

## CHAPTER II.

Old Mother Scrubhard was hurrying down the Highfield drive. That was not her real name—merely a nick-name coined in the mint of schoolboy jocosity. Her real name was Mary Brown, but that did not count. The boys of Highfield House recognized her as Mother Scrubhard.

They were familiar with a round-about back view of the dame, on all fours, striving by soap and scrub to put a decent aspect upon floors and passages soiled by their proteane feet.

She was the wife of Punchey Brown, whose name has figured before now in the annals of the House. Every Highfield boy remembers the punch-like face, with its small, black ferret eyes, denoting keen rebuff for driving a hard bargain over nuts and apples and kindred commodities.

His wife used to attend at Highfield House on Fridays and Saturdays, for cleaning and scrubbing. She might be seen weekly on either of those days hurrying off home after dinner, in her antiquated black mushroom hat and drab shawl, carrying a basket that looked heavy. I would not insinuate a shade of suspicion against her honesty; but we boys were often curious to know what that basket contained. To this day I wonder if Dr. Forchester or his sister ever shared our curiosity.

No doubt the basket might have held merely the lawlud perquisites of her vocation—soap, scrubbing brush, flannels, and such like. But on one occasion certainly there was proof positive of other contents.

It happened when a few mischievous members of our community were larking together, as the old dame came out of the kitchen-yard, bound on her homeward cruise. By some mischance, accidentally brought about on purpose, or otherwise the basket was upset, and some of its contents got abroad. There was a fair-sized lump of meat, and a hunk of cheese, and a smush of eggs, and two or three candles.

We asked her if she had been to market, and she got angry. She said she was only taking home the remains of her dinner, she hadn't an appetite, and couldn't finish all the cook gave her. Very probable. And no doubt the candles were thoughtfully provided by the cook in case a fog should overtake her on the way. She always took the short cut through the woods, and there were pitfalls and swampy places, which would need careful discrimination if a fog suddenly came on. Her son Thomas was the doctor's footman at that time.

Mother Scrubhard lived in a cottage a long way past the farm which had a haunted barn if you went by the road. The house opposite that farm had a like evil repute. It was said that coffins were heard being dragged about the passages at night. It seems strange that the neighborhood of Deepwells never provided material for that interesting book,

'The Haunted Homes of England.' For if half the legends that we boys used to revel over were true, they might have furnished copy for an extra chapter all to themselves.

On that afternoon, Mother Scrubhard with her basket was making for the short cut through the pine wood. She bustled along with purpose in her steps, for it was Saturday, and there was a deal of week-end cleaning to be done in her cottage.

Now the two sea-gulls had taken the occasion for a promenade in the wood, and never until that afternoon had Mother Scrubhard set eyes on them. The pond did not come within her beat or range of view when she paid her periodical visits to the House.

As she pursued her way among the fragrant pines, she caught sight of two birds, pearly-grey, waddling before her along the path. Her knowledge of birds was not extensive; she knew a duck from a goose, and a turkey from a peacock, and she had practical acquaintance with the common barn-door poultry.

But there, in front of her, were a couple of birds neither duck nor goose nor any ordinary fowl. They could only be pigeons, she thought—and yet they were different. Ah—she had it! They must be some of those outlandish pigeons which the farmers had down occasionally for their shooting. She noticed the droop of wings as the birds shuffled along in their hop-and-go-one style. The poor things had been wounded at the shooting, she thought, and here was a chance. A brace of pigeons would make a nice pie. "Punchey" (she sometimes called him "Brown"); we boys never knew if he had any other name "would relish a pigeon-pie."

Mother Scrubhard licked her lips at the thought, and quickened her pace, fired with determination to bag, or rather basket, the brace, if possible. She came nearer to running than she had ever come in the last forty years.

The birds took alarm, and scurried their fastest, but the pursuer gained on them. So they left the path, and scrambled away to rougher ground, intersected by trenches for gully dug for draining purposes, with shelter-burrows thrown in and brambly thickets here and there. The dame, nothing daunted, followed over the difficult course. She could not clear the trenches at a bound.

She had to climb down into them and climb out. But the gulls had to do the same. It was a queer sort of an obstacle race, and the old dame had the worst of it, for her joints were stiff and her breath grew wheezy and her limbs weary with the unaccustomed exertion. The birds might have escaped if they had kept up these tactics. But, poor things, they, too, felt the sturm and stress of the race. Those helpless crippled wings had to be dragged along like so much useless lumber, and the sound wings, doing double duty, taxed their strength with grievous exhaustion.

At last they brought up, dead-beat, at the bottom of a trench in a hollow of