

STRAIGHTFORWARD.

CHAPTER I.

HE shan't have her. I've told her that plain. My girls have got a good name of their own, and, while I can lift a hand to prevent it, they shan't part with it for a worse. For a worse, do I say?—for none at all. The lad spoke fair enough, I will say—told me everything straight out: he's not a Proudfoot at all, but just a chance child, left on a doorstep and brought up out of pity. If he'd been a real Proudfoot, of King's Cobbe, now, it would have been different. I mightn't have said a word. *They've* got a name, though land and money's been scarce enough with them for many a long day; but this here nobody's child to come after my 'Lisbeth!—"

There was a pause; breath failed the excited speaker. A very red handkerchief was passed across a still redder face. Harvest weather is a bad time for such things as indignation and wrath; and although Farmer Holt, of Netherby, England, was on the Cobbe, or pier, of King's Cobbe—a very airy, breezy situation, as every one knows—he felt as if he was sitting at the mouth of a baker's oven.

He had reason to be hot and vexed, perhaps. He was a stay-at-home man, with a stout, easy wife, two strong sons, and three pretty daughters. The best and prettiest of these, 'Lisbeth, had been for two years in the service of Colonel Ames, of The Cliffs, King's Cobbe, a trusted upper nurse, albeit she was so young, to his two little girls.

And now, all of a sudden, as the farmer would have told you, 'Lisbeth writes word home that she's engaged to be married. And who to, do you think? To Mr. Proudfoot, him as they call *valet* to young Captain Mostyn, of the Grange. All very fair that sounds; but a sort of whisper gets in the air, no words exactly, but just something uncomfortable.

So off starts the farmer to find out the truth. He doesn't go nigh 'Lisbeth, not he, but just marches up to the Grange, and has it out with the young fellow, who stands up very straight and quiet, and owns to it. He hasn't a drop of the real Proudfoot blood in his body; doesn't know who he is, either; was left as a baby on their doorstep, may be by a passing tramp. "And he to even himself to my 'Lisbeth! Says I, 'Young man, here's an end of this; just put my girl out of your head, for I'm her father, and I'll have none of it.'"

"But he's thought a deal of at the Grange?"

This observation is made by Mr. Lott, of "The Moor's Head," the little public house which commands the Cobbe. He has known the lad, Perran Proudfoot, as they have called him, all his life, and he both likes and respects him.

"May be;" the farmer is turning gruff,

"And what's family?" asks Lott, who is a good-natured, not very deep politician. "What's forefathers and ancestry? We're all descended from Adam. Let every tub stand on its own bottom, say I."

"Master Lott, when I'm going to buy a horse or a cow I look to its pedigree first thing. Folks may say it's a good goer, or a good milk-er, but it has the best chance of pleasing me if it comes of a good stock. Now, I ain't a-going to choose husbands for my girls less carefully than I'd choose beasts."

"It isn't every fine name comes in first at the winning post," said Lott, for he wasn't going to be put down by a Netherby man, on his own Cobbe, too; he loved talking too well for that. "Look you, Mr. Holt, this here lad, Proudfoot—I mean Perran, as we call him up here—that's his christened name, you'll let him have that—he's a downright good chap, family or no family, name or no name. He mayn't be good enough for your liking, I ain't saying that, but he's honest to the backbone, and every bit as good as he looks, which is saying a deal."

So it was, for Perran Proudfoot was undeniably the handsomest young man in King's Cobbe. Others besides 'Lisbeth Holt would confirm that statement.

"What made Michael Proudfoot pick up the boy?" asked the farmer, somewhat sulkily.

Here was an opportunity for mine host of "The Moor's Head." He could tell you all about every one in the place. He began deliberately, as befitted one who knew so much:

"It was Mrs. Proudfoot, Marion Colyer she was—she did it. They'd only been married a twelvemonth, a few weeks over that is, and the baby died, their eldest. Folks think that some tramps passing through the place chanced to hear of the death. Anyhow, it was a cold winter's night, and Mrs. Proudfoot she wakes her husband to tell him that the confined child, in the spare room, is crying. He gets up, to find it's a poor deserted infant outside on the doorstep. He brings it in, all stiff and cold, and Marion she warms it and feeds it, and in the morning won't let it go. It's sent her, she says, instead of her own. I mind the christening, too; it was the day of the funeral. It was Mrs. Proudfoot's fancy, and Michael wouldn't cross her. Dear, how time goes! that's four-and-twenty years since." Lott paused a minute to look back across that space. "And then Captain Spence, of the *Billow*, offers Michael a free passage to India, and the roving blood of the Proudfoots got stirred, and he, and the missis, and the baby went off, and the next we heard was of his 'listing in the Artillery out there, which they say is a first-rate service."

Farmer Holt was cooler now, and interested in the narrative. "Roving blood, indeed! All the county knows that a Proudfoot never dies in his bed," he announced.