

the evening. Mrs. Grayling greeted her old friend warmly, and the two were presently seated at the tea-table, gossiping over times past and present. Jane did not exactly see her way to bring round the conversation to the wished-for point; but a remark made by her hostess at length enabled her to lead up to it without subjecting herself to being questioned on a topic respecting which she would just then much rather be silent.

'I suppose we shall have a grand wedding before, long,' said Mrs. Grayling, 'between this Mr. Duplessis and the young lady at Belair?'

'That's more than I can say,' replied Jane. 'Have you ever seen Mr Duplessis?'

'Only once, and that was a month ago, last Thursday,' answered the landlady; 'and a right nice-looking gentleman he is. He came early in the afternoon, and hired our new gig and the gray mare, and drove away in a style which showed that he knew how to handle the reins. I should most likely have asked him his name, for one doesn't like trusting one's best horse to a stranger, however fine he may be dressed, only our hostler's lad, who was in the stables at Belair before he came to the *Silver Lion*, knew him again in a moment and says he to me. . . That's Mr. Duplessis of Lilac Lodge—him as is going to marry the rich Miss Spenceclough. So, when I heard that, I just slipped on my best cap, and ran down into the yard—for Luke was out—to see that everything was right for him, and most polite and affable he were.'

'He brought back the horse and gig all right, and without accident, I suppose?' said Jane.

'Bless you, yes. He got back the same night about seven o'clock. He came back the same as he went, alone. I thought he looked rather pale and excited-like; and I noticed that one of his gloves was split right across the back, and his hat damaged a little; and that his light overcoat, which, on his return, he wore buttoned close up about his neck, seemed on one side as if it had been dragged along a dirty road, but he accounted for all that naturally enough by saying that he had been out with some friends, one of whom had taken rather too much wine, and had afterwards got larking, and damaged the hats and coats of the others all round. He laughed heartily while he was telling me, and said something about bright eyes and a pretty cap, which made my colour come so that I ran back into the house, leaving the hostler to settle with him; and I didn't see him again.'

Jane Garrod sipped her tea, and pondered in silence for a minute or two over what she had just heard.

'But the strangest part of the story is yet to come,' said Mrs. Grayling after a short pause, bending over the table, and speaking in a whisper. 'I haven't spoken about it to a soul, though it has troubled my mind a good deal; even Luke doesn't know of it, and I wouldn't mention it to you, Jane Garrod, if I didn't know of old that you are a woman who can keep a secret.'

Mrs. Grayling rose from her chair as she spoke, and having turned the key in the door, went to a cupboard in one corner of the room, and took from it a work-box, which she unlocked, and drawing something from a secret drawer, held up the article for Jane to look at.

'A woman's blood-stained handkerchief!' exclaimed Mrs. Grayling in a whisper; 'marked in one corner with the name of "Marie." It was found by Tim the hostler under the seat of the gig, the day after Mr. Duplessis was here.'

Jane felt all the colour desert her cheeks as she gazed in silent horror at the handkerchief, knowing well whose property it had been.

'There is this fact to be borne in mind,' said Mrs. Grayling after she had returned the handkerchief to its hiding-place—'that the gig had been used, as one of a number of other conveyances, at a large picnic, the day before Mr. Duplessis hired it, and had not been thoroughly cleaned between times; and it's as likely as not, I think, that the handkerchief belonged to one of the young ladies who were at the party; though how it came to be in that condition, of course I can't say. Anyhow, both Tim and I agreed to say nothing about it—that is, unless

we heard of somebody being missing; for, you see, it might only get innocent folk into trouble, and turn out a mare's-nest after all, and altogether it's an unpleasant thing to have anything to do with. What's your opinion?'

'I think that you are right,' said Jane, 'but I would keep the handkerchief carefully by me: some day, when you least expect such a thing, it may be wanted at your hands.'

The Kingsthorpe carrier that evening set down Jane Garrod as very poor company indeed: a sociable, neighbourly gossip, in his opinion, enlivened the dullness of the way wonderfully; but for once, even the vacuity of his own mind seemed pleasanter to him than the presence of that pale, gloomy, preoccupied woman, who responded to all his observations in monosyllables, and who looked, as he said to himself, 'as if she had got a murder on her mind; and he was not sorry when he set her down at her own door, and jogged on his way alone.'

CHAPTER XXII.—JANE GARROD'S QUEST.

Abel Garrod was struck next day with the pale, anxious looks of his wife, and thought to himself that she was getting to talk less than ever, which was decidedly a pity, as tending, in his opinion, to make her duller than it need be. But, well or ill, Jane went to church twice that Sunday—not to the church at Normanford, but to the little church at Kingsthorpe, only half a mile away, thinking, perhaps, thereby to calm her thoughts, and tranquillize her mind. But, for once, the service took no hold on her, the words seeming to float far away above her head, as though addressed to quite other ears than hers. Do what she might, her thoughts would go back to that terrible token hidden away in the landlady's work-box at Fairwood; and whichever way she turned, she seemed to see before her Marie's pale frightened face, as she had seen it in that last moment ere it passed from her sight for ever. Monday was spent by Jane in a silent inward struggle—the whole of the day, and far into the night, and Abel waking up some time in the dark hours, found his wife pacing to and fro the bedroom, and heard her muttering strange words to herself.

