next moment he was more majestic than ever, though still with a curl at the corners of his thin lips. "That will do," he repeated, making passes in the air with his hands; "that will do, my good woman. If Annie so completely forgets both her own position and mine, it is indeed time that she should cease to come to the rectory. Keep her at home, by all means; keep her at home, pray. I should
exceedingly dislike to expose myself to vulgar village tittle-tattle by receiving her again. And if you think it is for her good to let Richard Delavel amuse himself by pretending to teach her the laws of propriety, do so—do so. He is the most fitting person, since he breaks them all himself systematically. Good morning, Mrs. Morrison. Pray do not trouble yourself to open the door.”

And, waving his hand as if to wave her back from his path, the rector marched out to the parlour, through the empty keeping-room and into the porch (where he left the farmer’s wife crushed with shame and self-reproach for the manner in which she had bungled her delicate task), and took his way across the fields and the park to the Hall, to have lunch and a little serious conversation with Lady Susan.

When he was gone Mrs. Morrison returned to the kitchen, dropped upon a wooden chair, and wept a few tears of mortification and anger, rubbing her eyes with her white apron. Then, while she stuffed a pair of plump ducks, she narrated to Annie the dismal details and result of the recent interview, with many apologies to her daughter for not having managed better. Annie knew her duty too well to reproach her mother, but she also was deeply mortified. At the same time she had the comfort of knowing that she had vindicated her dignity as a lady—the kind of lady that, since her acquaintance with Mr. Richard, she had discovered herself to be. And Mr. Delavel-Pole’s equal harshness to herself and his cousin had the natural effect of rousing resentment for the wrongs each suffered for the other’s sake, and other sentiments of a dangerous and undesired tendency.

In the afternoon the two women had another sensation. They were sitting quietly in the keeping-room, sewing and chatting, Annie in her lilac muslin with the bows, prepared for certain contingencies—their men folk being with the haymakers in the field—when, looking up at an unwonted sound, they beheld the Delavel carriage driving up to the gate. The visitor was none other than Lady Susan herself, and the sight of that illustrious being filled mother and daughter with a flutter of consternation. Under any circumstances the event would have been remarkable enough, but to-day it had an alarming significance.

“I was having my drive,” said Lady Susan, waddling in very much as Mrs. Morrison would have done (there was a striking resemblance in the physique and style of the two),
and sinking heavily upon the much-antimacassared parlour sofa, "and I thought I would just come round and see how you were, my dear. We heard about your dangerous accident yesterday, and how my son jumped into the sea to rescue you. It was very fortunate he happened to be there, was it not?—and also that he is such a splendid swimmer—like a fish, as my nephew says. Happily, he is as much at home in the water as on the land, so that it was nothing to him, comparatively speaking—though the wetting might have given him a bad cold. But you must be more careful for the future, must you not? Another time you might not be so fortunate. A Dunstanborough girl ought to know enough about the coast to keep clear of the tide when it is coming in, ought she not?"

"My lady, no one can be more sorry than I am for what Mr. Richard was exposed to through my carelessness," said Annie, with appropriate meekness, and in her best boarding-school manner; and then, at a sign from her mother, she left the room to get out cake and wine.

Lady Susan did not scold, like John and the rector. She was very kind and pleasant, and to judge by the way she watched the girl's face and movements, took a flattering interest in her. After the contempt that Mr. Delavel-Pole had poured upon them in the morning, the gracious attitude of the squire's lady was very soothing to both mother and daughter, who, nevertheless, kept a nervous watch for some explanation of it. In their hearts they felt that she had come for a purpose—a purpose that was inimical to their peace and comfort—and might be only another adversary in disguise. And presently she betrayed herself.

After a desultory chat with the farmer's wife, during which she watched Annie's comings and goings with scarcely veiled anxiety, she suddenly remarked that shocks to the system as the girl had just undergone had often very serious consequences—though such consequences were not always immediately apparent to the eye. She cited several instances of this which had occurred within her own experience, and then proceeded to describe the treatment which alone was efficacious in such cases. "Change of air," she said encouragingly; "that is the great thing—complete change of air and scene. In any derangement of the nerves, especially, it is simply marvellous in its effects. I daresay you feel all right now, my dear. Though I have known people, when they have been shaken in railway
accidents, feel nothing of it for days and perhaps weeks—until a creeping paralysis came on, and they found too late what the secret mischief was. Your accident was not serious, of course. Still it must have shaken you. And if I were your mother I should just send you away for a little visit—say a month or two—to recruit you after it."

She was a very poor diplomatist, and this little device for removing temptation out of Dicky's way was too transparent. Mrs. Morrison and Annie, knowing what they knew, exchanged a furtive momentary glance; and then Annie took upon herself to reply—deferentially, of course, but still with spirit (for was she not a lady, like Miss Barbara, with whom people had no right to take liberties?)—that she was perfectly well, but that, if she had not been, there was all the more reason why she should remain at home in her mother's care. "And besides," she said conclusively, "my brother is to be married in three weeks."

"Even three weeks' change would set you up wonderfully," said Lady Susan.

"Thank you, my lady, but I could not go just now. We have to make new things for the house. There is a great deal to do before the wedding."

Lady Susan said, "Oh, very well; you know best, of course," and ceased to urge her point. But by-and-by, having thought it over and renewed her energies with cake and wine, she had a fresh inspiration. "When Rhoda comes here," she said, "you will hardly care to remain at home, Annie. Rhoda will take your place and do your work, and it is only right that you should make room for her. It will be her husband's house, don't you see?—and there will be little ones coming, no doubt—and you will not like to feel in the way. Why not take a situation and earn your own living and be independent, as Rhoda herself has been for years past? If you like, I dare-say I can find a nice place for you. I know my sister, Lady Elizabeth, is looking out for a superior schoolroom maid—one able to travel abroad with the young ladies and the governess, which would be very interesting for you—and I will write to her at once if you would like to try for the situation."

To Lady Susan there was no social difference between a coastguardsman's daughter, who was a dressmaker, and the daughter of a yeoman farmer, who had been educated regardless of expense at boarding-school; but to Mrs. Morrison there was a great deal. And this ill-advised suggestion set
A MISTAKEN POLICY.

her portly person quivering with angry agitation, like a shape of blanc mange.

"Rhody Appleton is a respectable girl, and she's going to be my son's wife, and so I'll not say nothing against her—but it isn't the likes of her that'll turn my daughter out of her own home, my lady," she protested with tremulous dignity. "If we find there ain't room for us all, 'tisn't Annie that'll go—not while her father and me is above ground, at any rate. And we didn't give her the best of schooling to make a servant of her, neither. Much obliged to your ladyship, all the same. You mean it kind, no doubt."

Lady Susan did mean it kind, but, like many other persons of her class, she was sadly clumsy in giving effect to her intentions when dealing with the "common people." She drove away from the farmhouse with a sense of having impaired her popularity in the village (which was very dear to her), and a consciousness of failure in her efforts to serve the best interests of her son, which made her low-spirited and inclined to the darkest forebodings.

Reaching home, she met Dicky on the stairs, and, as he stopped to kiss her and ask her how she had enjoyed her drive, she broke down and wept, to his great dismay and surprise.

"Oh, my boy," she sobbed, embracing him, "if I see you taking to evil courses—ruining poor innocent girls, and our own tenants too—it will break my heart! It will kill me, I know it will!"

"What—what?" gasped Dicky, bewildered, disengaging her arms and holding her from him while he stared at her wet eyes and twitching lips. "What on earth are you talking about?" Then a light flashed on him. "Oh, I see"—his face darkening and hardening ominously—"I think I see what you mean. This is Master Max's doing, I suppose. I thought he was up to something when he honoured us with such a long visit. I'll be even with that fellow"—setting his teeth. "I'll teach him to insult me—and her—with such suggestions as those. I wonder you were not ashamed to listen to him, mother!"

With which he almost flung her off, in his virtuous indignation, and, seizing his hat, rushed there and then to the rectory, to "have it out" in a deadly quarrel with Delavel-Pole.

The direct result of this all-round meddling and muddling
was—as any sensible person (say Rhody Appleton, for instance) might have foreseen—to precipitate the very catastrophe that was so passionately feared, and which a policy of masterly inactivity might easily have averted.

On Sunday morning Dicky and Annie went severally to church—he to his curtained pew in the chancel, she to the benches close by, where she was accustomed to sit with her school-children; and the very first time they happened to look at each other their two young faces reddened from brow to chin. That was proof enough, had any one seen it, that the mischief was done.

CHAPTER IX.
DEFIANCE.

The surface of things was calm during the three weeks that elapsed between the accident and Rhoda's wedding. In the village not much was heard of the former affair outside the circle of those immediately concerned in it; and Rhoda became of so much public importance as to eclipse all rivals for local fame. Annie stayed in the house, helping to make curtains and table-cloths and other preparations for the homecoming of John's wife. Only the call of duty drew her out. She went to the morning service in a kind of surreptitious way, slipping into a back seat and out of church the moment prayers were over; and she took her class in Sunday-school as before, teaching the children "out of her head," unmolested and ostentatiously unnoticed by the rector, to whose house, of course, she went no more. But below the surface there was considerable disturbance, all on her account, and by reason of the incalculable temperament of her young admirer. Mr. Delavel-Pole was at deadly feud with his cousin, and had laid the farmhouse under an interdict similar to that laid on the Quirinal by the Pope when Victor Emmanuel went to live there. For their independence and their presumption the Morrisons were punished by the withdrawal of his gracious favour; and he pleased himself by thinking that the deprivation would be peculiarly distressing to Annie, which certainly it was. Lady Susan had sleepless nights on account of that
danger which the rector had pointed out to her; and the same
cause kept John Morrison sternly alert and watchful. Dicky
himself did not go to the farm, lest Annie should be made to
suffer for it; and he did not go to church on week-days,
because, as he said, it sickenèd him to see Max playing the
hypocrite. He attended on Sundays, as a duty to his family
and the State; and then alone did he get sight of the farmer's
daughter—a luxury the more ardently appreciated because it
was so rare.

Over the uncurtained doorway of the squire's pew he looked
down upon the lowly benches where she sat beside her school-
children, and even when his eyes appeared to be fixed upon
his book, he lost not one movement of her supple young figure
nor one turn of her graceful head. She certainly was alarm-
ingly pretty for a girl in her class of life, as poor Lady Susan
also convinced herself by many surreptitious investigations
from her own cushioned throne; and on Sundays Annie never
failed to emphasise that most fatal of her attractions—a
faculty for looking so like a lady that a stranger would not
have distinguished her from one. During this summer
weather she wore delicate muslins in pale blues or lilacs, and
a little straw bonnet with white strings tied under the chin—
and sometimes she added a white muslin fichu, crossed over
her breast and tied at the waist behind, all edged with virginal
little frills—a simple but dainty costume, that marked her out
as a person of refinement and good taste. Moreover, the girl
could not have sat or stood to better advantage had an artist
occupied the squire's pew and posed her for his own observation.
The contrasts of the dark oak, the cold stone, and the coarser
specimens of humanity around her, threw her into fine relief,
and the light from the stained windows, whether the sun shone
or not, always seemed the right thing for her soft complexion
and her burnished brown hair. Her attitude and behaviour
were modest to a fault; she did nothing that could offend the
most severe or jealous critic. And this scrupulousness of
propriety and self-respect was more potent in its effect on
Dicky than the most alluring devices of the most experienced
siren of the ordinary type could have been. It inflamed while
it ennobled his admiration. Every minute that he watched
her, and saw how delicately and how discreetly she bore her-
self, his first impression that she was a lady deepened in him
—the sense that she was worthy to be loved by a gentleman,
and that he was ready to love her upon those terms.
Yes, it had come to that, though he had only spoken to her once. He was young and of an ardent temperament, and long before she had appeared to him in her charming womanhood, he had been like a thirsty wayfarer at the public-house who is solicited by his friends "to give it a name"—if the reader will forgive so coarse a simile. If he had not yet drunk of the wine of life, he scented its aroma, so to speak, and was conscious of a capacious appetite for its consumption. To a certain extent it did not much matter what the nectar was, or rather, to modify the metaphor a little, it did not much matter what the goblet was out of which he drank it, so long as it did not obviously discredit its sacred office. He wanted to love somebody as much as he wanted somebody to love him—indeed, a great deal more; he was impatient for an opportunity to let his young passions, that had begun to feel their strength, go free. Several times he had thought himself provided with an object for his adoration; but violent disparities of taste or sentiment had arisen at an early stage and nipped all those fair illusions in the bud; this was the first attractive woman who had captivated the man in him without immediately thereafter rubbing his aesthetic susceptibilities the wrong way. Therefore he plunged into love, not falling accidentally, nor yielding to external enticements, but like a diver taking a header into deep water—into what he imagines to be deep water. It was what goes by the name of love with girls and boys, whose claim to know all about it is so preposterously supported by novelists, poets, and other presumably experienced people who ought to know better; a very fine and vigorous sentiment certainly, but with very little bottom to it as a rule.

When the three weeks were nearly over, and he was coming home to dinner from one of his fruitless walks about the village, taken daily in the hope of getting a glimpse of his Annie somewhere, he met John Morrison and his sweetheart sauntering side by side through a green lane. Rhoda had been to the farm to inspect the new improvements, and John was escorting her home to the coastguard station.

"Good evening, sir," said John respectfully, touching his hat.

