

'Those two men have been at the gate this half-hour, Oliver. Do you know who they are?'

'No,' he answered, after a long keen look. 'They don't belong to this part, I think. At least I've never seen either of them before.'

'Well, I don't think Mr. Carroll cares to have strangers about on these occasions. Will you go and ask them what they want, and perhaps they may take it as a hint to be off?'

'All right, sir,' and Oliver Haythorn strolled off towards the gate, feeling quite sufficiently at home in the Rectory meadow to warn off intruders.

They were not a prepossessing looking pair. One was a sailor, to judge by his dress, which looked odd enough in this inland village. But a dingy, disreputable sailor, without any of that frank, good-tempered expression which is popularly supposed to belong to the profession. His companion was better dressed, but his clothes had an air of not having been made for him. He was a tall, fine-looking man of between forty and fifty, with a ragged, unkempt, black beard, and dark restless eyes, and a generally-unwashed appearance.

'Were you wanting to speak to anyone?' asked Oliver, civilly enough, as he drew near the gate.

'No,' answered the sailor, after a minute's pause and a side glance at his companion. 'I suppose we don't even want to ask the way, though we're both strangers here!' and he laughed, rather oddly.

'I thought perhaps you wanted something?' said Oliver, and paused suggestively.

'Meaning we're to move on,' said the sailor. 'All right, we'll be moving. But I haven't seen such a sight as this for thirty years.'

His tone softened somewhat, and so did the young face watching him. Inexperienced as he was, the young fellow had a glimmering comprehension of what lay beneath those words. He turned away half-resolved to bring Mr. Wilmot himself to speak to

the strangers; but one of them called him back.

'Here!' he said. 'I suppose you can tell us something. Who's living at Priestfield now?'

'Priestfield? Why, that's our— My uncle lives there.'

'And who's your uncle?'

'John Haythorn. The Haythorns have been there this hundred years.'

The man started and leaned forward half over the gate.

'What is your name then?' he asked, a little hoarsely.

'Oliver Haythorn. What do you want to know about us for?'

The dark eyes searched his face with a piercing look; but the man made no answer, at least to him.

'Come, Benson! We'll be going, he said at last, drawing a long breath, and raising himself with an impatient push at the gate. 'We shall see you again, my lad, maybe, at Priestfield.'

They turned away, and Oliver, lost in wonder, stood looking after them as they went up the road. Who could they be? and what could they be wanting at his uncle's house—his own home? Oliver put the question once to himself and found no answer; put it again, and saw a possible answer, but one that he must not even think of, if he could help it, just now. It was with a feeling of relief that he saw Mr. Wilmot beckoning to him, and hurried across the grass to help in setting the boys to a 'Tug of War,' by way of finally letting off their superfluous spirits before they went home.

The boys found Oliver the same as usual—fiery, imperious, generous, and good-tempered, when not contradicted. But Mr. Wilmot's keener eyes fancied they detected something amiss, and presently, when a momentary pause found them standing side by side, he spoke.

'I believe you *did* hurt yourself just now, Oliver. There is something the matter with you, I know.'

Oliver did not deny it; but he paused, with a momentary embarrassment, looking