

Temple Norbury. Anything might happen in a week, thought he, with characteristic fatalism. And if it didn't, Susan would be sure to go down to the dance on Thursday, which would give him a chance. But when he came in to dinner on Thursday nothing had yet happened to remove the difficulty, and Susan steadily refused to go to the dance, so he was resolved to have it out with her. And so he would if she had not chanced to speak first.

"I think I shall go down to the dance to-night," she said abruptly.

"To be sure, maid."

When Susan had dressed and set off, the man went cautiously about the premises, then locked the house doors. Contrary to all custom he pulled down the blind and did his best to fill up the gaps between it and the casement. The dog watched him disconsolately from the hearthstone, standing with head lowered. In turning round, the man saw it and paused.

"I don't much like the job, Spot, and that be the truth," he muttered. And the dog wagged his tail.

Nevertheless, Joshua got out his tools—a hammer, a saw, a screw-driver and an old chisel. He had no notion how the seat was fastened. Nobody for several generations had so much as thought of that. With the eye and the heart of a criminal Joshua examined the thing. He looked round now and then and listened. It was a dry frosty night with only a light breeze whispering in the doorways. The chair was as firm as the wall. For some time the man was puzzled, but at last by thrusting his long saw between the back and the wall and working it in all directions he found the position of two bolts that apparently held the seat in place.

His saw was eating into the third peg, and the man's mind was set on the terrible prospect of seeing that seat move, when he stopped suddenly. Spot growled. Joshua had the appearance of a burglar interrupted in his first job. Undoubtedly it was a knock, a loud one, and it was repeated. The dog barked openly.

"Let 'em knock," was the farmer's muttered comment as he drew one hand over his forehead and let out his breath. And assuredly the visitor took him at his word. The sound encouraged Joshua. Not the youngest clerk with a writ would do it like that. Thus fortified, he went to the door, and without opening it demanded who was there.

An unknown voice asked for Mr. Clegram. It was a gentleman's voice, so the debtor's suspicions revived. He could see nobody that night. But it was for his own good; the speaker had come from Sir Hemingway Coles; was Miss Susan to be seen?

There was a moment's silence inside, during which Joshua went stealthily to remove the saw and with a broom sweep up the cobwebs and sawdust. By the time he had done that he resolved to admit the visitor, who had kept on talking all the time.

Into the lamplight stepped Mr. Ralph Chedworth in evening dress, with a long fur coat over it. He introduced himself with good-humoured apologies, referred to his visit a few days ago, hoped his interest was not impertinent. Then he frankly said that Sir Hemingway had told him of the transaction, and he had come to talk about it.

"You have made a mistake, Mr. Clegram. I don't think you ought to have parted with that seat."

The farmer was propitiated by the visitor's tone and manner, and only too glad of the sympathetic discussion that Chedworth seemed to offer.

"What's a man to do, sir?" said he. "I had nothing else to sell. If I had not paid thirty pounds that morning I should have been sold up anyhow. It seemed like a fatality that I met Sir Hemingway in Merstow at that minute. What would you have done?"

"You were in a tight place certainly. But what does Miss Susan say to it?"

"Susan knows ne'er a word about it, sir," exclaimed the man solemnly, and looked into his companion's face for some hopeful suggestion. "It be the most awkward side of the business."

Still Chedworth said nothing. Clegram went on.

"And in a manner I blame the maid for it. If her'd made up her mind sooner I needn't have done it, do you see. Farley has always said he'd stand by me if Susan would only come to, but she 'oodn't. Then the very day as I sold the chair to Sir Hemingway she tells me that Farley be the man."

A few questions put Chedworth in possession of the situation.

"But why has she changed her mind?" asked he. "What has Susan to do with a man as old as Farley? She has been forced to it."

"Not a bit of it!" cried Joshua indignantly. "I left the maid a free hand. I never said a word to her about it one way or another."

"No, no, not you," said Ralph with an irrepressible smile. "It is a fatality as you say. Circumstances have done it."

The bit of rural drama took Chedworth's fancy, as the personality of Susan had done from the outset. He meant to see the end of it.

"But who was the young man?" he added. And Joshua told him.

"Do you mind if I tell your daughter about the chair?" asked Ralph, after a few minutes' further talk.

"Very far from it, sir. I'd be obliged to you." Chedworth rejoined the dogcart under the frosty moon.

"Frozen, Dufty?" said he to the groom he had made friends with.

"Not quite, sir."

"You won't mind driving on to the Eight Bells at Withbridge? We can get warm there."

"There's a dance there to-night, I believe."

"There is. I want to see it."

So off they went.

In the glittering throng to which Susan had with wild abandonment flung herself, there were only four men in evening dress. They were all local young men of family that enjoyed a frolic. With one of them Susan had consented to dance. Charles Lampitt noticed it with annoyance, for he had also noticed a reckless gaiety about Susan to which he had never before seen her give way, and which in his eyes had heightened her charms to an extraordinary degree. After that dance he taxed her with flirting.

"And why shouldn't I?" was her quick retort, in a manner which the young man also could not connect with Susan.

"Well, I should think you know," he said in an injured manner.

But Susan was thoroughly excited and only laughed.

"Susan—Susan—" began Charles again in a lowered, tremulous tone as he made a grab for her hand.

"Don't be serious to-night, Charlie," she said, quickly recovering herself, and assuming an irresistible tone of entreaty. "It's my only night; let me have it."