"Good evening," responded Dicky, with a brief nod. He had no softening of heart towards either of these two, who were so unpleasantly near to Annie, and had made themselves so objectionable to himself, and his set face did not relax a line,
Rhoda smiled her most engaging smile, hesitated, said "Good evening, Mr. Richard," and passed on, with evident reluctance to thus conclude the interview. On rejoining John she began to talk rapidly, her distant voice sounding shrill in Dicky's ears as he strode towards his home; and presently she turned and ran back, arresting him at a door in the park wall, the convenient key of which he carried in his pocket.

"Sir," she exclaimed breathlessly, but with all her wonted air of self-possession, "I beg your pardon, but I believe you said something to Mrs. Morrison about doing us the honour to come to our wedding."

"Did I?" he replied. He had to think for a moment; then he admitted that he had said something about it.

"Well, sir," proceeded Rhoda archly, "the day is near at hand—next Thursday. We're to be married in church at eleven, and have our dinner at mother's, and in the evening Mrs. Morrison is going to give a tea-party to welcome us home, and there's to be a dance in the barn."

Dicky listened composedly; it was no trouble to be dignified with Rhoda Appleton out on the neutral ground of a village lane; then he said he would go to church to see her married with pleasure, and would bring his sisters with him.

"But"—insinuatingly—"you said you would come to the wedding, sir?"

"And isn't that the wedding? But if you'll give me an invitation for the dance I shall be delighted to accept it." And though he looked grave and cool as he spoke, he meant what he said very thoroughly.

Rhoda gave him the invitation there and then, and he did accept it, subject only to the condition that it should be endorsed by the Morrisons, who were to give the entertainment. This preposterous scruple was laughed to scorn by the bride-elect, who took upon herself to assure him that the Morrisons would be only too much honoured by his condescension; but under the circumstances he insisted upon the formal guarantee that John would make him welcome.

And the same night an elaborate invitation, indited by Annie, was brought to the Hall by John himself, who was not only willing to indulge his Rhody, and make things pleasant for the great occasion, but was gratified by the proper spirit shown by Master Richard in the matter. For John assumed that his character of watch-dog was understood, and flattered himself that, owing to his prompt measures, the squire's
handsome son had abandoned his fancy for Annie, and his pernicious danglings after her. "I've taught him his place," said the young farmer, with a sombre smile. "It's hands off, and he knows it. Oh yes, he may come to the dance and the supper, Rhody, and the dinner too, if you like. I don't think he's half so bad as they make out, and of course I shall keep a sharp eye on him."

So Annie consulted her manual of etiquette, and composed a polite note, her maiden heart all a-flutter within her; and Mr. Richard Delavel had great pleasure in accepting Mrs. Morrison's kind invitation, and went about for some days with a sense of treading upon air.

The wedding "went off" in the most satisfactory manner, its most brilliant feature, not even excepting the bride in her blue silk and orange blossoms, being the presence of Mr. Richard in the group before the altar in the morning and amongst the guests who danced in the Morrisons' barn at night. His parents, to Rhoda's intense relief, did not object to his thus descending from his high estate and demeaning himself to the level of the common herd (because they did not know anything about it); and his discreet and affable behaviour was such that the "weddingers," as they styled themselves in the idiom of those parts, not only felt honoured to the last degree by his company, but even at ease and able to enjoy themselves notwithstanding.

He walked across the park to the church in the morning with his sisters and their governess, the sedate Barbara carrying a little packet of half a dozen silver teaspoons and Katherine a bouquet for the bride. They went through their own churchyard gate and chancel door into their great pew, where they sat and gossiped behind the curtains until the bridal party arrived and the rector stalked from his vestry to receive them. Then, as the little procession passed up the church (as they had walked all the way from the coastguard station), two and two, Katherine, signalled by her brother, stepped from the door of the pew into the chancel aisle and held out her bunch of white flowers to Rhoda. The bride accepted them with a whispered "Thank you, Miss," and a curtsey—for if Dicky had lost some of the divinity that hedged a Delavel, the rest of the family had not—and hesitated about passing on until she saw what direction the young lady meant to take. Katherine politely waved her on, and turned to rejoin her governess; but Dicky pulled her sleeve and said
"Stand here, Kitty—we can see better." He did not parti-
cularly want to pander to Rhoda's vanity, and he was as
exclusive for his sisters as he was eclectic for himself; but he
saw an opportunity to annoy Max, and it was too precious to
be thrown away.

So he stood up with the wedding party, between pretty
Annie in her white muslin and pink ribbons and Katherine
in her brown holland and garden hat; and as soon as the
service was over—read by the rector in his most distant and
stately tones—hastened to shake hands with bride and bride-
groom and all the plebeian party, and to conduct himself
generally as if he was their nearest and dearest friend. Mr.
Delavel-Pole had himself meant to unbend and be gracious,
to relax somewhat the rigour of the interdict, in considera-
tion of the occasion, and perhaps pave the way for a gradual
reconciliation with the Morrison family, and a return to favour
of his interesting young Sunday-school teacher; but when he
saw his cousin behaving in this manner, altogether forgetting
his position and encouraging the poor to forget theirs, he felt
that some counteraction was necessary for the support of
Church and State and of the honour and dignity of the
Delavel House, and stiffened into a rigid hauteur that was
enough to freeze the marrow of all around him. He did not
radiate the palest gleam of sympathy for anybody—happy
bride or tearful parents—no more than those effigies of his
dead and gone ancestors that lay, stood, and knelt in stony
stillness all about them. He would offer no congratulations;
he would take no part in—he would not even appear to notice
—the little flutter of pride and importance that animated the
new-made wife and her relations, when the deed that they had
come to do was done. He hoped Rhoda would do her duty,
he said, in the new state of life to which it had pleased God
to call her. That was all.

Dicky was delighted. He went into the vestry and insisted
on signing the register. He introduced his sisters to Annie
(though they knew her much better than he did), and insti-
gated the kind-hearted governess to say pretty things and be
friendly to the agitated and wet-eyed mothers of the newly-
marrried pair; and he presented Lady Susan's teaspoons with
a little speech in which he told Rhody that he hoped he
should stir with them many a cup of tea brewed by her fair
hands; and so on, and so on. When it was all over, he
marched back across the park hand in hand with Katherine,
in the highest spirits at having succeeded in putting Max into "one of his infernal tempers."

At lunch he was very lively; in the afternoon he was very restless; at dinner he was so silent and abstracted that no one could get a word out of him. And the moment dinner was over and Lady Susan had left the dining-room, he slipped from the table and dashed up the shallow, dark old Jacobean staircase that led to his bedroom, half-a-dozen steps at a time.

"Why, Dicky, what is the matter?" exclaimed Barbara—a very proper and staid young lady—who was descending from the schoolroom to join her mother. "Where are you going?"

"Nowhere—to bed—for a walk—never you mind," he replied in breathless gasps; and, leaping headlong into his chamber, he banged the door behind him.

Soon he emerged in his morning clothes—his best morning clothes—and like one of the ghosts of the house, of which there was an assortment, flitted lightly up and down corridors and back staircases until he reached the stable yard. There he found a horse saddled and waiting for him, on which he sped forth into the night.

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CHAPTER X.

DANGER.

It was a soft, starlit summer night. Dicky observed that there was no moon, and reflected that the light—or, rather, the want of light—would be agreeable to dancers who might wish to cool themselves in the open air. He rode through the park at a speed that should have aroused the suspicious vigilance of gate and gamekeepers, but did not; and, dismounting, let himself out by that door in the wall which was supposed to be opened only at certain seasons of the year, and for special purposes of woodcraft, of the key of which he had unlawfully possessed himself. Along the white highroad for a little way, rousing clattering echoes as he went—in and out of grassy lanes, where his horse's hoofs struck the earth with muffled thuds, and where the full-leaved trees darkened the twilight over his head—he passed like a pursued highwayman; and soon arrived at the farmhouse, where lights and
voices and the shrill scraping of a violin indicated that the revelry was at its height. Though the stars as yet were few and pale, and the daylight still lingered in translucent green and golden streaks in the western sky, this wedding guest was late. They had waited for him, as in higher circles we wait for the Governor or the Prince of Wales, for a long time after the tea-party had come to an end and the tea-table been cleared for supper. Then they had given him up on the supposition that his parents had interposed, and gone to the barn to dance without him. As he quietly walked his horse from the road gate to the stack-yard, which lay between the house and the barn, and was contiguous to the cart sheds and stable, he could hear the merry thump and scamper of many feet in Sir Roger de Coverley—a dance that mostly marked the climax of these entertainments. Not a soul was about that he could see. Everybody was in the barn, and was so absorbed in Sir Roger, and made so much noise with feet and voice, that his arrival was unheard and unnoticed.

He dismounted in the yard, found an empty corner in one of the sheds (the stable being full) where he put up his horse, tying its bridle to a waggon wheel, and then he stood a few minutes, in the gradual darkening of the day and brightening of the stars, to take his bearings and decide whither he should bend his steps. As he stood, looking round him and listening, he saw that the window of the keeping-room, across a little corner of yard and garden, was open; that the room itself—as well as the parlour beyond—was lit up, and shadows passing to and fro within. Probably Mrs. Morrison was in the house, on hospitable cares intent, while the guests were reveling in the barn. Dicky thought the proper thing would be to go to the house, therefore, and present himself to her. Lightly he turned and left the yard, passed through a little green wicket into a path bordered with dahlias and foxgloves and with clumps of Indian pinks that smelt very sweet in the moist air, and took his way round to the porch entrance. And there he stopped suddenly, while he stared before him with bright eyes and held his breath.

All the doors were open. In the furthest room a moderator lamp stood on a beaded mat in the middle of a highly polished centre-table, round which books and shells and other ornaments were disposed in the fashion of a wheel of fortune at a fair. A card-table stood open near the gaily-aproned hearth, with two candles in old-fashioned-plated candlesticks at two
opposite corners, and packs of cards and a cribbage-board symmetrically arranged in the middle. The piano, which was very old, high, and shallow, with faded green silk fluted into a central rosette, from which hung cord and tassels, covering the primitive and worn-out mechanism above the meagre keyboard, also stood open, its few narrow yellow keys shining under the soft glow of two more candles in two more plated candlesticks. The thrifty linen cloth was removed from the drugget that covered the floor; flowers bloomed from the vases on the mantelpiece, and bunches of dried grass adorned the yellow-gauze-swathed frames of the pier-glass and pictures. Antimacassars, freshly washed and starched, abounded in unprecedented profusion. The best parlour was in full dress for company, displaying all those evidences of gentility and prosperity which made the marriage such a recognised social promotion for the coastguardsman's daughter; but no company was there. Young and old had deserted the decorous house for the irresistible jollity of the barn.

In the keeping-room, however, two steps from the threshold on which he stood, Dicky saw the one solitary person who had stayed behind—and that one was not Mrs. Morrison. The keeping-room was lighted only by the candles intended for the illumination of the supper-table; and the supper-table, composed of several tables joined together, nearly filled all the available space. It was loaded with fowls and hams, and jellies and pastry, and custards and creams, so that scarce an inch of tablecloth was to be seen; and Annie was busily flitting around it, like a pink and white butterfly, touching up the flowers and cut paper frills and adding little garnishings here and there where they seemed to be needed—surveying her operations from time to time critically, with her head on one side. Her sleeves were turned back over her arms, and her book-muslin skirt pinned up round her waist. Her hair was unruffled, her pink bows and pink roses uncrushed, her face calm and serious. She had not yet taken her share in the prevailing excitement.

Dicky watched her, and she did not see him for a minute or two; then a turn round the table brought him within her range of vision. The surprise was so sudden and complete (for, like the rest of the party, she had given up expecting him) that she was not able to guard herself from the betrayal of her delight at his appearance. Her lips parted; her bosom heaved; her eyes brightened and glowed. "Oh—h!" she
cried, under her breath, with a quivering sigh of satisfaction that was beyond words. It was her only welcome, but it was more than sufficient.

Human nature is human nature, as so many profound philosophers have told us, and this boy was not a saint—far from it. What he saw in the girl's aspect and manner told him that now he might venture to kiss her with the certainty of being forgiven, and such an opportunity it is not the custom of unregenerate young men to throw away. In the twinkling of an eye, and before she could unpin her skirt and roll down her sleeves—which was her first instinctive impulse—he had his arms around her and was pressing his eager lips to hers, paying little heed to her bird-like flutterings and modest struggles to escape. He had no thought of "insulting" her by this proceeding, or of harming her in any way. He loved her, as we have said—with what young creatures, who cannot possibly know much about it, call love, and which is certainly a very ardent sentiment—and, though he was no saint, he was a true man, and had the true man's chivalry in him. But certainly he acted without any thought of matrimonial contingencies.

Annie, however, who was a saint, more or less, saw orange blossoms and wedding-cakes, and all sorts of fine things floating in the distance, as she protestingly, and yet not unwillingly, submitted to be hugged and kissed. "Oh, sir," she murmured, when at last she had collected herself a little, and got her dainty dress smoothed down, "it is not right! You ought not to—to think of me in this way. Remember your family and position, and how far above me you are!" Duty required that she should point out this formidable objection to the foreshadowed alliance.

"How can you talk such rot?" he returned, in tender accents, laughing at her; and he dismissed such considerations as altogether irrelevant to the business in hand. "You dear little thing, I can't tell you how I have been longing to see you again, and looking forward to this chance. But I never dreamed of finding you alone in the house. Did you stay back here expecting that I would be coming this way?"

"Oh no!" she interrupted, quite shocked at the bare idea of such a thing. "How can you think I should have been so forward? We had all given you up."

"It would not have been forward—it would have been awfully sweet of you," he said, again drawing her to him.
“Why should you be so shy when you know I love you?” And he kissed her more boldly than ever.