'I can hold out no longer,' she said; 'I must go on with it. An invisible hand draws me forward, and I cannot resist. Oh! why was not this task given to another?'

Abel marvelled greatly, but being wise in his own dull way, asked no questions, and pretended to be asleep.

Any one going from Kingsthorpe to Fairwood has the choice of two roads by which to travel. The old road is straggling and tortuous, but tolerably level; and winds pleasantly along for a mile or two of the way, close to the high cliffs which shut out the sea on that part of the coast; by it, the distance between the two places is eleven miles and a half. The new road cuts straight across country, regardless of hill or dale, and although by no means so picturesque as the old road, has this great advantage over its rival, that it makes the distance to Fairwood but eight miles and a quarter, and has, in consequence, monopolised the whole of the traffic between the two places; for Fairwood is not touched by the railway. About half a mile before reaching Fairwood, the two roads, old and new, merge into one, and are here joined by the road from Berryhill and other inland towns; at which junction a toll-bar has been judiciously planted, with a thoughtful eye on the pockets of all, not being foot passengers, who may choose to come or go by any of the three routes. To the garrulous graybeard who administered the office of collector at the toll-bar, went Jane Garrod on the afternoon of Tuesday. Jane's visit was made with a purpose; but she was too cautious to let the old man—with whom she had one of those state-of-the-weather acquaintanceships, common enough between people who live wide apart in country places, suspect anything of the kind. During the summer and autumn months, the old man had generally a store of mild ginger-beer in thick stone bottles, set out at his door for the delectation of thirsty wayfarers; and Jane, when she reached the gate this afternoon, bade the old man good-day, and then asked to be

supplied with a bottle of the beverage in question, and sat down in the roomy porch, that she might rest herself, and discuss it with the amount of leisure requisite for its proper appreciation. The afternoon was close and warm for the time of the year, and Jane was really tired with her long walk.

'It's a long tramp, Mrs. Garrod, all the way from Kingsthorpe, at your time of life—not that you be so very old either,' said Matthew as he drew the cork with a trembling hand.

'Ay, that it is,' answered Jane, 'and I never walk it without wishing I could afford to keep my carriage, and ride like a lady. It would be pleasant, now, to have Luke Grayling's gig on such a day as this. A nice trap to ride in; I dare say you know it?'

'Ay, I know the trap you mean well enow,' said Matthew. 'It has been through this gate more than once, or twice either.'

'It's not much used, I think, except for picnics and pleasure-parties,' said Jane.

'I dun know about that,' said Matthew, 'I seen it with a young couple in it going a-pleasurin', more than once, and then, again, I seen it t'other way. Why, no longer ago than last Thursday-night was a month, about half after six, a gent druv up in it alone, and the moment I clapt eyes on it, I knew it was Luke Grayling's turn-out. 'And where be you sprung from?' ses I to myself. 'You cæe down th' old road from Kingsthorpe, but I never seen you go that way this morning.' And 'hen I settled that he must have gone round by Leavenworth, which would account for my not seeing him pass my way. While I was turning the matter over in my mind, the gent paid me the toll, and had got a fair start again, when he turned the horse's head round, and druv back. 'I've had a spill,' ses he to me, 'and got into the mud. I don't like going into Fairwood this figure; and if you can find me some soap and water, and a clothes-bush, and will hold my horse for five minutes, I'll give you half-a-crown for your trouble.' Now, it isn't every day that I've the chance of earning half-a-crown in five minutes, so I nodded my head to him, and got him the soap and water; and then he got down from the gig, and I saw that his hands and face were all muddy, and his hat crushed, and his coat dirty into the bargain. So I nudged the horse while he titivated hisself up a bit; and he gavo me the half-crown all right, and druv off; and I've never clapt eyes on him since.'

'Some young spark, most likely, who didn't know how to drive properly,' said Jane.

'Not so young either,' said the old man. 'About forty, I should take him to be. A fine, handsome gent as ever I clapt eyes on; with long moustachers, and a dust-coloured overcoat buttoned up to his throat. He seemed to me to look very white and ill: he had likely hurt hisself with falling out of the gig, though how he could fall out, I can't think. He asked me whether I had any brandy in the house; but I told him I had only ginger-beer, and wanted him to try a bottle; but he only laughed, and shook his head, and said it was no matter.'

The old man had nothing more to tell; and bidding him good-day, Jane went on her way to Fairwood, from which place she booked herself by coach to Berryhill, and went home thence by rail.

She was up and doing next morning an hour before her usual time, so as to get through her household work as early as possible, anxiously considering meanwhile what her next step ought to be. Now that she had thoroughly made up her mind to go through with the matter, she was determined not to move an inch from anything that it might lead to. She felt, indeed, as though she were being led on by a will other than, and superior to, her own. The one point of the case, as it then stood, on which her mind most persistently dwelt, embodied itself in the following proposition:

'Mr. Duplessis left Kingsthorpe, in company with his sister, at half-past three o'clock in the afternoon, taking the coast-road, probably as being more unfrequented than the other—a road which has no lanes or by-paths leading to anywhere, except to one or two solitary sheep-farms.