It was after this dance with the only man she had ever felt fove for that Susan was again confronted by a gentleman in evening dress. She smiled, but declined rather bluntly; then her features flashed with surprise. She had seen that face, but could not connect it with anybody. Mr. Chedworth had drawn off. This was mere diplomacy. He took care that Susan should have opportunities of examining him without any direct glance from himself. He had no difficulty in finding an attractive partner. After a critical survey, however, he concluded that there was no girl present to approach Susan. And Charles Lampitt looked a very decent fellow, suitable enough for such a destiny. To his disappointment, inquiry proved that Mr. Farley was not there. Chedworth waited for another opportunity, and presently it came.

"I see you do not remember me, though I have sat in your chair."

Then it all flashed upon Susan, and she recollected the visitor. Chedworth detected the nervous glance of pain, and the man thought that he could himself easily fall in love with Susan. But that was not his design.

"Can I speak with you privately somewhere?"

The assurance of high breeding and a dramatic outlook carried off the bold request, and without hesitation Susan led the way. On seeing her closely and alone, Ralph was struck by some fresh change in her.

"I have damped all your spirits," said he. "Why?"

"Will you tell me what you have to tell?"

"I want to drive you home."

"Not yet," exclaimed Susan, flushing petulantly.

"Why is it your only night? You must forgive me if I overheard you say that. It was quite unintentional. You spoke too loud."

There was something about him that neutralised all the impudence. Susan looked into his face, but did not answer.

"Susan, although I am a complete stranger I sympathise with you. I am older than you. I have seen the world. You shall not marry Mr. Farley."

"Is that all?" said she, recoiling from him. "I felt I could trust you and I can't. I thought you had something—"

But Ralph intercepted her at the doorway.

"I have, and you can trust me," said he with authority. "You had better come home with me and see your father. I may be of some good."

Susan struggled with herself for a moment. All her soul rose in revolt. Chedworth watched her and listened. Every gesture, every change of expression, charmed him. Ultimately she gave in, as he knew she would.

The few preparations were rapidly made. Ralph saw the groom.

"You can get a lift home? I'll answer for the dog-cart." Several would be going in the direction of Norbury, so Chedworth set off with Susan alone.

They did not exchange a dozen words on the way to Coneygore. As they drove into the yard Ralph said to her: "Your father wanted you to go to the dance, didn't he?"

She just said yes, then thought how her father had perused her. To her surprise there was no light in the house. The dogs barked from the stable. To repeated knockings Susan got no answer. Ralph said the man must be asleep, and knocked louder.

"What has he done? What has happened?" said Susan, now thoroughly alarmed.

But Chedworth wanted to see the scene between the girl and her father, so he parried her by suggesting that perhaps Mr. Clegram was out. Susan looked for the key in the usual place, and found it. Just as she turned it in the door the sound of a galloping horse arrested her. The next moment Charles Lampitt leapt off in the yard.

"Is that you, Susan? Who is that man and what right has he to take you off like this?"

With some difficulty the lover was pacified, but nothing could persuade him to leave Susan in the hands of Mr. Chedworth. When the door was opened he entered the house with them. Susan struck a light, and as if by common instinct the eyes of all went to the seat by the door. Its place was vacant. There was the print of its position on the coloured wall. For the rest, cobwebs sprinkled with sawdust and the ends of the four pegs differing in colour from the stone. Even Chedworth was astonished. He looked at Susan, whose features showed that the shock had completely sobered her. She was again the girl Ralph had seen on the morning of his visit.

"I did not know he was going to take it to-night," said he. "I was to tell you."

And forthwith Chedworth explained the circumstances of the sale which he had learned on coming to Temple Norbury that evening for his promised visit.

"Come with me now to Sir Hemingway," he said calmly.

Lampitt seemed to agree.

"I shall stay here till you come back, Susan," said he in an altered manner.

Chedworth expected to meet Joshua Clegram returning from his surreptitious journey. But they saw only an owl on their way to Temple Norbury. The knight had not retired. When Chedworth went in to him he found Sir Hemingway standing in a theatrical attitude before the long-coveted relic, the seat by the door.

"Odd fellow, that Joshua Clegram," he exclaimed, flinging out his arms and spreading the ashes of his cigar broadcast. By this time his expanse of shirt-front bulged far outward, and his coat-sleeves had got hitched up nearly to the elbows. "His daughter knows nothing about it. He daren't tell her. I'm afraid there'll be a row in the house when she comes home. Deep old dog, ha! ha! He got her off to a dance."

"I saw her there," said Chedworth. "And I've brought her here. She wants to see you. Now, look here, Sir Hemingway—"

A sudden sharp knock at the door interrupted the knight's amazement. The butler came in and closed the door after him.

"Unpleasant news, sir. Mr. Clegram is drowned in the pool. William Dufty saw it and will give full particulars if you wish him to come in."

"H'm, he daren't tell her," commented Ralph Chedworth.

For an instant Sir Hemingway was too agitated to speak. Then he gave orders for Dufty to be brought in.

The farmer apparently was unable to face his homeward journey, for as the groom passed through the grounds he saw a figure by the pool in the moonlight. On his approaching it disappeared with a plunge. It was too deep for Dufty to follow, and when he got assistance it was too late. The horse in the cart was found wandering about the grounds and Susan drove herself home in it. Nothing would restrain her; no force of persuasion could get her to stay at Temple Norbury that night. She got to Coneygore and found Charles Lampitt awaiting her. After telling him all about it, she agreed to go and stay with his mother.

In spite of Joshua Clegram's conclusion, there was something that could induce even Sir Hemingway Coles to give up his bargain. Sir Hemingway had the chair reinstated as near as possible in the original way. Indeed, he proved singularly generous and it was he, in company with Ralph Chedworth, that undertook to settle the difficulties with Mr. Farley. It was for Charles Lampitt that Coneygore was put in repair.