How should she know he loved her when he had never spoken to her since the day he met her first? And she might have known that that sort of love was not of a matrimonial character, had not her good principles forbade such knowledge. “I love you” was, to her right-minded judgment, equivalent to “Will you marry me?”—as of course we know it ought to be in all cases, where a man addresses a woman who is not his blood relation. So that his careless question filled her with the most profound emotion. “Are you sure you love me?” she asked him in an agitated whisper.

“My little darling,” he responded, delighted with her implied surrender, and not thinking much of terms on either side, “you know I do. How can any one help loving you?”

“You don’t know me yet,” she suggested.

“I know you perfectly—as if we had been friends all our lives,” he said, caressing her sleek brown head.

“I am not worthy of you,” she went on, discharging her conscience fully. Something in this phrase staggered him a little, and kept him silent for a moment. The ghost of an idea that she might be taking things over seriously flitted across his mind. But it vanished at once; he would not have this delightful meeting spoiled by thoughts of anything beyond it. “Don’t talk nonsense,” he said lightly. “That’s only a bait for compliments. You know as well as I do that you are worthy of anybody or anything—you dear little woman!” And again he was about to dishevel that neat white muslin and crush those pretty bows and rosebuds that were already showing the results of his embraces—only at this moment the sound of an opening door gave him a shock which arrested his attention.

Mrs. Morrison came toddling into the keeping-room from the direction of the kitchen to see how the preparations for supper were getting on. And there by the supper-table she saw Mr. Richard standing, propping himself against the edge of it in a stiff and unnatural manner. And there she saw Annie standing before him, head hanging down, eyes veiled with modest lashes, cheeks ruddy as the rose, occupied in picking a bit of green parsley into a hundred thousand fragments. Our worthy matron knew little of the ways of the world, but she recognised what that meant. “What a
handsome pair!” was the instant thought of her maternal heart; and then she prepared for action. Had she been the most experienced old campaigner of a dozen London seasons she could not have acted better.

“Ah, Mr. Richard, have you come, sir, after all? Well, you’re kindly welcome, and Rhody ’ll be just delighted. She’d almost given you up. Have you been here long, sir?”—warmly shaking hands with him.

“No,” said Dicky, who had been there about a quarter of an hour. “I have only just come. I made all the haste I could, but somehow dinner seemed to be twenty-four hours long to-night—I thought they would never get done. But you won’t break up yet, will you? It is not supper-time for hours, is it? I have been so looking forward to a dance in the barn. I have been asking your daughter if she will have me for a partner”—looking pointedly at Annie, who took no notice of the hint.

“Oh, she will, with pleasure, sir; she learnt dancing at school, and I daresay you’ll find her as good as any of ’em. But you mustn’t forget the bride,” said the mother-in-law slyly; “I think Rhody ’ll want to be number one, you know—she’ll look to have you ask her first.” Then she glanced at Annie, who was apparently absorbed in her business at the supper-table. “Go and get some more parsley, my girl,” said she; “there isn’t half enough. There’s nothing sets a table off like plenty o’ parsley.”

A brief silence followed Annie’s disappearance, and then the mother asked her young guest if he didn’t think the child was “looking well.”

“She’s looking lovely,” Dicky responded with fervour. “She has grown up the prettiest girl I ever saw.”

“Well, she is pretty. And I thought you’d noticed it,” said Mrs. Morrison. “But, now, you won’t turn her head, will you, Mr. Richard? She’s only seventeen, and she isn’t used to gentlemen’s attentions. You won’t go for to—to”—she hesitated in some confusion, and then burst out recklessly—“You know what I mean, sir; I can’t say it!”

Dicky’s face flushed crimson; he did know what she meant perfectly. “I wouldn’t,” he said solemnly, “hurt a hair of her head for all the world could give me.”

“Bless you, my dear,” rejoined the gratified woman, too much overcome by her emotions to remember to order herself lowly and reverently, as was her wont; “bless you; I know
you wouldn't! There's something about you that I can trust, and trust I will—let them say what they like."

"Do they say I am not to be trusted?" demanded Dicky, with some heat, mentally referring to Delavel-Pole.

"Never mind what they say. I don't believe 'em. There's a look in your face that speaks for you," said the farmer's wife, benevolently regarding him. "And you'll not play with my girl, as some young gentlemen in your place would do—you'll not take advantage of her because you've saved her life and made her grateful—I know you won't."

Dicky, as we have seen, was not so scrupulous as he might have been, but he had a soul that was capable of being profoundly stirred by such an appeal as this. He began to hope that he had not been something worse than a fool, and to make high-minded resolutions. "That I never will," he replied solemnly; "never—on my word of honour."

"Then I shall trust her to you, my dear. I shall trust you to take care of her, with an easy mind."

"I will take care of her as if she were my own sister," said he. But in thinking how he should take care of her, after what had just happened, the idea of marrying her some day necessarily presented itself to his mind. It was rather a disturbing, even rather an appalling idea at first, but he faced it promptly. A man must do his duty, he told himself, and take the consequences of his acts; and the prospect of braving the world and defying its conventional tyrannies had always possessed a fascination for him. Why should he not marry a farmer's daughter? It was nobody's business but his own, and she was good enough for any man, let him be fifty times a Delavel. "Have no fear," he said, taking the hand of the old mother, who had so effectually pierced his most vulnerable point; "it shall never be said that a woman trusted me in vain. I'm not a very good fellow, I am afraid, Mrs. Morrison, but at least I am not a villain. No woman shall ever say that of me."

"Bless you, my dear," repeated Annie's parent, wiping a tear from her eye, and even showing an inclination to kiss him, with difficulty repressed. "You are a true gentleman, every inch of you."

"I hope so," said Dicky, swelling a little.

And then Annie returned, and they could say no more. But Mrs. Morrison felt that she had made good use of her time—as she certainly had—and was tremulously cheerful.

"Give it to me, deary," she exclaimed, holding her plump
hand for the parsley, "and you young folks go off and have a dance while there's time for it. I'll do what else is wanted in the house."

But Annie was not prepared to go alone with Dicky to the barn through the dark yard and garden, though he entreated her so earnestly with his boyish bright eyes. A fit of maiden bashfulness possessed her. She looked at her mother with a look that was promptly responded to by that intelligent matron.

"Though, perhaps," said Mrs. Morrison, as if struck by a happy afterthought, "it would please Rhody better if you went and spoke to her a bit first, without telling her as you had been into the house; and me and Annie 'll follow you in a few minutes. We've got to mind our p's and q's with Rhody, I can tell you, Mr. Richard, and she'd be finely jealous if she thought we'd been keeping you all this time away from her, and she the bride and all. If you'll just go and have a dance and a bit of a chat with her first she'll like it, and so will John. You'll find the old man there too. We'll be after you directly."

"All right," said Dicky, "I will—if I must."

And reluctantly he tore himself from his blushing lady-love (who, the moment he was gone, flung herself upon her mother's ample breast, to confess that Mr. Richard had told her he loved her "in so many words," and took his way alone to the rustic ballroom, where he met with an ovation none the less enthusiastic for being respectfully subdued, and was triumphantly taken in charge by Rhody. The bride, still in her blue silk, and with a killing wreath of orange blossoms round her head, was dancing with great spirit and vigour, but had all the evening kept a watchful eye upon the doorway for his much-desired appearance. She had made such a boast of the compliment he had designed to pay her—she had stirred up so much delightful envy and jealousy thereby—that if, after all, he had failed to come, the mortification to her vanity, and to all her tenderest woman's feelings, would have been insupportable. She was just beginning to despair, and to be harrowingly conscious that furtive smiles and whispers were permeating the company, which naturally was inclined to triumph a little in her disappointment, when her quick eye caught sight of his tall figure in the dimness of the outer right. Instantly she dropped her partner, and made a rush across the floor, scattering the dancers right and left without
ceremony. "Ah! there is Mr. Richard!" she cried rapturously. "John! John! Stop that fiddle—tell them to leave off—and come and speak to Mr. Richard."

John obeyed his wife with an alacrity that was productive of many winks and jokes, and the pair advanced together to the barn doors to receive their distinguished guest. The festive spirit was in them, and also many glasses of punch and negus. Peace and charity and an all-comprehensive benevolence animated their lively souls, and John was ready to think every man a jolly good fellow, let him be whom he might.

"Come in, sir, come in," he urged hospitably; "we are only plain folks, but you're welcome to the best we've got. Come in, Mr. Richard, sir; and we take it very kind of you to leave your fathers' all to drink good health to the likes of us—very kind indeed, we do. Here you, Eliza, where are you? Get some punch for Mr. Richard Delavel—a fresh brew, mind, with plenty of good stuff in it."

The punch was brought, and Dicky imbibed it freely, and himself began to feel that it was a world of good fellows, and to be generally pleased with himself and his surroundings. He drank Rhoda's special health with many compliments on her charming appearance, and then, careful to avoid making further distinctions, shook hands with everybody—even with Eliza, who nearly "dropped" as she afterwards described it, under the unexpected shock. He gave his arm to his young hostess with as much deferential grace as if the barn were a London ballroom and she a new-made duchess, and paraded her about in a manner that made her dizzy with delight and pride. Then he joined the elder Morrison, who sat in a group of hilarious old farmers (himself the most hilarious of all), smoking long churchwardens and drinking brown October that was as strong as brandy; and a great tankard of beer was added to the punch. The liquors were too good to pass, and it was thirsty weather, and Dicky would not for the world seem to slight the hospitalities that were so warmly pressed upon him.
Morrison was an old-fashioned farmer of the old-fashioned days, content to do as his father had done before him. The old plough turned up the stubble, the horny hand scattered the seed in the furrows, and when the corn was ripe it was the sickle that mowed it down. Even the flail was heard in the barn still, though the hum of steam machinery was not unknown in the village. Nevertheless his farm was (for an old-fashioned farm) in good order; hedges trimmed and ditches cleaned and crops well up to the average; rent paid to the day and profits accumulating—very slowly, but with a steadiness that is rarely experienced by men of his class now-a-days. His system was to save all his money, pound by pound, instead of re-investing it in the land (in the shape of improved implements, drainage, artificial manures or pedigreed stock); to let nature take care of herself, with such nursing as he could give her without expense; to be content with slow processes, and small but safe returns. In short, to walk in the benighted old paths generally. And the system seemed to suit his conservative landlord as well as it suited him. Mr. Delavel was wont to hold up this comfortable old tenant as a model for the rest.

In the lifetime of the previous Morrison the present one had been but an ordinary labourer amongst the hired men, with no prospect of marrying and making a home for himself until the death of his father left him to inherit the tenancy of the farm. In like manner his son John was only a working bailiff to himself, and he never dreamed of parting with his money in his own lifetime to set up that young man in the world. "What I done," said he, "he can do, and what my father thought right I think right. The place'll be his own in the course o' nature, and surely he don't want to hurry me into my grave afore my time." This was when it was first broached to him that John wanted to get married. He could not see what a man wanted to be married for when he'd already got a comfortable home and a good mother to cook his vittles and mend his clothes. He wouldn't hear o' such nonsense. John must wait as he awaited. Plenty o' time for the cares of a family when he was ten or twenty years
older. He himself had married at forty-five, and consequently that was soon enough for anybody.

But John, though a slow man, was a determined one, and he insisted on not waiting till he was forty-five. His father and he had repeated battles. All the family, save himself, objected to Rhody, for one thing; they did not consider her their equal in rank, nor eligible in any way. "And o' course you can't expect to get one o' the right sort, while you've nothing to offer," the old farmer argued plausibly; "but wait till you're the master here, and then see how the gals'll run arter yer. I waited until I came in for the place, and what was the consequence? Why, I got yer mother and five hundred pounds down, with silver teapots and house linen, and a mahogany bedstead, and goodness knows what besides."

John replied that he was quite satisfied with his humbler choice, and that all he wanted was a little something to start with—a few hundreds on loan, that he would bind himself to repay in certain instalments. Upon which the old man lectured him at great length upon the iniquity of borrowing. He had never owed any man a penny in his life, and never would, no, not if he was to starve for it. Once you went into debt you were done for—ruin was a mere matter of time. John naturally proceeded to beg his father to give him a small instalment of his inheritance, if that was how he felt about a loan; and then the old man went into a passion, and declared that while he was above ground, at any rate, he'd take care o' the bit o' money he'd had such hard work to scrape together. If people chose to make ducks and drakes of it when he was in his grave, why let 'em, and he thought it hard that a father as had give his son a good eddication, and as comfortable a home as any in the land, should be turned agin' like this and wished out of the way so as others might step into his shoes.

This kind of thing continued for some time, and John used to carry the discouraging reports to the coastguard station when he went to see Rhody of an evening. At last that intrepid and resourceful young woman stepped into the breach. "Let me tackle him," said she, "and see if I don't make him change his tune." She tackled him accordingly, and with complete success. In a short time she was able to wind him round her little finger. Her energy, her impudence, her fearlessness, her practical view of things, her general "smartness" captivated him—for even an old farmer of seventy is a man,
and a man is the prey of the appropriate siren while the breath of life is in him. Not even she could persuade him to untie his purse strings, but short of that she could bend him to her will. And thus it came to pass that the marriage was allowed, and that patriarchal arrangement for the maintenance of the young couple entered into—an arrangement that gave father and daughter-in-law equal satisfaction. It was the latter’s suggestion and contrivance, but the former believed it to be entirely his own brilliant idea, and was therefore very proud of it. It seemed to him that it answered all the requirements of the case. “Not only costs us nothin’—for we shan’t miss what the gal eats—but gives us her services free,” said he; “and many a penny she’ll make and save, I’ll be bound, with that clever head o’ hers.” When Mrs. Morrison pointed out that two missuses in a house never had been known to agree, he captiously told her that it would be her own fault if she didn’t get on with such a gal as Rhody, who’d brighten ’em up so as they wouldn’t know theirselves. And when the jealous mother deprecated the plan on Annie’s account, the old man hotly affirmed that it was just what Annie wanted—such an example of industry and practical good sense as her sister-in-law would afford her. “She won’t lie abed or be trapesing off to church o’ churning mornings, leaving her mother to do all the work,” said the farmer, newly conscious of his daughter’s shortcomings. “And when Annie sees her bustling round, maybe she’ll be stirred up to imitate her a bit.”

