

The Seat by the Door

By ALGERNON GISSING

IN the February sunlight the air was crisp, and great snow-white clouds reared their heads above the dark belt of woodland. Ralph drew rein and let his horse jog him down to a footpace. Before him lay the green mounds of the old Roman camp, and over the ridge beyond another horseman was just disappearing. Chedworth was alone, and thought he was the last of the field, so once more he swore at the villainous mount his host had afforded. "Give it up," he added, and stared savagely around.

He was ignorant of these desolate wolds, and not a house was to be seen. Whilst letting his horse choose a pathway, the peewits that had but just settled all rose again in a flock and sent their wailing cry over the uplands. With a sense of relief Ralph heard a shout from behind. His face lightened as he recognised another laggard in pink at the gate. There was worse company than old Sir Hemingway Coles.

"Excuse me, my boy," panted the knight genially as he came up. "I thought it was that accursed butler. Boh, this won't do. Let us get out of it."

"Which way?"

"Trust me. But wait," said Sir Hemingway, pausing with a twinkle in his eye. "Now we are here let us go by Coneygore. I never pass it, and there's something that will please you."

"Don't make it farther. I never sat such a beast."

"It's the nearest way," laughed the other. And they set off talking.

The pair followed a little stream that came down a crease from the wood, and in a hollow a solitary farmhouse soon appeared. As they went forward Sir Hemingway talked much of the Knights Templars and the historic sense, to which Chedworth paid but scant attention. The scene interested him.

Coneygore was a gray homestead of the district backed by a slope of wold, scattered with old thorn trees. Even in this sunlight the aspect of the place was peculiarly forlorn. House and buildings were much dilapidated, great rifts appearing in the barn walls, and of the cart-shed the whole roof had fallen. The carts and implements were unpainted and rusty. The long waggon that had once been yellow was drawn out in the yard and showed signs of under-going amateur repairs. As Ralph Chedworth passed it he read the name on its front, "Caleb Clegram, Coneygore." The letters had evidently been painted over afresh by a rude unskilful hand. The name was that of the present proprietor's father, dead for thirty years. Hearing the sound of horses a young woman came to the open door, but stepped back to drop her skirt. Then she again came forward. Sir Hemingway touched his hat politely.

"Now, Susan, will you let my friend have a look at the seat by the door?"

"Certainly, Sir Hemingway."

And the two men alighted. They stepped into the great kitchen; examined and admired; and the knight shook his head with what was meant for a sigh.

"Sit in it, Chedworth. No, it isn't comfortable, but the Grand Masters didn't want to be comfortable in this world. I've offered Joshua the best saddle-bag that can be manufactured—in addition to a mad price, mind you—in exchange for that bit of old timber, and he'll not listen to it. Extraordinary, isn't it? Is your father about, Susan?"

"No, Sir Hemingway."

"Well, I shan't last long. If he misses his opportunity he'll repent it. Nobody would be such a fool as to give half what I've offered." The knight looked at Susan, and she stood the glance with marked composure. But there was no smile on her face.

"Why should they sell it at all?" said Chedworth.

"To be sure," shrugged Sir Hemingway, turning away in petulant humour, whilst Susan shot a quick glance at Ralph, who still occupied the chair.

"That's what Sir Hemingway doesn't understand," said she almost satirically.

It was that one remark and the look which preceded it which stayed in Chedworth's mind after they had left the place. The knight's anger he took jocularly, and knew how to conciliate the vanity of the self-made man, so they journeyed pleasantly. When they parted Ralph had promised to spend a week at Temple Norbury, and a few days later he went there.

The sight of Sir Hemingway Coles disturbed Susan. After watching the visitors go that day she stood a long time in front of the seat by the door. That chair had now become inseparably associated with the old knight, and in a very unpleasant way. Theirs was no recent acquisition. A Clegram had owned Coneygore for three hundred years, and the seat by the door was as much a part of the inheritance as the swan-egg-pear tree or the old cider mill. It was, indeed, permanently fastened to the wall, and you could only sweep round and underneath it. Susan, in common with her father and every other Clegram, in infancy had learned to walk by shuffling round this old chair. It had indeed inspired a kind of superstitious veneration in the family, so that Susan had come to feel that their own fortunes were somehow mysteriously interwoven with the destiny of that seat by the door. Antiquaries quarrelled as to its real age, although most of them agreed in scouting the tradition of its having been the possession of the last Grand Master of the order of the Knight Templars in England. But this had nothing to do with Susan's emotions.

She was preoccupied that evening, and her father never talked much. When he sat in a chair he dozed. Just after supper he was aroused from this condition, and looking up saw Susan fronting him.

"Shall we have to part with that?" said she, inclining her head towards the doorway.

The man was startled for an instant, and had to collect his thoughts. Only the big clock ticked in the silent room. The snoozing dog looked up at the uncommon predicament.

"Never!" stammered Joshua.

And for the first time in her life Susan knew that the man was not straightforward with her. She turned away and said no more.

Sleep did not come soon to her that night.

After the postman had been in the morning she saw that her father was disturbed again and he spoke of driving to Merstow. As soon as he had gone Susan also dressed for a journey. Her brow was fixed, and there was something resolute in her movements. When ready she locked up the house, and set off over the fields.

