

## THREE MAIDENS MARRIED.

[CONTINUED.]

'What can he want?' wondered the curate. 'I gave them relief to-day.'

'Send him round to the window, Nancy,' said Mr. Chavasse.

A young ragamuffin, in a very dilapidated state of clothes, was soon discerned approaching the large window, which was open to the ground. He took off an old blue cap, and displayed a shock head of light hair.

'What is it, Ned?' cried the curate. 'Please, sir,' answered the lad, lifting his sunburnt, freckled countenance, 'I have been to Mr. Leicester's and he tailed me to come and ask whether Mr. Hurst was here.'

'Well, you see I am,' replied Mr. Hurst, with a half smile.

'He said, please, as I was to tell you what I had tailed him, and would you go on quick, and he'd get a fly and come after, but he was too bad to walk.'

'Go where?' cried the curate. 'To Mr. Leicester's?'

'No, sir, to Gaffer Shipley's. He's took awful.'

'How? Is he worse?'

'He's a dying, sir; Dame Vaughan said I was to say so. He can't hold himself still on his bed for screeching. And the babby's a dying and a screeching; it's on Dame Vaughan's lap, it is, and she says they won't be alive many minutes, and it's the physicas she give 'em.'

They had risen, all of them, and gathered round the window, looking at the boy. Mrs. Chavasse spoke in her sharp, hasty way.

'What is it you are saying, Ned Long? Tell your tale properly. Who is it that's dying down at Shipley's?'

'The Gaffer, ma'am, and the babby.'

'Both?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'I never heard of such a thing. You must have brought your tale wrong, boy.'

'Dame Vaughan says as it's the physic.'

'What physic?'

'I doesn't know.'

'I never saw such a stupid boy! who is to make out what he means?' irritably repeated Mrs. Chavasse, her curiosity forcibly excited.

'Mr. Hurst—Why, where's Mr. Hurst? He has never gone without tasting his tea?'

He had, and was striding over the ground towards Thomas Shipley's cottage. A strange scene presented itself there. The baby was lying dead, and the old man, on his bed, seemed in danger of dissolution.

'Whatever is the cause of this?' questioned the curate.

'I don't know what's the cause,' sobbed Dame Vaughan. 'I hope no blame won't be laid to me.'

It appeared that the Gaffer had had his tea at four o'clock, and seemed refreshed and better after it. At six, when Dame Vaughan undressed the infant, she remarked that it appeared so well as scarcely to need the powder.

'Suppose we give father one of the powders?' suggested Mary, a modest-looking, gentle girl, who, until recent events, had been in high favor in the village. 'If they are fever powders, it might do him good; and it couldn't do him harm, any way.'

'Ay, sure; it's a good thought,' assented Dame Vaughan. 'We'll give him one to-night and another in the morning. This child won't want 'em all.'

So they mixed up two powders. Giving old Shipley his, first, lest he should fall asleep; and the other to the child. Soon after the latter had swallowed it, it began to scream, and writhe, and toss convulsively. Its legs were drawn up, and then stretched out stiff, while its face, to use Dame Vaughan's words, was not then the face of a baby. The neighbors came flocking in, and, suddenly, sounds were heard from Gaffer Shipley's bed: he was screaming and writhing like the child. Widow Thorpe's boy was dispatched for Mr. Castonel, and another, as we have seen, to Mr. Leicester's.

The boy, Thorpe, was flying along, proud to be of service and full of excitement, when by a piece of good fortune, which Dame Vaughan declared she should ever be thankful for, he espied Mr. Castonel. 'He was a standing outside the lodge where the strange lady lives,' said the boy, afterwards, 'and if he had been a waiting for me, he couldn't have been a standing out better.'

The boy made up to him, panting. 'Please, sir, will you run down to Gaffer Shipley's?'

'What for?' asked Mr. Castonel.

'They are both a howling horrid, sir. Dame Vaughan says it must have been the powders as they took.'

'Both who?' quickly demanded Mr. Castonel.

'Mary Shipley's little 'un and the Gaffer, sir. They gave 'em a powder apiece, and another says—'

'What the—!' burst forth Mr. Caston-

el, glancing on the boy. 'Who gave one to old Shipley?'