On this wedding evening, as he sat amongst his cronies, as happy as a king, taking all the credit to himself for the joyfulness of the occasion, Rhody came behind him, put her arms round his neck, and kissed his purpling cheek with a resounding smack. “Well, old man,” she said heartily, “and how are you getting on? Are they looking after you as they ought to?”

He took his pipe from his mouth and returned the smack with vigour. “Fust rate, my duck, fust rate,” he cordially replied. Then, turning to the company, he added with pride, “She’s the gal to take care on yer.”

“I mean to take care of you,” said Rhody, with determination. “I’m not going to let you drench yourself in thunderstorms same as you did the other day, laying up rheumatics and lumbago for your old age. Good folks are scarce.”

“And so are pretty gals,” said the farmer, saluting her rosy cheek again. “And they must be took care on too.
Have a sup o' beer—come, do; it'll do yer good. She do a credit to us, Master Richard, don't she? Many's the poor young man that's broken-hearted this day, I'll be bound!"

Dicky declared that, for his part, he was ready to cut his throat for envy and despair; at which Rhody bade him "go along," and then reminded him that, if he suffered in that way, he had only himself to blame. The jest was taken up by the circle of old fogies, who at all times deemed it most appropriate for young people, but on this occasion felt that etiquette demanded that it should have the fullest and broadest treatment, and Dicky was rallied upon the supposed state of his heart, the supposed effect of association and example upon it, at great length. He bore it good humouredly, and even entered into the spirit of the thing, admitting the hypothetical young lady and the possession of all the tender feelings attributed to him, until he found the general company gathering round to listen and to mingle their guffaws with the wheezy cackle of the old men. Then a sudden spark of irritation flashed from him. "Why are they not dancing?" he demanded sharply.

Somebody suggested that they "didn't like to make so bold," now that he was present, which quickly drove him from his seat, and sent him striding across the ballroom, in search of the orchestra, which had retired to a dark corner, and was silently burying its nose in the inexhaustible tankard. In a few moments he and Rhody were dancing a vigorous polka up and down the barn, and all the heavy, sheepish men in shining broadcloth and gay neckties and all the girls in their Sunday muslins and alpacas and bows of bright ribbon were dancing around them.

Rhody, by way of showing the high tone required of one who associates with the aristocracy, affected to despise the barn and its simple gauds, but it really made a very charming picture. That the floor was ridgy and rough—that the seats were mainly composed of sacks of corn tucked up in household draperies—that the light was produced by tallow candles guttering into tin sconces, and was scarcely strong enough to define the outline of the roof, or to inconvenience the white owl on her accustomed rafter—that the air was heavily charged with strong, warm, mealy, grainy odours that tickled sensitive nostrils like the smell of ripe grass inhaled by people affected with hay fever—only added to the charm of the place. The walls were hung with bunches of evergreens and flags of glazed
calico; a rough stage, formed of a shutter laid upon bushel measures, precariously bore up a windsor chair which accommodated the musician, a harmonious blacksmith, whose fiddle was an indispensable adjunct to all Dunstanborough festivities. A table in a corner was loaded with bowls of punch and vast jugs of beer and negus. The rustic revellers were in artistic harmony with their surroundings, and their enjoyment was good to see. From the broad aperture of the doorway—both the great leaves being thrown back—the lovely night looked in, not quite dark yet, and full of stars and mystery. Dicky thought that, if only Annie would come, nothing would be wanting to make it the most perfect ballroom in the world.

"Why doesn't she come?" he demanded of the bride, in irrepressible impatience.

"She's helping her Ma," said Rhody carelessly.

"And can't the others do that? Why is she drudging in the house, like Cinderella, instead of dancing with the rest?"

"She likes it," said Mrs. John; "and she don't care for dancing. She's too religious."

"Rubbish! Send somebody to tell her she must come. Everybody should dance at your wedding, for luck," he added; for he kept most of his wits about him still, in spite of his potations.

He stopped dancing himself, and immediately the fiddle stopped. Eliza came by, bearing empty jugs to the cellar to be refilled; and by her the young missus, whom Eliza was prepared to rebel against as such, sent a rather peremptory message to Annie to give over pottering after the supper, and come along to the barn. "Tell her Mr. Richard Delavel wants her," she called after the servant, with a sharp laugh.

Seeing that he had aroused a little suspicion and jealousy in his young hostess, Dicky set himself to restore her confidence in him, and in her own pre-eminent attractions, and, of course, succeeded in no time. Annie was forgotten in two minutes, and Rhody was languishing on his arm in blissful triumph. She reminded him of what he had said in the morning about the silver teaspoons, and asked him when she might have the honour of his company to tea.

"I shall be most happy to come," said Dicky, "any day you like to ask me."

"Then suppose we say next Sunday," Rhody suggested, being a young person not given to letting the grass grow under her feet, and belonging to a class that dispenses with
the formality of a honeymoon. "By Sunday I shall be quite settled, if that would suit you."

Dicky determined to invite himself to schoolroom tea on Sunday, and then to get the good-natured governess to excuse him without saying anything about it. "All right," he said; "I'll come on Sunday."

This readiness to pay her honour, of course, charmed and delighted the bride, but it was not of her that Dicky thought in making that promise.

Then a reel was started, and taken up with enthusiasm, the men flinging out their arms and snapping their fingers as they swung and jigged around their partners, and the girls responding with smiles and rustic antics as they twirled their full petticoats in the dusty air. Dicky flung himself into the fray with as much ardour as any of them, for he loved a reel and could dance it well, and some of the Dunstanborough maidens, who had come to tenants' and servants' parties at the Hall, had been his partners before, and were of proved efficiency. He did not, and was not required to, observe any ballroom etiquette; he was privileged to consult his own goodwill and pleasure only; so he took one girl and another as fancy dictated, dancing with each for just as long as it pleased him, and then returning her to her rightful partner, who in no case resented his temporary deprivation. In this way he gratified a great many people, found variety and interest in his own performances, and held himself at liberty to appropriate Annie as soon as she should appear upon the scene. But in fact, he did not do it of design. I am sorry to say his head was so full of the fumes of punch and old October that he did not quite know what he did.

When Annie came at last she was accompanied by her mother, and Mrs. Morrison's arrival was taken as a signal for supper. At sight of her, Rhody, the mistress of the ceremonies, held up her hand; the fiddler laid his fiddle on his knee; the dancers paused, and held their sides, and panted, and flapped themselves with their handkerchiefs, and trooped laughing towards the door.

But Dicky was not to be robbed in this way. He swept them back with an imperious arm, Mrs. John and all, protesting that supper was not to be thought of at this absurd hour. "Come!" he cried with a voice and gesture that made the girls look at each other and whisper "Well, I never!" under their breath, holding out both hands to the shrinking daughter
of the house. "Come along! What shall it be? Can you waltz, Annie? Oh yes, I know you can. Play us a waltz," he shouted to the blacksmith, who was about to descend from his rickety rostrum. And the musician, reluctantly returning to his windsor chair, struck up the venerable Elfin waltzes; and Annie, standing hesitatingly just within the barn doors, was taken without more ado into her lover's arms.

"We have lost nearly an hour," he said in an impassioned undertone. "Why didn't you come before?"

He whirled her into the room and down to the far, dark corners—growing darker and darker as one after another the candles burnt out in their dripping sockets—and mechanically she fell into his step and moved with him without consciousness of any effort on her own part. She had learned to waltz at boarding-school, and she was naturally light-footed and agile; but she did not know whether she was doing well or ill, and did not care. She was filled with emotions that transcended all trivial anxieties of that sort. Her conversation with her mother had assured her of the honourableness of Dicky's intentions, and the prospect that had opened before her bewildered her with its magnificence. She was young and healthy, she had had her dreams like other girls, and this noble youth, who had hitherto dwelt like a young god of Olympus so far above her, more than realised them. So she yielded gently when he strained her to his breast as they waltzed together, and she touched his sleeve with her soft cheek—a touch that maddened him in his present state—feeling it lawful to thus express herself now that he had told her he loved her, and told her mother that no woman should ever say he had deceived her. The other people were dancing; they had a spirit in their feet, as Shelley says, which made it impossible for them to stand still while the fiddle went on; and in the confusion and dimness about them he took her through the wide doorway into the open air, where the sweet smell of cow's breath mingled with the odour of stale straw, and where it seemed so quiet and dark—darker than it really was. The moment he found himself safe, as he thought, from observation—not remembering the conspicuousness of a white dress and the distance at which it can be seen when the stars are shining—he flung his arms round her, tightened them until she gasped for breath, and kissed her with a vehemence that made her tremble. He was intoxicated in more ways than one, and quite reckless of consequences by this time. He
told her that he loved her again and again, calling her his darling, his precious one, all the tender names that passion could devise; and when she asked him whether he would love her as much as that always, swore by his honour, and all that a gentleman held dear, that he would be true to her, and to her only, to his life's end.

Suddenly into the midst of this madness, came John Morrison, himself as cool and grim as if he had taken nothing stronger than water all day. Annie gave a little shriek, and Dicky, in his fury, nearly felled the intruder to the earth.

"Steady, sir, steady," said John, parrying the attack with more quickness than might have been expected from a man of his build and habits; and in a moment the boy's wild beast impulse passed, and he waited in a panting silence for the inevitable question. "What does this mean, Mr. Richard? What are you doing with my sister out here in the dark?"

It was Annie who spoke first. "It is all right, John," she said, with a note of gentle triumph in her trembling voice. "He is not doing wrong—no more am I. We are—we are engaged, John."

Silence followed this statement, which was a shock to Dicky as well as to John, but not nearly such a shock as it would have been an hour ago. Then the brother declared that he didn't believe a word of it. "What does Mr. Richard say?" he inquired, after a second pause of incredulity and astonishment.

"I say what Miss Morrison says, of course," replied Dicky. "We are engaged—if she is good enough to accept me."

"And what does the squire and my lady think of it?" queried John.

"I have not asked them," said Dicky. "Does nobody know?"

"Not yet. And I think," added the boy, who was sobering with great rapidity, "that it would be just as well to keep the matter to ourselves for the present."

"I suppose you have only just made it up between you?"

The silence of the young pair gave assent to this.

"I'll tell you what it is," said the farmer, in a changed tone, "the liquor has got into your head and you're excited. All the fellows are making love to-night—they don't know what they're doing, half of 'em, and they'll forget all about it to­morrow."

With great dignity Dicky begged that he might not be
classed with those human pigs who did not know how to behave themselves in ladies' company. He hoped he was a gentleman, at any rate.

"All right," said John. "We'll talk about it in the morning, and see what you have to say then. You'd better come to supper now. Rhody's hunting for you high and low."

CHAPTER XII.

THE END OF THE WEDDING DAY.

The wedding day did not end well, upon the whole.

As midnight was approaching, and while the guests were still seated at the supper-table, having eaten to repletion and abused themselves with strong liquors, having made their realistic speeches and sung their time-honoured songs, a thundering knock upon the front door made them jump in their chairs and ejaculate "Lord-a-mercy!" with great fervour. After the first moment of alarm, all eyes were converged upon Dicky's face. The boy had been joining in the rough merriment around him to an extent sufficient to cover his growing discontent with his own proceedings, the awakened sense of caste and of the anomalousness of his position, which increased with the hilarity of his companions, and as the seriousness of his escapade sobered him. He carved fowls, and pulled crackers, and made speeches with the rest, and occasional jokes that provoked roars of admiring laughter. Now his fine-cut features wore a passionate scowl that changed his aspect altogether, and at once explained the situation. An embarrassed silence was maintained while the sleepy maid-of-all-work shuffled into the entry, and more briskly returned to the keeping-room.

"Somebody from the 'all, sir, wishes to speak to you," said Eliza.

Rising haughtily, he went out, and found a groom standing on the door-step. The man touched his cap and said, "If you please, sir, my lady wished me to say you was to come home directly."

Dicky asked no questions; he was too keenly conscious of cutting a ridiculous figure in the eyes of those grinning rustics.
behind him to run the risk of adding to his humiliations. He turned and said good-night in a stately manner, explaining that his mother was a nervous woman, and was anxious about him if he happened to be out a few minutes later than usual; and then, ignoring many friendly expressions of the generally-felt hope that he wouldn't get into trouble, and scarcely looking at Annie, he mounted the horse that his servant had fetched for him, and rode home in vengeful silence.

His mother, in her dressing-gown, came out upon the corridor to intercept him as he went to bed. "Oh, my boy," she wailed, in a cautious undertone, "what are you thinking of to go on like this? If your father were to know what you have been doing! Fortunately, he was in the library, and I managed to keep it from him."—

"How did you know yourself, mother?" interrupted Dicky breathlessly.

"Never mind how I knew"—

"Has Max been here?"