It was a gray morning with a north-east wind on which came occasional snow-flakes. Susan was walking in the face of it. She crossed a wide slope of coarse pasture, and past a grove of beech trees which looked very black in the landscape. Then she reached a broad high road. Just as she had alighted from the stile the thud of a horse's hoofs on the grass margin made her look up, and it was impossible for her to avoid the rider. He stopped in front of her. Charles Lampitt was the last person she would have wished to meet on this journey. He was of course in the best of spirits. Susan could not pretend to be. She even coloured more visibly than she generally did, and this made him chuckle.

"You'll be down on Thursday night?" said he after their first few words.

"Yes," was her answer to avoid discussion, for she meant no.

Susan was not troubled with an uneven pulse, but when she went on again her heart was throbbing furiously. At Lady Day Charles Lampitt would have a farm of his own too—but no, there should be no thoughts in that direction to-day. She had not really promised him anything. She was free. Her destiny was her own. If they were to be bought it should certainly not be Sir Hemingway Coles that—but thoughts of this kind should be evaded also. Susan hurried forward with the determination to think of nothing but just her one plain purpose.

This brought her in about a quarter of an hour to a house that bore an appearance of some gentility. But buildings and rick-yard showed that it ranked in some way or other as a farm. Susan threw glances round her, and went up to the front door. It opened immediately, and a little man with black moustache and gray whiskers stood in a broad joyous grin on the threshold. Susan could not resist a laugh also as she said that she wanted Miss Farley.

"Yes, yes, of course. Come in, and I'll tell her."

The visitor entered and went into a room. The little man closed the door and rubbed his hands in ecstasy.

"Funny, isn't it? I had a stranger floating in my tea this morning. It was a female and was to come to-day. Fanny said it meant good luck for her servant, for she's gone hunting. But it was luck for me, eh? Ha! ha! Such an uproar yester-

day. Box packed in half an hour—threats of policeman."

"What, with that last one Emily?" said Susan in irresistible surprise.

Mr. Farley nodded an affirmative.

"Went courting, Susan," said the man confidentially. "But, what was worse, had sweetheart in the kitchen till midnight." He betrayed real glee in the narrative. "You can guess how Fanny took that."

And he exploded with laughter, which ended exactly like a cock's crow, in which Susan had to join.

"Then Miss Farley is not here?" said she.

"I'm all alone. Peace for a day."

They looked at each other and Susan felt bolder. She knew her sovereignty over the little man.

"It couldn't have been better, could it?" crowed he. "You've never given me that answer, Susan. Let me show you round."

She said something about not staying now, but the other treated it as an assent, and brought out cake and wine from the sideboard. He would take no denial. He poured out two glasses and cut the cake.

"Susan," he went on, holding his glass in the air and looking from it to her quite seriously, "here's to you know what, eh?"

The young woman blushed as he drank off the wine, then with a thrill of resolution she followed his example.

"It's an answer, Susan—fair and square," cried he, startled with delight. "Name your own time, but it's an answer." He wanted to refill her glass as well as his own, but she forbade it. She ate some cake.

"We can carry on two farms as easily as one"—he had been a prosperous grocer and wine-dealer until a few years ago. "We'll put everything right at Coneygore, and Fanny must go there. We'll make your father a new man. Ha, ha! doodle-doo! Don't hurry, Susan; but I want you to look round. You shall see everything."

He was deaf to all refusal, and pooh-poohed every excuse that Susan made pretence of urging. She felt real hesitation now that everything had fallen out exactly as she wanted. Better circumstances she could not have devised if she had had the whole pre-arrangement of the situation. The only obstacles now arose from her own scruples. But—Sir Hemingway Coles and the seat by the door.

So Susan looked round; spent two hours under the enthusiastic guidance of Mr. Farley; and was made to stay to dinner. This meal became an historic event in Farley's existence, no less than in that of Susan, and when she left the house the latter knew that she was no longer free.

Her father was in the yard on her return, and he looked in astonishment at Susan.

"I'm going to get married, father," said she.

"Lor' bless the maid, it'll be uncommon awk'ard for me," was the reply, after a moment's silence.

"Not at all. It will be far better for you. Mr. Farley says he will put everything right for you here."

"Mr. Farley! I thought it was Charles Lampitt as you meant to wed."

His tone was exasperating to Susan in her disturbed condition, so she turned and went into the house without another word. And for some time nothing more was said between them.

Joshua Clegram was not ready-witted, and he knew that he had missed the opportunity of disclosing to Susan what was on his mind. His eyes followed his daughter, and he even took a step or two towards the house, but that was all. After that he went across to the stable and sat down on an up-turned bucket.

"And I needn't ha' done it after all," he muttered at last. "Why couldn't the maid ha' spoken?"

Still he decided to make a clean breast of it after tea, and perhaps Susan's skill would find a way out of it. But after tea Joshua dozed and did not make a clean breast of it. When he roused himself he stared across at the seat by the door suddenly, then shuffled off to attend to the horses. When he went to bed his guilty secret was still unconfessed.

Susan had stipulated with Mr. Farley that he should not come over to Coneygore just yet. She promised to let him know when she had prepared her father. Joshua also had stipulated with the knight for a week in which to deliver the chair at