Master Thorpe shrank aside. He did not, just then, like the face of Mr. Castonel. 'Here,' added the surgeon, writing a line on the leaf of his pocket-book, and tearing it out, 'take that to my house. Mr. Rice will give you something to bring down. Run all the way.'

The boy ran one way, Mr. Castonel ran the other. He flew over the ground at his utmost speed and was soon at the cottage. The baby was dead: Mary was stretched over it, sobbing and crying, and the gossips were crying over her.

'Now, the first thing, a clearance,' exclaimed the surgeon, 'and then I may come to the bottom of this. Leave the cottage, every one of you.'

He held the door open and the women filed out. Then he turned to Dame Vaughan. 'Have you any warm water?'

'Not a drain, sir,' she sobbed, and the fires out. It was the powders and it couldn't have been nothing else. Mr. Rice must have sent poison in mistake for wholesome physic.'

'I should think not,' remarked Mr. Castonel. 'Let me see those that are left. Mary,' he irritably added, 'don't sob and moan in that way; that will do no good. One, two, three, four. Are these all?'

'All sir,' replied Dame Vaughan. 'Six come and them's the four what's left.'

Mr. Castonel carried them in his hand through the room where Thomas Shipley was lying, and went out at the back door, which he closed after him, and examined them alone in the yard. Possibly for the greater light.

'There is nothing wrong with these powders,' he said when he returned. 'However, Dame Vaughan, you had best take charge of them, lest they should be asked for.'

'I'll look 'em up in Mary's drawer,' she sobbed. 'I know it was the powders, and I'll stick to it till I drops.'

'Do so at once. Here, take them. And then go amongst the neighbors and see if you can borrow some warm water. If we can get a quart of it down the Gaffer's throat, till what I have sent for comes, so much the better. Hollon! where are you off to?'

'I thought you told me to fetch some warm water,' answered Dame Vaughan, arresting his footsteps.

'But I did not tell you to leave the key in the drawer. The powders are perfectly harmless, but it may be as well, in justice to Mr. Rice, to let other people think so.'

Mr. Rice and young Thorpe came together, full pelt, and it was soon after their entrance that Mr. Hurst appeared. When the Gaffer had been attended to, Dame Vaughan returned to the powders.

'The powders were all right,' said Mr. Rice. 'I'll stake my life upon it. Where are they? They were only *hydrargyrus cum creta*,' he added, to Mr. Castonel.

'I know they were. I have examined them.'

Dame unlocked the drawer, and put the powders on the table before Mr. Rice. He opened all four of the papers. The curate, Mr. Castonel and Dame Vaughan, stood and watched him. 'These are the powders I sent,' he observed. 'They are quite right. They are only the common gray powder, Dame Vaughan.'

Dame Vaughan still looked unconvinced. 'Let her take charge of them,' said Mr. Castonel. 'It may be more satisfactory.'

'Is it possible,' interposed the curate, 'that the powders can in any way have been changed?—wrong ones administered?'

Mr. Castonel turned his eye upon him, an eye that looked as if it would have liked to strike him dead as the child.

'No, sir,' he coldly said, 'I should think it is not possible. Did you wish to cast a suspicion on Mrs. Vaughan?'

'Nay,' cried the curate, 'certainly not. I would not cast a suspicion upon any one. It was but an idea that occurred to me, and I spoke it out.'

Gaffer Shipley recovered, the baby was buried, and the affair remained a mystery. A mystery that has never been positively solved. Other medical men, upon being pressed into the inquiry, pronounced the powders to be an innocent and proper medicine, frequently given to children.