Lady Susan hesitated, and then reluctantly admitted the fact. "He walked up after dinner, as he often does, and he happened to ask for you—and Barbara said she had seen you going out"—

"Damn him!" said Dicky savagely. "I'll give him something to meddle for in earnest next time."

His mother uttered a little whimpering wail at hearing the wicked word on those young lips that were generally so courteous to her and to everybody; it stabbed her tender heart with its testimony to the truth of the prevailing belief that this favourite son was on the road to ruin. "O Dicky, Dicky!" she cried, with the tears in her eyes.

"Mother, I beg your pardon," he said, with swift compunction. "I ought not to have spoken so. But really it is more than I can bear, to have that fellow playing the spy and the informer in this way—and you encouraging him."

"He only does it for your good, and because he feels it to be his duty," Lady Susan protested. "He wants to save you from evil courses, and from bringing disgrace on us and on that poor girl."

"Disgrace!" cried Dicky, immediately breaking out again in fire and fury. "Let him use that word to me, and I'll break every bone in his body—parson though he is." He spoke through his set teeth, wild with rage; but in the
THE END OF THE WEDDING DAY.

extremity of his anger he felt a glow of comfort and triumph in the reflection that he had acted as a man of honour to "that poor girl;" and then and there he determined to discharge the obligations he had so recklessly undertaken to the very letter. Max and the Family should be satisfied to that extent; there should be no disgrace of the kind they feared.

"You don't know what you are saying," lamented Lady Susan, in a voice of despair. "You have been taking too much—I can smell it, Dicky. Oh, my boy, I thought you loved your mother better than to break her heart, as you are doing!"

"I do love you," he said, putting his impetuous arm around her. "And it is that lying sneak who is breaking your heart, making you believe what isn't true—not I. You didn't use to side with other people against me, mother."

"I don't, Dicky. But you know it is all true—that Max is not lying. Oh, I wish—I wish you were more like him!" concluded Lady Susan, who had a genius for saying the wrong thing at the wrong moment.

"All right," said Dicky, promptly withdrawing his arm. "If he is your ideal it is no good for me to try to please you. I may as well give it up at once. Good night, mother. It is time for both of us to be in bed. I'm tired to death."

She gave him a tearful kiss, which he coldly returned, and they parted—she to spend the rest of the night in tears and prayers, and he to toss through the slow hours in feverish thought, varied by demoniacal nightmares.

At the farm the bride and bridegroom, having seen the last of the guests out of the house, exchanged a word or two on the doorstep.

"It's my belief," the former remarked in a decisive manner, "that Master Richard was pretty far gone."

"He'd had quite enough," said John, "but there was a many worse than him."

"He'd never have carried on as he did with Annie if he'd known what he was about," said Rhody, who, even at this momentous period of her life, could afford to feel annoyed at the recollection of the little injury that her vanity had received. "He pushed me right out of his road as if I'd been so much dirt, and he took hold of her—in front of everybody—in a way that was quite disgusting. I really wondered how she could let him do it, and she always setting up to be so
proper. You don't mean to say you never noticed it, John?"

"Oh, I noticed it," replied the farmer slowly. "I thought he was going it rather too strong, but afterwards I had a word or two with him on the quiet, and I found it was all right. Look here, Rhody, you mustn't say anything about it just at present—but we'll be having another wedding some of these days. I never thought it of Master Richard, but so it is—he's not playing with Annie, after all. He means honourable by her."

Rhody uttered an exclamation that was almost a shriek. "Oh, how can you be such a born idiot?" she burst out; and he thought they were strange words for a bride to use to her husband on their wedding night, and did not like them at all. "To think of a gentleman like him meaning honourable to a girl like her! You must be out of your senses to talk such nonsense."

"I know what I am saying just as well as you do," he retorted surlily. "And you oughtn't to call me names, Rhody. If you begin like this afore we've been so much as a whole day married, what am I to expect by-and-by? It hurts my feelins, Rhody—I didn't think it of you."

"Well, I don't mean to hurt your feelings, old boy. But of course it is foolishness to think such things. He'll no more marry Annie than he'll marry me—goodness, no! I should think not."

In her own mind she determined that he should not, if she could prevent it; it was not likely that she was going to have Annie set over her head in that way.

"Why, it's as plain as the nose on your face that he's amusing himself, because she lets him, and because it's dull being at home for the holidays with nobody but his ma and sisters. 'Taint his fault. It's what all young gentlemen do, if girls let 'em."

"I wasn't aware you knew so much about young gentlemen's ways," said John, still unappeased.

"Oh, I hear people talk, of course, and they all say that he's just as fast as he can be. Why, only last Christmas his ma caught him kissing Alice, the young ladies' maid."

"Under the mistletoe, I reckon."

"No, it wasn't under the mistletoe—it was behind the schoolroom door, and it was in the dark."

"Well, he's open and above-board as far as Annie is con-
cernèd. He never made no bones about it. He up and said
he was engaged to her the minute I asked him."

"Poor boy!—for after all he's nothing but a boy—is that
how you take advantage of him when he's so drunk he doesn't
know what he's doing?" Rhody spoke bitterly, for the bitter
thought possessed her that—supposing such things possible—
she might have had that golden chance; and her envy and
jealousy knew no bounds. "Well, there's one thing certain—
he'll tell a different tale to-morrow, you'll see. And if he
don't, you've got the squire to reckon with. I think I see his
face when he hears who's to be his daughter-in-law!"

"It's Master Richard we've got to do with, not the squire,"
said John; "and he'll be his own master in a few months.
And he can play the man, though he is a young 'un. I think
the squire'd have a tough job to make him do what he hadn't
a mind to. He's not one to be forced."

"Poor boy!" ejaculated Rhody again, with passionate
fervour.

"He was not so drunk that he didn't know what he was
doing," proceeded John. "He knew as well as anybody.
And, drunk or sober," he added grimly, "he's got to behave
honourable to my sister, or I'll know the reason why."

"You think a lot of your sister," sneered Rhody.

"She deserves to be thought a lot on. She's as good as
he is."

"Better than I am, of course: I'm nobody!"

"Now, Rhody, it isn't kind of you to speak so—to-day of
all times. I did think," he added disappointedly, "that you
and Annie'd be happy together—that you'd be fond of her and
think well of her."

"I'll be fond of her if she behaves herself," said Rhody.
"But if you expect me to go down on my knees and worship
her as if she was an angel out of heaven, why, I can't do it.
She's no more an angel than I am. She pretends to be so
religious and so proper, and she's the greatest flirt that
ever walked. She's led Mr. Richard on—she's laid herself
out to catch him—from the first. Why, on the very day
he saved her at the mussel-beds—I never told you at the
time, 'cause I was ashamed to, and I thought you'd be so
mad about it—I left them alone in the kitchen for a few
minutes, and when I came back there they were a kissing and
hugging."

"That's a lie," said John quietly.
"Thank you. If I am accused of telling lies—and by my own husband—and afore I've been a day married"—

Here Rhody broke down and wept. She was overwrought by the excitements and fatigues of the day, and fevered by the liquid refreshment that she, in common with her guests, had too freely indulged in, and her nerves at this moment were beyond her control. John put his arm round her, and presently she laid her head on his shoulder. It was the end of the first matrimonial quarrel, but the beginning of many of which Dicky and Annie were the cause.

CHAPTER XIII.

DICKY PLAYS THE MAN.

Dicky awoke with a headache and in bad spirits next morning. He saw quite clearly what he had done, and would not for a moment admit to himself that he regretted it; but he knew that he would not have done it (just in that fashion) had he not been carried away by the contagion of excitement and foolishness. He had a heavy sense of having been precipitate, and having got himself into a mess generally; and he thought how men of the world, how his Oxford contemporaries, would scoff at his callow boyishness if they knew. He also thought, with considerable consternation, of his father and brothers, and how they would deal with him if they knew. Nevertheless, his resolve to play the man, as John Morrison had phrased it, was fixed and firm. What was done was done, and what remained was to make the best of it. The skies might fall, but he would stand to his word of honour. All his prospects in life might go, but Annie would stay; and that gain, he told himself, would cover all his losses.

Soon after breakfast, which he took in the schoolroom, a message was brought to him that John Morrison wished to speak to him. He summoned his future brother-in-law to the little room which was his private den, supposed to be devoted to study, and there met him with a frank hand outstretched—a kind of greeting that caused the young farmer to sink his truculent air—as of one come to force terms from a strong adversary taken at a disadvantage—to a manner
which suggested a desire to make things as comfortable for all parties as the circumstances allowed.

"Well, Mr. Richard, sir," the visitor began, almost in a tone of apology, "I thought as how I had better walk round and have a word with you—as between man and man, you know, sir."

"Certainly," Dicky cordially responded. He liked that phrase, "as between man and man," and he liked John's attitude, which implied a respect for both of them. "I am very glad you have come. But if you hadn't I should have gone to the farm myself."

"I suppose you know what I have come about, sir?" John rather diffidently inquired.

"About my engagement to your sister," replied Dicky. "I understand."

"You hold to it that it's a real engagement, Mr. Richard?"
"As far as I am concerned, of course. I hope Annie has not changed her mind since last night?"

John took no notice of this query; he was looking with intense, solid earnestness at the alert, flushed face before him. "You really mean it?" he said slowly. "You are ready to act honourable? You promise to make her your lawful wife?"

Dicky's flush deepened. "I don't know that I've ever done anything to make you think me a villain," he replied, with the Delavel air.

"No, sir. But still it's hard to believe that a gentleman like you can be serious, when the girl belongs to another walk o' life. Not but what," he added promptly, "I consider that Annie is any man's equal, be he who he may."

"So do I," said Dicky.
"You've only seen her a few times, sir."
"Only twice—to speak to."
"Only twice! You don't mean to say that's all?"
"That's all. But you see it was enough."

"Would you—would you like another chance, sir?" asked John, after a thoughtful pause, and evidently with an enormous effort. "Maybe if we hadn't been all merrymaking and foolish it wouldn't have happened as it did—maybe you were carried away through being excited and having had a little drink. And though I don't mean to let my sister be took liberties with—not if it's the king on his throne—I don't want you to feel as if you was caught in a trap and we wouldn't let
you out. "Twouldn't make Annie any happier to be married that way."

In silence Dicky held out his hand, touched to the quick by this generous offer, which he could not for a moment entertain. "No," said he, "I don't want another chance. It's quite true that I was carried away last night. If I had been cool and sober I should have remembered that it was my duty to wait until I had something of a home to offer her—some prospect in life to go upon. But if it hadn't happened then it would have happened later. And if Annie and her family are satisfied for her to take me as I am, I am only too glad that I spoke. And I pledge you my word of honour, John Morrison, that I will be true and faithful. She has given me her love, and you shall find me worthy of it. No woman," added Dicky solemnly, "shall ever say that she trusted me in vain." This was the dearest aspiration of his heart—the foundation of his moral code—the whole duty of man as he understood it.

John took his offered hand, and wrung it warmly. "Sir," said he, with something like emotion in his voice, "you are a gentleman." It was the highest compliment he could pay, though, as a matter of fact, he had but a poor opinion of gentlemen.

Then Dicky went to find the housekeeper, and shortly re­turned, followed by a servant bearing a tray of refreshments. The two young men poured out two tumblers of beer, and looked at each other as they raised them to their lips.

"Your health, sir," said John, "and may you be as happy as you deserve to be." He drained his glass, set it upon the table, and remarked, with some compunction, that his host was over young to undertake the cares of a family.

"Well," said Dicky, "I'm afraid I shall not be able to undertake them for some time yet. I must set to work to make a home before I can marry—and I have everything to do."

"I thought you was to be made a parson now directly, sir, and be put into a family living like Mr. Delavel-Pole."

"Never, John, never! I'd break stones on the road first."

"That's what they all say, sir—that the squire means to make a parson of you."

"I believe the squire does mean it, but I don't—and, after all, that's the main thing. One can't always fall in with one's father's views, John."

"No, sir. I've found that out myself. But if you go against the squire he'll be hard on you, won't he?"
"He will, no doubt."
"He won't like your marrying our Annie?"
"No."
"He'll cut you off with a shilling, as like as not?"
"I am quite sure he will, without the shilling."
"And you feel as you ain't afraid to face it, sir?"
"Oh, I can face it. I have foreseen it for a long time—before I thought of Annie. She won't make any difference. When he realises at last that I won't enter the Church he's sure to kick me out."
"It's almost a pity that you can't make up your mind to it, sir."
"Do you think so?"
"Well, not if it goes against the grain, of course. But it would make things easy and comfortable."
"I don't know that life is any the better for being easy and comfortable," said Dicky.
"I'm thinking o' my sister," said John. "It's what she's counting on. To be a parson's wife, with a parish to look after, would be Heaven to her. That's what she's looking forward to."
"I'm sorry for it," said Dicky, "but I hope she would rather have an honest man for a husband than a hypocrite."

John was silent for a few minutes, trusting that Dicky was not by implication accusing himself of being the black sheep that Mr. Delavel-Pole described him. Then he made so bold as to ask the young man how he proposed to make a living and a provision for his wife if he cut himself off from the natural source of supplies.

"I will work," said Dicky, "as other men work. I am only waiting till I am twenty-one. When I am of age I shall have five hundred pounds, my godfather's legacy; it isn't much, but it will give me a start—it will give me freedom. I think of going to Australia, John, and I mean to make my fortune there."

The home-staying farmer was rather shocked at this audacious project, but was brought to see some wisdom and promise in it when it was unfolded to him in detail. At any rate, he was glad to recognise that the boy's scheme of life had something practical and definite in it. That was enough to satisfy him for the present.

"But I must wait till I am twenty-one," repeated Dicky. "I don't want to come into open collision with my father until I am free—unless it is impossible to prevent it."
John agreed that it would be wise to avoid being kicked out in the interval of helplessness, and offered to let his sister's engagement remain undiscovered to the family until the twenty-first birthday had passed and the legacy became available. "Nobody knows anything about it yet except mother and Rhody—and Rhody don't know much. I'll undertake that mother holds her tongue; and as for Rhody, why, I must just bamboozle her a bit," said the bridegroom, with a touching faith in his new powers.

Dicky accepted the convenient concession gratefully, though he would not have condescended to ask for it, and, with another friendly glass of beer and a warm hand shake, the young men parted, on the best of terms with themselves and with each other.

This was on Friday. All the rest of that day and throughout Saturday Dicky stayed at home and thought. Then on Sunday, having in a measure adjusted himself to the responsibilities of his new position, he became eager to enjoy the contingent privileges. Seeing Annie at church in the morning, prettier than ever, with her conscious, downcast face, and reflecting as he looked at her that she belonged to him, induced a strong desire for closer intercourse. So, remembering Rhody's invitation, he laid his little plans, and announced at luncheon that he should take his tea in the schoolroom if agreeable to Miss May, the governess. To his surprise Mr. Delavel raised his head, and said sternly, "You will do nothing of the kind, sir. You will dine with us as usual."

Miss May looked uncomfortable; the girls stared, surprised; Lady Susan sighed loudly.

"Have you any particular reason for desiring my company to-night?" asked Dicky, with ill-concealed impertinence.

"Yes, sir, I have," replied his father promptly.

"And may I ask what it is?"

"No, sir, you may not. It is enough for you that I do desire it. And I expect you to obey me."

Dicky bowed in silence, and continued to eat his lunch with elaborate deliberation. He thought he saw the hand of his enemy in this move, and naturally determined that he would not give that young man the satisfaction of outwitting him. When the meal was over, he accompanied governess and pupils to their schoolroom quarters, and offered to escort them to afternoon service as a compensation to them for the loss of his company at their evening meal. "I know it must be a
bitter disappointment to you," he said, "but I am ready to make such compensation as is in my power. I'll go and listen to two of Max's sermons in one day—there! Could I give you a greater proof of my affection than that?"

Miss May, who shared the prevailing impression that he was a black sheep, though she loved him none the less for it, replied that it would do him good to go to church a little more (which was also a prevailing impression), and that she therefore accepted his offer gladly. And at half past two the little party set off. There were morning and afternoon services at Dunstanborough; in the evening none, as the old church had no apparatus for lighting, and "after tea" on summer Sundays, from time immemorial, had been devoted by the villagers to family walks and saunters on the beach and the cliffs, and in the green lanes—a habit as firmly established as that of church-going itself. From the Hall Mr. Delavel and his family attended in their curtained pew in the morning, and in the afternoon their servants filled another pew at the opposite end of the church. The Delavel sons, as they grew to man's estate, followed their parents' custom of staying at home at ease after the forenoon expedition; but governess and children were expected to attend a second time. To them it was of the nature of discipline and educational routine, and it was an equal surprise and gratification to them that Dicky should choose to accompany them when he was not obliged to do it.

He was very agreeable and entertaining, and they greatly enjoyed their walk with him across the park, although Miss May did have to remind him once or twice that it was not quite decorous to talk of the rector and other sacred institutions as he talked—at any rate, not before his sisters; and during service he behaved himself with the most irreproachable propriety. But when service was over—when Annie Morrison had filed out with her school children at one door, and the occupants of the great chancel pew had emerged upon their private footpath through another—then Dicky drew Miss May aside, and opened her unsuspecting eyes. "I am not going back with you, if you will excuse me," he said hurriedly. "The fact is, I promised to go and see John Morrison's new wife this afternoon, and she would feel hurt if I did not. I shall be home in time for dinner."

"Ah, now, Richard!" the poor woman protested, knowing enough of what was going on to be aware that she had heavy
responsibilities at this moment. "What am I to say to Lady Susan when she asks me for you?"

"Nothing," said Dicky sternly, holding up his forefinger; "not a syllable. Now, look here, Miss May, if you say a word to any of them, I'll never speak to you again."

"And would you have me tell a lie?—with my prayers upon my lips?" she inquired pathetically.

"Certainly not. If they ask you where I am, say you don't know. Because you don't know, you know."

"You have just said you were going to the Morrisons'—the place of all others that they wish you not to go."

"Then I'll say I am not going," said Dicky cheerfully. With which he strode off, singing a lively tune under his breath, while the distressed and helpless governess gathered her brood around her, and slowly turned her face in the opposite direction.

Half-way between the church and the farm he came up with Annie Morrison, who had dismissed her children in the churchyard after service, and was walking home by herself. Rhody and John had, of course, accompanied her in the morning, the former in her bridal dress and bonnet, the cynosure of all eyes; but they had stayed behind to enjoy their wine and fruit, their little arm-chair nap, and their lovers' tête-à-tête, in the afternoon, as befitted people of their position, who had partaken on a hot day of a very rich and heavy dinner.

"Are you running away from me, Annie?" asked Dicky, as he overtook the farmer's daughter, who was quite aware that she was being followed, and by whom.

She stopped and turned, with a glowing face and downcast eyes. "Mother will be looking for me," she said, with the sham modesty and pretended ignorance that sacred convention demanded of her at such a moment, as he took her hand.

"Nonsense," he reasonably retorted, his own young visage as red as hers. "She's got Rhoda to wait upon her now."

Annie's face changed a little; she lifted her eyes; her soft lips hardened. "As to that," she said, "I think mother will want me more, and not less, now. It has been a mistake to have Rhody to live with us—we always knew it would be. It's early days yet to be finding fault, but I can see she means to be mistress and turn mother out of her place and make a
nobody of her. She has taken her chair at the head of the table. Mother gave it up to her—though I told her not to. And it isn't right, is it?"

"Right!" echoed Dicky indignantly. "It's the most confounded cheek and impudence I ever heard of. I shall set my mother to talk to Mrs. John if she doesn't behave herself better than that. I say, Annie, come and have a little walk with me and tell me all about it. Come through the woods"—turning towards a stile that was nearly hidden in the brambly hedge. "It isn't half a mile farther, and you will be out of the sun and dust."

Meanwhile, Mr. Delavel-Pole had taken note of Dicky's unaccustomed presence at afternoon service, and had made up his mind, long before beginning the exhortation to his "dearly beloved brethren," that he would take a walk to the farm himself when the congregation had dispersed, for the double purpose of holding out the olive branch to the Morrisons in general and to Annie in particular, under the guise of a complimentary nuptial visit to Mrs. John, and of keeping a watch upon his cousin's movements. Accordingly, when he emerged from his vestry, uncassocked as well as unsurpliced, and saw Miss May in the distance alone with her young charges, he set forth in the direction that Annie, and Dicky after her, had taken, with the certainty that he should find that guilty couple (for he had begun to suspect that one was as bad as the other), up to mischief of some sort that required his counteracting interference.

His fears were more than realised. The first glimpse he had of Annie, whom he recognised by her blue muslin and white bonnet, and the neat unbroken outlines that her slender person presented, was just after her lover had overtaken her, and while they lingered to talk of Rhody's misdoings. The Rector was prepared to advance and disperse them, but while on his way to do this they turned aside, evidently without seeing him, and went over the stile into the woods that skirted the road; and then he did not know what to do. There was something very vulgar in the idea of following them now, and yet he was strongly impressed with the sense that he had a bounden duty to perform—to his kinsfolk and the Delavel House, to his erring young parishioner, and to that misguided boy who was leading her astray. After a moment's hesitation he walked to the stile, and with some trouble, tracked the lovers to their retreat. He stood a moment to stare at them,
petrified with horror (for they were locked at that moment in each other's arms), and then turned and hurried back to the Hall to tell his aunt and uncle what he had seen.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SON PROPOSES: THE FATHER DISPOSES.

The culprits sat on a fallen log, arm round waist, head upon shoulder, hand clasped in hand, and were quite happy—blissfully unconscious of the rod that was in pickle for them. Grasshoppers hopped about their clothes, and beetles crawled over their boots with impunity; unnoticed bees, and even wasps, hummed and buzzed around them; unheard ringdoves cooed through the woodland solitude, where the evening came so much sooner than elsewhere. The mythical first lovers in their enchanted garden could not have taken things of this sort more completely for granted than did our young pair just now.

"I don't know exactly what is best to do," said the lad thoughtfully, caressing her smooth hair, from which he had removed her bonnet, with his smooth cheek, "but I think—and John thinks—that we had better say nothing about it till I am of age. There is no use in shutting our eyes to the fact that there will be a tremendous row about it, and, until I am my own master, I shall have no power to protect you. After that," said Dicky, with a thrill of pride, and thinking of his five hundred pounds, "after that we shall be all right."

Annie asked him how long it would be, for she burned to have her glory known, at any rate to Rhody, and he told her. In three months more he would be twenty-one. She pondered silently for a few minutes, while he kissed and caressed her, and she sweetly submitted. Then she remarked earnestly that, above all things, and at no matter what personal sacrifice, they must do their best to propitiate "Mr. Delavel and my lady," and to avoid making a permanent breach with the family. To this end she suggested that it might even be desirable to keep the engagement from their knowledge to a still later period—in fact, until the young man was "settled."

"As to that," said Dicky, "the breach is inevitable. It
doesn't matter whether we tell them sooner or later—so it may as well be sooner, and have done with it. My father would never forgive me—not if I waited for a hundred years. I know him too well."

Annie coloured with wounded pride. "He would think me too much beneath you," she murmured.

Dicky coloured in his turn. "You musn't mind what he thinks, my darling—I don't—for he's quite as often wrong as right. He thinks my brother Keppel ought to marry an ugly widow, old enough to be his mother—I believe Keppel will do it too—just because she's rich, and has got a pedigree. I call that wrong, not to say idiotic to the last degree, for Keppel hates her as it is, so that when he's married to her there'll be catastrophes for certain."

"I wish I had a pedigree," sighed Annie.
"So you have," said Dicky. "Everybody has."
"But not the right sort."
"Made up of robbers and king's mistresses?"
"No, of Norman knights and?"
"Pooh!" interrupted the boy, contumeliously. "A lot of scamps, you may depend on it. You have something better than that, my pet; honest blood for as far back as you can trace it, and a sweet little body that many a fine lady would give money and pedigree and everything for. Wouldn't Keppel like to change with me, that's all!"

"I don't think I have ever spoken to Mr. Keppel," remarked Annie, with a little flutter of pleasure at the idea presented to her—the idea of another gentleman of the Great House and the great world having possibly been attracted by her charms.

"He's a stupid fool, and he'll find it out," said Keppel's brother, who was inclined to think himself a wise man. "Far better marry the girl you love and trust to Providence."

"Yes," said Annie, yielding herself to a fresh series of caresses. She approved of this sentiment in the abstract, but the instincts of her prudent little soul condemned anything like recklessness. "Still—still," she said with grave earnestness, "perhaps, if we are very careful—if we wait for our opportunity and do things quietly and gradually—in time Mr. Delavel might be persuaded to see things as we do."

"Never, my dear child, never! Best not flatter ourselves with any such false hopes."

"Oh, but I think so," she insisted, with a pretty woman's confidence in her own weight when it is upon a man that it
is to be brought to bear. "When he sees that I am educated, and that I am not—not common, as he might think; when he sees how suited I am to be a clergyman's wife, and when we are living at a distance, not mixing up with Rhody and all these people, that will make a difference, won't it?"

She spoke very sweetly, but what she said gave her young lover a chill, a dim sense of inadequacy in her, an obscure foreboding of the future that he was making for himself. "You don't want to cut yourself off from your family!" he said. "I would never ask you to do that, Annie."

"We should be in a different class of life," she gently responded.

"I don't know about that"

"Oh yes, the husband always raises the wife to his level. And I am not like Rhody—it goes against me with Mr. Delavel and my lady to see me mixed up with her." Annie tingled at the recollection of Lady Susan's offer to get her a place as schoolroom maid to Lady Elizabeth's daughters. "But if they were to see me in your house—in your parish, amongst gentlefolks—and what I could do"—She broke off, quite overcome with the glorious vision that rose before her of Sunday schools and parochial meetings at which she would preside as the vicar's wife and deputy, a model of all that was excellent and refined.

"My dear girl," said Dicky with the faintest coolness in his voice and an imperceptible relaxation of the muscles of his arm that clasped her waist, "I shall never have a parish. I am not going to be a clergyman. I thought you knew that?"

She heard the announcement in silence. She had known something of his intention from John, but had given no importance to it. She had refused to admit that such a disappointing thing was possible.

"Oh, you don't mean that," she murmured, with a caressing, persuasive gesture.

"I do mean it. Why shouldn't I mean it? What should make you think I say things that I don't mean?"

"When you have thought it over you will feel differently about it. You will see what a grand and noble career it is—the highest in all the world"—

"That may be," he interrupted, withdrawing his arm from her waist unconsciously. "But I have no vocation for it. If I went into the Church, it would be for the sake of getting a provision for life without working for it—that's all my father
SON PROPOSES: FATHER DISPOSES.

wants me to go into it for—in the same way as Keppel will marry his widow; and I should like it just about as much as he will like her. You wouldn't wish me to be so mean as that, Annie?"