That same night, at the early star-light hour, Frances Chavasse was lingering still in their garden. She looked frequently to a side gate, by which visitors, who were familiar with the house, sometimes entered. It seemed that she was restless; anxious; impatient. Whoever she was expecting, he kept her waiting long. Was it Mr. Hurst? It was not Mr. Hurst who entered; it was Mr. Castonel. What! were they lovers? Surely yes; for he strained her to his heart, and held her to him, and covered her face with his impassioned kisses: as he had in

other days, ay, even in that same garden, strained to him Caroline Hall and Ellen Leicester. Was his love for her genuine? Had it been for his former wives? No matter: theirs had been for him: and neither had loved him more entirely than did Frances Chavasse. Verily Mr. Castonel must have possessed powers of fascination unknown to other men! Frances had played herself off upon the unhappy curate, partly to gratify her vanity, partly as a blind, for she and Mr. Castonel had long had an understanding in secret.

The Reverend Mr. Hurst has been explicit to-night,' whispered Frances, in a mocking tone.

'The fool!' interrupted Mr. Castonel; and the glare of his eye was like it had been twice before that evening. Frances did not see it; she was leaning on his breast.

'He asked me how much it would take to keep two,' she went on, laughing. 'And would I have him if he got a rich living of two hundred a year. Gervase, I think, I do think, he will nearly die when—when—he knows.'

'I hope he will,' fiercely uttered Mr. Castonel. 'Frances, the time is drawing near that I shall speak to your father.'

CHAPTER XVII.  
OF A TAP-ROOM CONVERSATION, AND A HYPOTHETICAL CASE PUT FORWARD BY THE BLACKSMITH.

Mr. Tuck and Mr. Jenks were in close confabulation over the London paper, a copy of which Mr. Jenks took at second-hand. Mr. Tuck did not consider it beneath his dignity as assistant surgeon to drop in, now and then, at the Three Pigeons, with the jolly frequenters of whose tap-room he was a favorite. If he were nobody in the estimation of Mr. Castonel; if he were looked down upon by the dowagers as a young man who had failed to establish himself in his profession, he was nevertheless an oracle to one class, and that was the working-men who had regaled themselves o' nights with the ale and whiskey of Mr. Jenks.

On this occasion, however, there was no one with the two but Strang, the master-blacksmith, who was a rising man, peculiarly, and owned the premises whereupon stood his house, and his workshop—a double affair, for he did a bit of wheelwright work occasionally, in mending wagons, and tiring wagon-wheels. The three were discussing the details of a murder trial, with which all London was ringing at the time. A lawyer, of some note, had been convicted of a series of deliberate murders. The victims were clients of his own, whose lives he had first insured for small sums in various offices. It was not the murders alone, but the inadequacy of motive that puzzled the trio.

'Just to think of it,' said the blacksmith. 'He poisoned Jenkins for ten pound'. If it had been a thousand pound, I could make it out. But where is the temptation of ten pound?—a bit 'o money that a man 'd spend in less 'n a year, in tobacco an' swipes. It's extra'nary, to say nothing else.'

'Yes, sir, as you say, it is extraordinary,' chimed in the landlord. 'And ten pound too, sir. Very strange, I must say.'

'He don't seem to've made more by it than four hundred pound altogether,' repeated the blacksmith.

'Yes, sir, four hundred and ten pound,' replied the more accurate publican.

'I think I have it,' broke in Tuck. 'The vest waited his explanation patiently. 'He was crazy,' said Tuck.

'Ah, yes, I shouldn't wonder, sir,' replied the complainant Jenks. 'Seems that would explain it, sir, naturally enough. Oh, yes, sir—as you say, he was very much crazy, no doubt.'

'Crazy!' sneered the blacksmith. 'That's the new dodge, now-a-days. A fellow wants money, an' he's bound to get it, some way. The devil puts it into his head to pisen people, an' he pisen 'em, an' they say he's crazy.'

'You don't understand it,' persevered Tuck. 'It is what we medical men call a homicidal mania. You see there is the case of a dog, who goes mad and bites everybody he meets—his own master first, probably.'

'Yes—but they kill him—don't they?'

'Ah, but he's a dog, you know.'

'An' t'other's worse—yes—worse!' cried the blacksmith, bringing down his ponderous fist on the table, until the glasses danced and reeled as though the liquor that had been in them had affected their heads—'a dog has his nature, an' can't help that; but a man that'll pisen another for ten pound—he ought to have his head on an anvil, an' me a poundin' it, with my sledge. That's all!'