"No, dear," she said, modestly leaning towards him, so that he again put his arm around her. "But—but if you would only think it over"

"I have—I do, and I can't do it. I am not good enough—or bad enough. It's out of the question. I'm sorry if you are disappointed, Annie. I thought you'd rather have an honest man for a husband than a hypocrite."

"Oh, don't speak so," she pleaded, and this time she put up her charming face in such a way that he kissed it with a sudden rush of passion, a sudden outpouring of his sympathy-craving heart.

"My darling, I will do my best for you—I will be as good as I know how," he said, with a tremble in his voice; "and you'll trust me, won't you? You won't care what I am, or what becomes of us, so long as we love each other? I wonder if you love me enough, Annie, to face things for my sake, as I am ready to face them for yours? I don't believe you do."

"Oh," she protested, with soft reproach, "how can you say that?"

"Do you?"

"You know I do. You are everything to me."

Whereupon he hugged her to his breast and kissed her a thousand times. And after that they spoke no more of the comfortable provision that he would not have, but of the alternative career that he had sketched for himself. He told her how he meant to take his money—and her, if she was not afraid to venture—to Australia, and there build himself a fortune, as so many others had done. "It may be hard at first," he said brightly, as if the hardness was the charm of it (as indeed it was); "and perhaps you ought not to risk it—perhaps you ought to stay behind till I have made a home that is suitable for you"

"No, no," she murmured. "I don't mind anything to be with you." She knew that the hardest life with him would be softer than the softest life with Rhody.

"My precious one! Then I will take you, and we will make our fight together. That is how it should be, Annie—that is my idea of marriage. We will make our fight together, and we won't care for anybody. I shall have to delve, like
Adam, and earn our daily bread by the sweat of my brow, and you will probably have to bake it, for we shall not be able to afford servants—at any rate, not at first. But we shan't mind that, we shall like it; it will be delightful!"

He went into raptures over his scheme, which to Annie's mind had so much that was "low" about it, while she was silently tormented with visions of that dear conventional parsonage house, with its white-aproned maids and its graceful proprieties, which represented the things that her soul loved. Oh, it was hard to exchange that splendid position, that elegant home, for the kind of life that Dicky was proposing; she could have cried to think of it. But she hoped still that it might not come to that, and in any case the man she was to marry was a Delavel. So she stifled her regrets.

No visit was paid to the bride that afternoon. She spread a bounteous tea table, and put her silver spoons into her mother-in-law's best cups, and sat in state, with a temporary apron over her blue silk dress until half-past five. Then Annie appeared alone, bringing a message that Mr. Richard was very sorry he was not able to come as he had promised.

"And why not?" Rhody tempestuously demanded, stung with mortification and disappointment.

"Because his father wished him to be home to dinner."

"At half-past six! And we have tea at five!"

"He couldn't have got back in time, Rhody."

"Now look here," said Mrs. John, "he was coming along this afternoon, as he said he would, and you met him and stopped him."

"I did not," retorted Annie indignantly.

"Didn't you meet him?" The girl was silent. "And wasn't he coming this way?" Silence. "And haven't you been alone with him all this time when he might have been with us here?" Still silence. "I'll tell you what it is, miss, if you go on in this way I shall just walk straight over to the Hall and tell my lady about it. I won't stand by and see that poor boy hunted into a scrape that'll be his ruin, after all the kindness we've had from the family."

"Drop it," said John, who was standing by. "I won't have Annie spoke to like that, and I won't have her interfered with neither."

"Oh, won't you?" cried Rhody, with quick breath and expanding nostrils. And then there was a quarrel.

Meanwhile Dicky went home, elate and satisfied, full of his
enterprises, inspired by the near prospect of adventure and difficulty, and by the generally picturesque and definite aspect of life. He did not at once seek the company of his parents; indeed he avoided them as long as possible, until the punctual dinner-bell compelled him to join them. Then he saw at once that he was in disgrace, though whether for old sins or new ones did not appear. His mother was dejected and lachrymose, his father coldly rigid as a graven image; and both were studiously careful to take no notice of him. Seeing this, he assumed the air of taking no notice of them, and entertained himself with his own thoughts until the cheerless meal was ended. The moment he saw an opportunity to slip away he seized it, but before he was out of the room his father sharply called him back.

"Richard!" thundered the stern old gentleman, in a tone that was like the sudden report of firearms.

"Sir," responded Dicky haughtily.

"I am going to London in the morning, and I wish you to go with me. Be good enough to have your things packed by ten o'clock."

The boy looked at his mother. She was looking at the table-cloth and she did not raise her eyes, but she said, in a low voice, "Sarah will do it for you." Sarah was her elderly maid.

"Will the visit last long?" he inquired, addressing his father.

"It will last until the vacation is over," said Mr. Delavel significantly.

Then Dicky saw the state of the case. For a few minutes he stood silent, battling with a rising torrent of passionate words—telling himself how critical was this moment, and how necessary it was for Annie's sake that he should be calm, while the temptation to break out was almost irresistible. In the end prudence conquered, and he restrained himself. "Very well, sir," he said quietly, and went out without another word.
CHAPTER XV.

DICKY STANDS TO HIS WORD OF HONOUR.

Richard's last term at Oxford was drawing to a close, and the merry days of his youth were numbered. It was the last week in November, and he had not seen his Annie since August; and in the interval he had attained his majority and come into possession of his estate. He had also spent some of it. As Dunstanborough did nothing to celebrate his coming of age, which under the circumstances was not considered an event to make a fuss about, he celebrated it himself; and when he did give an entertainment he liked to do things handsomely; and when you do things handsomely you must be prepared to pay in proportion. Moreover, on his refusing to let his father invest his money, Mr. Delavel had promptly intimated that a man who desired to be so entirely his own master could do no less than pay his own debts; and Dicky, whose allowance was meagre for a Christchurch man, and whose disposition was generous, had liabilities to the amount of a full third of his legacy, though they were trifling compared with the college debts of his brothers. So that in the first month of his legal manhood he got rid of about two hundred of the five hundred pounds which were to make his fortune.

But he had had a good time. He had borne the long separation from his sweetheart (after the first few weeks), not only with fortitude, but with cheerfulness. In point of fact, though periodically reminded of his engagement by a beautifully written and carefully composed letter—which was generally answered in most affectionate terms by return of post—the nature of his passion for Annie was not what it once had been. He had not, to his knowledge, ceased to love her—not at all—but he had ceased to remember her for the mere pleasure of remembering her; it required the postman to bring her to his mind. And her letters, though models of good grammar and penmanship, had no charm or flavour—few people's letters have, for that matter; they did nothing to fix the impression she had made on him. So the impression waned. He forgot to transfer her photograph from pocket to pocket when he changed his coat, until it drifted to the back of a drawer, and he could not find it one day when he wanted to show it to a friend. And other pretty girls attracted him
and interested him, just as she had done when he first saw her at the church porch. And in a general way he was quite happy without her. Alas! alas! But such is life, and such is youth, in spite of the poets and novelists.

He had had a good time, as I have said, in the two months that had passed of that Michaelmas term—never a better. Those were the days when stately academic Oxford kept herself to herself, before fellows got married, and undergraduates got businesslike, before the Spirit of the Age had poked its intrusive nose into her affairs. Her young barbarians played a great deal more than they do now, and if they played Tom Fool the most of the time, they certainly had plenty of fun out of it. And fun is a pleasant thing, though the modern reasonableness may be better. Dicky had had good fun, with money in his pockets and a personal popularity that was independent of money; he had hunted, and boated, and fished, and shot, won tennis and billiard matches, had wild fights in the street, and midnight larks in the quadrangle, and never a heartache the whole time, though occasionally a headache in the morning. But now his fun was coming to an end, though he did not know it.

He came out of his bedroom one day, fresh from his ice-cold bath, bright and handsome and in the liveliest spirits, to entertain a couple of friends at breakfast. The friends had already arrived, and so had the devilled bones and the omelette, and so had the post. There were several letters on the table, and he glanced at them one by one as he chatted to his guests, tore some across and threw them on the fire, stuck others in the oak panel that framed the glass over the chimney, and put one into his pocket unread. The one he put into his pocket was from Annie.

Now he had not heard from his sweetheart for a whole fortnight, and yet this is what he did. He had a long and merry breakfast, eating a prodigious quantity of game pie and bread and marmalade; then he went to lecture; then he joined a friend in a tandem-driving expedition, which came to an untimely end by the smashing of the dogcart; dined at a country inn; got home as gates were closing; played cards till two and went to bed. And he clean forgot the letter he had put into his pocket until he awoke next morning. He had been dreaming of running off to Gretna Green with a young lady (I think it was the barmaid of the inn where he had been dining), and that the chaise broke down on the
wrong side of the border, with John Morrison in full pursuit behind; and that put him in mind of it. He reached out of bed for his coat, found the neglected missive, broke the seal, and as soon as the grey dawn lightened sufficiently, read it. And this is what he read:—

"MY DEAREST RICHARD,—I am afraid you will be feeling anxious at my long silence, but you will forgive me when I tell you the sad cause of it. My dear mother had a stroke of paralysis ten days ago. She seemed to rally from it, but a second one followed, after which she gradually sank, and breathed her last on Friday. I am thankful to say she had no pain, and Mr. Delavel-Pole was most attentive to her in her last hours. She received the sacrament on Thursday, though we did not think then that her end was so near. It took place on the following morning at three o'clock, and she was buried yesterday beside Grandmamma Morrison under the south wall.

"Dear Richard, this sad event makes a great difference in my circumstances. While she was alive and well she always stood up for me with Rhody, and would not let me be put upon; but now I am without any protector, for my father thinks everything right that Rhody does, and if John interferes he gets into trouble himself and does me more harm than good. John says I ought to be allowed to live in my own home, but my father and Rhody want me to go. At least Rhody wants me to go, and my father never takes my part against her. She feels me in her way, and she says I ought to be earning my own living and not eating the bread of idleness. She has talked over Lady Susan, who has never seemed to understand the difference between me and my sister-in-law, and classes us together, as if we had both been brought up alike. A fortnight ago her ladyship came to see mother, to tell her of a situation for me and to persuade her to urge me to take it, and I feel sure it was the worry and trouble of this that brought on dear mother's illness. Even Mr. Delavel-Pole seemed to think it quite reasonable that I should become a national schoolmistress to please Rhody, though otherwise he has been most kind.

"You can understand, dear Richard, in what a painful position I am placed. I have no one to protect me now, and the home where I have been made so much of all my life will soon be mine no more. At present, of course, Rhody lets me
alone, and next week I am going to stay with a schoolfellow in London, who saw mother's death in the paper, and thought it would be good for my health to have a change, and I dare say I shall be allowed to eat my Christmas dinner under my own father's roof. But after that I am sure I shall be turned out—my life will be made so unbearable that I shall be obliged to go—unless in the meantime you proclaim our engagement, and show them that I still have some one to take care of me. While mother lived I did think it better to keep the matter to ourselves, hoping you would see your way to take orders and please your father, who in that case would certainly use his influence to get you a living; but now that she is gone, and I am situated in this way, I feel that we ought not to hide the true state of the case any longer. I think that is how you will feel too. Dear Richard, I rely upon you—I have no one else to look to now. I am sure you will not let me be thrown upon the world, homeless and friendless, if you are able to prevent it.

"Mother was not able to speak after her second seizure, or I am sure she would have left you a message. She was so fond of you, and always said she trusted you with her whole heart. She would never hear a word against you.

"Hoping you will write soon, and with much love,

"Believe me, my dearest Richard, your devoted and sorrowing

Annie.

"P.S.—My school friend, Mary Greenwood, with whom I am going to stay, lives at Hammersmith. I do not care for her very much. Her family are tradespeople and dissenters. But it will be better than being with Rhody."

Our young Oxonian read this letter again and again, as he lay in bed, staring hard at the beautiful handwriting, and gnawing the ends of his moustache as if anxious to gnaw them off. Then he dressed himself thoughtfully, went to chapel, ate his breakfast, lit his pipe, and sat down to think things over. After thinking them over for the best part of the morning, he seized pen and paper and wrote as follows:—

"My poor little Girl,—I need not say how much I grieve for your loss and trouble. Why didn't you tell me before? Of course you have a right to look to me to take care of you, and you don't suppose for a moment that I am going to let
you be thrown upon the world. There is only one thing to be done, Annie dear. I dare say, when I tell you what it is you will be dreadfully shocked, and say that it is impossible, but circumstances alter cases, and as you put yourself in my hands, darling, you must leave it all to me. Come up at once to your friend, Miss Greenwood—I am sure she must be an awfully nice girl to have thought of asking you just now—it is just one of those considerate things that only a real kind woman thinks of, and bring all your little belongings that you care for with you. I will meet you at Shoreditch and take you to her house, and I will make arrangements for our marriage before you leave it. Say nothing to any one, dearest, till all is over. Leave everything to me. I will find some hole and corner church in Hammersmith where our banns can be put up without a soul knowing it, and I shall have a free week before Christmas to get a lodging ready to take you to as soon as you are my wife. Be as quick as possible, so that we may have it over before Christmas. I am my own master now, and I promised your poor mother that I would take care of you, and this is the only way of doing it, my darling. So don’t make any objections, but get ready at once and come to me. Write and tell me your train, and I will meet it. Tell the Greenwoods not to come to the station, as a friend will be there. And we can settle everything in the cab as we drive through London.”

The rest of the letter was merely this part of it over again, only expressed a little more strongly, as his delightfully simple plan for the removal of Annie’s domestic difficulties unfolded itself to his young mind, and it concluded with a further injunction to her to trust all to him and fear nothing. He was quite confident that he was right, and therefore feared nothing on his own account.

His iron-clamped door admitted no visitors that day. When he had posted his letter, he hunted up the photograph of his beloved, and looked at it (through a cloud of tobacco smoke) long and earnestly, by way of stimulating the old passion that could no longer be allowed to sleep. She was represented in outdoor costume, with a curtain to her bonnet and a large shawl over her full-skirted gown; and the simple elegance of her attire was most grateful to his aesthetic sense. So was the charming face, framed in the narrow bonnet-cap—the soft, grave mouth—the soft, smooth hair—the modest
downcast eyes. By long looking and thinking he brought himself to feel in love with her again, and stimulated his natural pleasure in the idea of immediate matrimony to an almost intoxicating enthusiasm.

What was to happen after the marriage he was not very clear about; he did not look so far as that. Only he felt it was no use sitting down to his reading again, since he would be certain to have to leave Oxford before he could take his degree.

CHAPTER XVI.

HAD Annie been free to choose how she would be married we may be sure that everything would have been done with the strictest regard to decorum and the sacred customs of society; but circumstances alter cases, as her lover had justly pointed out, and, under the circumstances in which she found herself, she felt she could do no better than accede to his proposal. Its audacity certainly dismayed her for a moment, and the thought of a wedding only a month after the funeral of one's nearest relative was very shocking to her highly proper notions; but she was not a young person to allow her feelings to run away with her judgment, as Dicky was, and knew what was for her own advantage much better than he knew what was for his.

So she packed up at once, and set forth on a long visit to her London friend. Rhoda bade her a cordial good-bye, and recommended her to utilise the fine opportunity she would have for picking and choosing to get a real nice place to go to after Christmas; her father gave her her railway fare and two pounds to spend; and John drove her and her neat canvas-covered boxes to the great town where he went to market once a week, and put her in the train. Not one of them had any idea of the important enterprise to which they so light-heartedly committed her.

No difficulties in the shape of university regulations prevented Dicky from being on the Shoreditch platform when that train came in. Wild horses would not have held him from his Annie now that she was in his charge—a helpless
woman dependent upon his protection; chivalry demanded that he should be rusticated and ruined, if need be, rather than she should be left to the tender mercies of possibly uncivil porters or exposed to any similar discomfort from which a man could shield her. So there he was, his long form wrapped in the Inverness cloak which was the fashionable overcoat of the period, his keen, clear-featured face making, like Una's, a noticeable spot of brightness in the gloom and grime of those shabby precincts. What an unmistakable aristocrat he was, she thought, as she watched his quick eyes flashing into window after window as the carriages drew past him, and waited to meet that eager glance with a welcoming smile. To think that this princely young man was to be her husband—that she would be Mrs. Delavel for the rest of her life—was enough to make her for the moment as indifferent about other future circumstances as he was. Whatever happened after she was married, nothing could happen that would take her precious title from her. The thought lent a sweetness to her smile that enchanted him. And if she had looked charming in her blue and lilac muslins, she was quite beautiful in that colour which, so sombre in itself, is so pre-eminently becoming to fair women; and its pathetic suggestions all helped towards the vivid new impression that he had prepared himself to receive.

At any rate, they had a most cordial and tender meeting. He took her out of her second-class carriage and bestowed her in a four-wheeler—the porters waited on her as if she were already a member of the family—and sat with his arm round her waist as they drove through the city, pouring out the thousand details of his delightful scheme. It was indeed a most elaborate and finished programme by this time. There was only one fault to find with it; it ended with the wedding—or, rather, with the honeymoon—instead of beginning with it, as it should have done.

"And then what?" Annie diffidently inquired, as they were approaching Hammersmith.

"Oh, then—then we must think what is best to be done," he responded lightly. "Of course, we can't decide on anything till we see how my father takes it. I must write to him and John the first thing; and it's no use meeting troubles half way. We'll fix things up somehow when the time comes. We shall be all right as long as we are together."

As the cab passed through the street where Mr. Greenwood
conducted a thriving grocery business, and turned into the neighbouring road, where he dwelt with his family in a neat house called Byron Villa, Dicky begged to be allowed to present himself to Mrs. Greenwood.

"As they don't know anybody in Dunstanborough, they can't tell tales, and I want to be able to get at you when I have a chance to run up," he urged; for Annie did not seem willing to grant his wish. "Besides, I'd like to see that friend of yours—I'm sure she's a jolly girl, and she might be of the greatest use to us just now."

"Oh, she's not my friend particularly," explained Annie. "We were at school together—that's all. And they are quite common people. Not the sort you are used to at all."

"What does that matter?" he returned, with an inward twinge. "I shan't care whether they are common or uncommon, if they are kind to you. And we shall have to mix with many commoner people than they are before we have done—if I'm not mistaken."

"I don't see why that should be necessary," said Annie.

"Beggars can't be choosers, my dear."

"I don't think you'll need to be a beggar," she said gently, "unless you like."

The cab stopped at Byron Villa, and, before either occupant could get out of it, a round and rosy-cheeked damsel, in a warm red frock that pleasantly relieved the murky colours of the street and atmosphere, came flying into the road to meet them. She was plain, and no doubt she was common, but the moment Dicky looked at her he felt that his instinct had not misled him. He had been sure she would turn out to be a jolly girl, and she was a jolly girl. Her character was written all over her so that a child might read it at a glance. Quickly he sprang out of the cab, lifted his hat, and smiled that pleasant smile of his which never failed to dispose the female heart towards him.

"How do you do, sir?" said Miss Greenwood, frankly giving him her hand. "You have brought her to us safely? Ah, Annie dear"—receiving the descending figure into her arms and hugging it cordially, though it was in the open street—"I can't tell you how sorry I am for you! But come in—come in. We are going to cheer you up and do you good. Come in to the fire, dear, and get warm. The cabman will bring your things. Come in, Mr.—Mr."—

"Mr. Delavel," said Annie, rather coolly, and with the
composure of the lady-like young person who has made a study of manners—a composure intended to correct the effect upon Dicky of Miss Greenwood's noisy welcome.

"Come in, Mr. Dellaby, and have a glass of wine. Mother'll be so pleased to see you. We were so glad for Annie to have a gentleman to meet her, for father is busy all day at the shop—not but what I'd have met you myself, Annie dear, with pleasure. Come in now to the fire—you must be nearly frozen."

She led Annie into the little garden, and Dicky, having paid the cabman, accompanied them with the greatest alacrity. There was nothing vulgar to him in Miss Greenwood's vivacity, and her hospitality was irresistible. And he clearly foresaw that she would presently be a party to the great scheme, Annie's bridesmaid in due course, and, perhaps, a support to her in the wrath to come when wedding ceremonies were over.

A comfortable family sitting-room, a buxom hostess, cordial as her daughter, a big fire and a well-spread table, kept Dicky at Byron Villa longer than he should have stayed, seeing that he had other business in London and was bound to get into his college before midnight if possible. He made himself at home with all the domestic circle, down to the baby, who sat on his knee and blew the case of his watch open. Mrs. Greenwood felt, she said to Annie afterwards, as if she had known him for years, and the little boys and girls all asked him whether he was coming again—to which he replied that he certainly was, if they would let him. He kissed the children when he went away, and shook hands with Mary and her mother as if they had been his aunt and cousin at least, accepting their invitations to return quite as if he were grateful for them. All which misplaced familiarity vexed the soul of his fiancée, who would have preferred to see him stand upon his dignity with people so far beneath him.

"Good-bye, my sweet, for a few days," he said to her, as he was hurrying away. "I shall be up again soon to see how you are getting on. I am so glad to be leaving you with such nice kind people. Your Mary is delightful. Make a friend of her and tell her all about it—won't you? I must be off now to see the parson about putting up the banns on Sunday. What a blessing the Greenwoods are dissenters! Whatever you do, don't go to church, for they'd be sure to want to go with you—they're so kind. Go to chapel with them for the next three weeks."
“That,” said Annie gravely, “is a thing I couldn’t do.”

And she did not do it. She went to church regularly, and her friend accompanied her. Nevertheless, no hitch occurred in the elaborate arrangements which might so easily and so often have been upset. Fate willed that our hero should, at the early age of twenty-one, marry the least suitable woman he could find, and repent it ever afterwards. A toothless old clergyman, who mumbled his words, and who showed that he had never heard the illustrious name of Delavel by pronouncing it with the accent on the second syllable instead of on the first, published the banns of marriage between the young couple for three Sundays running, without attracting anybody’s attention to the fact. The Morrisons at Dunstanborough deluded themselves with the belief that Annie in London was looking for a situation; and the family at the Hall supposed their scapegrace son to be reading or pretending to read at Oxford; behaving himself neither better nor worse than usual. Not until he failed to come home at the end of the term, and wrote from London that he was engaged about a matter that would detain him there till Christmas, did the idea (suggested by Mr. Delavel-Pole) that he was pursuing Annie Morrison trouble them; and then, though they peremptorily commanded his return, and he neither returned nor wrote to say why he didn’t, they had no prevision of the impending catastrophe. They waited for him to appear, and watched for the postman, and told each other that Christmas was near, and that, at any rate, he would certainly come home for Christmas. Thus they did nothing to check the paying-out of that long rope, the possession of which seems to make it necessary that one should hang one’s self. Dicky had a long rope this time, and the proverbial consequences ensued.

Having made several flying trips to London, regardless of expense, and done nothing worth doing at Oxford in the intervals between them, he at last set off with his bag and baggage to return no more. He gave a great supper party before he left, at which men got drunk and played high jinks, as their manner was; and that was his farewell to youth and liberty and the merry days of life. The next morning he took the train to London, and three mornings afterwards immolated himself upon the hymeneal altar, making a burnt-offering for his sins that was cruelly in excess of the requirements of justice, a sacrifice more costly than he had the least idea of.
In the brief interval he was desperately busy, first looking for a lodging in which to instal his bride, and then suitably preparing it for her reception. After much hunting he found the place he sought in peaceful Chiswick, in an old world house, that looked from under a canopy of trees across a quiet road upon the river, a place that seemed to him artistically appropriate, as well as convenient and comfortable. The trees were bare now, and the river, full to the brim, was mostly veiled in mists. By four o'clock in the afternoon the opposite shore was indistinguishable, and the boats going up and down were like phantoms in the grey fog. But the prospect from the windows of the old house, though it might become melancholy if looked at for a whole winter at a stretch, was quite to the taste of our young man, who desired one that should be as different as possible from the vulgarly commonplace; and behind the windows were a couple of wainscoted rooms, furnished in flowered chintz, and presided over by a widow who had seen better days, which—rooms, chintz, landlady and all—charmed his susceptible fancy the moment he saw them. It did not take twenty minutes to conclude an arrangement whereby he became the widow's tenant at three pounds a week; and it did not take half-an-hour to develop business relations into friendship—to inspire her with a maternal interest in the youthful bridegroom, and him with cordial gratitude and admiration for the widow's kindness, good manners, and good looks.

"She's no ordinary landlady," he said to Annie, when triumphantly reporting his proceedings in this matter. "I never saw a more well-bred woman. And she's got beautiful dark eyes—rather sad eyes, as if she'd had a lot of trouble, poor thing. And so she has. Her husband was a sea captain, and his ship was reported missing fifteen years ago. Fancy waiting and hoping against hope for fifteen years! No wonder she looks worn and sad. She must have been," he added thoughtfully, "a wonderfully handsome girl."

"And how old is she now?" his sweetheart naturally inquired.

"About forty-five, I should think."

"I'm afraid she's an artful old creature," Annie rejoined, with a playful air, "and knows how to get round unsuspicious young men."

"I'm sure she's nothing of the kind," declared Dicky warmly; "and I'm not one to be 'got round' either, I can
tell you.” His feelings were hurt by these two misapprehensions, neither of which was removed by time and a better knowledge of the circumstances.

However, his vexation was but momentary, and he continued to believe in his landlady, and in his own penetration. He and she worked together to prepare the rooms at Chiswick for the bride. The landlady offered furniture and conveniences from her own apartments—so little like the ordinary landlady was she, so demoralised by the fascinations of her open-hearted young lodger; but of course Dicky would by no means allow her to incommode herself for him or his. He preferred to purchase what was necessary out of his own pocket, which was as open as his heart.

A good deal of money from that pocket dribbled away in the course of those three days. The cupboard in the wainscoted parlour was stocked with wine and choice delicacies of various kinds. Flowers were ordered in; multitudinous wedding presents were bought—jewellery, furs, little knick-knacks that tempted him in the shop windows—for the beloved one who had so few to give her presents, and for the family which had been good to her in her hour of need. But this was not a time to think of sixpences and shillings, and he certainly had a large amount of pleasure for his money.

When the eventful morning came, and he stood in his Inverness cloak, with his hat in his hand and the ring in his pocket, to survey the preparations he had made, and pictured his young wife’s happy recognition of all his tender thought for her, his heart swelled with emotions that brought a mist to his eyes and a lump into his throat. In that moment he had entrancing dreams of a blissful wedded life; dreams that were not going to make the very faintest attempt to come true, of course, but which filled his soul with a solemn sense of unworthiness.

The landlady—Mrs. Carthew was her name, and she really was the nice woman he believed her, and not a designing creature—put out her white hand to him as he was leaving the house.

“I wish you every happiness,” she said earnestly.

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” he returned, wringing her hand with passionate gratitude. “I do think I am going to be happy.”

Alas, poor young idiot! He was going to cut himself off from his chances of happiness as completely as human ingenuity could do it.