'But men are crazy in various ways,' persisted Tuck. 'I was a good deal in a lunatic asylum when I was studying medicine, and saw some queer fellows, I can tell you. There was one man who was just as sensible as you or I, only on one thing. He was mad

on cats.'

'Cats?' echoed the blacksmith.

'Cats, sir,' echoed, with a variation, the landlord.

'Cats,' continued Tuck. 'He was first noticed as having a great hatred of them—killed them in every way possible. He wasn't content with those that came on his own place, but he'd entice the neighbors' cats with bits of meat, and chop their heads off. At last, he got to be a nuisance. They brought him up before the magistrates at Bow street. He told 'em that it had been revealed to him that the devil was going about in the shape of a cat, and if he happened to hit the right one, there would be no devil any more—so he intended to keep 'em. So they began to see into his case, and the long and short of it was, they put him in the asylum.'

'Well, I don't know but I'm a little crazy that way myself,' replied Strang. 'I hate cats. But that's not pisenin' human bein's.'

'It's not the poisoning that makes me think him crazy. It's the absence of sufficient motive.'

'The motive's the devil—that's the motive,' said the blacksmith. 'Look here; there's Mr. Castonel has lost two of his wives. Sposen—I say sposen—he had pisened both of 'em.'

'Oh, that's not a supposable thing,' replied Tuck, rather shocked at the hypothetical case.

'I'd know,' said the other, 'stranger things than that have happened. But I say sposen he had. Now he didn't never live a cat an' dog life with 'em, that I ever heerd on—they was amazin' fond on him, every one says—an' he couldn't make nothink by it, for neither of 'em had any money. Now would you call him crazy, sposen he'd done it.'

'Well, I should, most certainly,' said Tuck.

'I'd do nothing of the kind,' retorted the blacksmith. 'I'd say he had the devil in him, an' nothink but the rope round his neck would fetch him out. That lawyer was no more crazy than you are. He got dwellin' on the idea of money till a sovereign was as big as a wagon wheel, an' ten of 'em seemed a fortune. That's the state of the case, Mr. Tuck, you may depend on it.'

'It may be,' admitted the assistant surgeon.

'Exactly, as you say, sir, it may be,' chorused the landlord, glad to find an approximation to one opinion in the minds of his guests.

'An' further more, likewise,' resumed the blacksmith, whose eloquence was aroused in a stream, and was carrying him along—'it's my opinion that half the deviltry an' wickedness of men an' women, that's in bedlams, is set down to madness, which it isn't. I had an uncle that got cracked in his upper story—so the doctors said—an' used to tear his clothes to pieces. I noticed one thing pretty plain—they was always his old clothes.'

'Did they ever give him any new ones?'

'Of course they didn't. What was the use, when they know'd he'd tear 'em up? New clothes!'

And the blacksmith fairly snorted at the preposterous supposition.

'But you had no mode of comparison, if you didn't give him the new clothes,' responded Tuck.

'Anan?' ejaculated Strang.

'I mean that he might have torn the new ones too, if he had them.'

'Oh! I know he wouldn't,' persisted the other.

Like the 'because' of a woman, or the hammer of an auctioneer, or a determination of the House of Commons to take the main question, this cut off all discussion. Could there be a stronger reason than the knowledge of a self-willed man? What was science, in the shape of Tuck—a small specimen, it must be granted—to do with such an obstacle?

Nevertheless, Tuck, though silenced, was not convinced.

As for the landlord, he was in some mental distress. After getting his guests to a state where he could agree with both, to find them now of diverse opinions was distressing. Like a good diplomatist, he changed the point of issue, by the introduction of a pot of stout apiece—a parting libation, so to speak, to the goddess of harmony.

'What a fool that Strang is,' said Tuck to himself on his way home. 'To even suppose that Mr. Castonel would poison anybody. But 'sposen,' as Strang says, he had then he would be mad, beyond doubt. But I can't conceive what put such an illustration into the man's head. Poison—pooh! pooh! I won't even think of it.'

But he did think of it, at times. The idea was so preposterous, that it would enter his mind, whether he would or not.