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CHAPTER X
Some children were playing at the doors of the cottages and on the green, and they stopped and stared at her, and one ran into a cottage and brought out its mother to stare also. The woman bobbed a courtesy, and Declina went up and spoke to her and patted the head of the child, who hid its face shyly in its mother's apron. She wanted to make friends with the people among whom she was going to live. Then she went into the shop. There were two steps down, and the smell of all the "smelly" things on this earth seemed to rise and embrace her. A stouthead, middle-aged woman came out from the parlor as the door-bell tinkled. She had a round, ruddy face with saucer eyes, and wore a sun-bonnet perched on the back of her head. She wiped her face on her apron as she waddled behind the counter, and stared at Declina with a curiosity which found vent in an eager—"Lor, now, you're the young lady what's come to The Woodblines, I'll be bound, miss?" "I am Mr. Deane's daughter; yes," said Declina. "And I'm glad to see you, miss," said Mrs. Topper, genially. "I should a-know you in the twinkling of an eye; you're so like your brother. Ah, what a handsome young gentleman he is! and nice, too, though he is so full of his fun. Calls me 'Mother Topper' as often as not; but, there! I don't mind that. And so you've come to live among us? Well, I hope you'll like it. There's worse places than Stretton Wold, and worse people, though I shouldn't say it, for I was born and bred here. And where did you come from, miss, if I may make so bold?" "From London," said Declina. "I want some bacon, and some sugar—" "To be sure!" said Mrs. Topper, cheerfully. "From London, Ah, I've never been to London. Stretton's where I was born, and Stretton's good enough for me." "And some tea," said Declina, suppressing a smile; "and—oh, a great many things; but here's a list I've written out."



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Mrs. Topper took it, but laid it on the counter without glancing at it. "And so you've come to keep house for your good father, miss? Ah, wonderfully clever man he be! A bit in the clouds, as they say; but what can you expect from a jennyass! Clever people ain't like ordinary folks. The list, miss? Oh, yes, I'll see as the things are sent up all right." "Thank you," said Declina. "And may I have the bill every week, please? I'm afraid it has not been sent regularly. Let me have an account-book every Saturday, and I will see that it is paid each Monday." Mrs. Topper smiled, indulgently. "Lor, miss what's the need?" she remarked. "The book will come in every half year or so, and it don't make no odds whether it's paid." "But I want—" "Don't you bother about that, miss," broke in Mrs. Topper, pleasantly. "It'd only worry you, and me too, for that matter, a-making up the account every week. You see, since my gal got married and left me, I've done all the bills myself, and I ain't much of a hand at figures." Declina sighed with a kind of comic despair. "Well, let us say every fortnight." "Ah, well," assented Mrs. Topper, but not very assuringly. "I'll do my best, miss, and no one can do more, can they?" Declina was obliged to admit this, and Mrs. Topper, leaning over the counter as comfortably as she could, ran on: "And I suppose you've heard the news, miss? All the place is in a state of excitement this morning. They was in here last night in perfect droves, so as I couldn't get to move about, and all with the same story. It did sound at first too good to be true, but Mrs. Murphy—she keeps the inn, you know, miss—ran in last thing last night to tell me as it was true, and that she'd had it from Mr. Bright himself; and all I can say is, that it's the best news we've had in Stretton Wold for many a year." "What is the news?" asked Declina, though she could guess. "Lor, now didn't I tell you?" said Mrs. Topper, smiling and tossing the sun-bonnet a little further on her head. "It's that his lordship's going to take up his residence at the Hall. Of course, you being a stranger—you won't mind me, miss?—it don't seem so important to you as it does to us as has lived here all our lives, and gets our living out of the place; but of course it makes all the difference to trade, having one of the gentry—and the only gentry, excepting yourselves at The Woodblines, of course, miss—a wanderin' about the face of the earth instead of settling down in his own house and among his own people. I can recollect when the Hall was as full as a hive with visitors, and us a-taking pounds and pounds a week for groceries—that was in the old lord's time—and it has seemed dreadful like to see the big house all empty, and not a pound of sugar or a loaf of bread a-goin' up to it from year's end to year's end." "I think I must go now, Mrs. Topper," said Declina. "Yes, miss; I'm a-dertain' of you! But, as I was saying, all that's come to a finish now; and we're going to begin fresh. Mrs. Murphy, she says that Mr. Bright was a-inquiring for maids—my gal's married, worse luck; or she'd be one—and men-servants; and I hear that Mr. Cobbet, the builder, is a-going up to the Hall to see about repairs and alterations." As Declina edged toward the door she thought of Bobby, and smiled. "—And there's to be three gardeners took on at once. Lor, it is a change, as you may say, miss, ain't it? It most takes my breath away; but I'm mortal glad, not only for the sake of trade, but for his lordship's own. Ah, miss, you've no idea of the stories as we've heard about him! Dreadful, poor gentleman! They do say as all London was a-ringing with his wildness. But, there! most of the nobility run wild some time or other, don't they? It's excusable, I suppose, and don't count against 'em, as it does against common folks." Declina got her hand upon the door, and Mrs. Topper sailed round the counter after her. "But that's all come to an end now; and I'm hoping, miss,—she panted breathlessly,—that his lordship will settle down like an ordinary Christian, not to say county gentleman. You haven't seen him, miss, I suppose? A fine figure of a man and a handsome—

like all the family. I can recollect him as a boy—such a fine, strong young fellow—if I may make so bold as to call him such—but dreful wild and reckless. Afraid of nothing, miss—nothing at all. I've seen him with these own eyes pop over that wall on his pony as if—'twere a kitchen fender. And fight! Why, he fought William Saunders' Tommy, as was drownin' a cat, until Tommy was like a jelly; and his lordship, though he'd got two black eyes, rode off whistling. Just like a Gaunt! It's in their blood, as you may say. And your father's well, miss, I hope and trust! There ain't no need to ask after Master Robert. It's a pleasure to see him a-going by with his handsome face and laughing eyes. He always calls out to me if he sees me at the door. 'Mother Topper' he calls me. But, Lor, I don't mind. And he's a-going to be a young officer, miss! Lor, what a fine figure of a soldier he'll make; and I hope I'll live to see him marchin' through the village with a band a-playin'!" As Declina, almost as breathless as Mrs. Topper, opened the door and fled, Mrs. Topper called after her: "You'll give my best respects to the good gentleman, your father, miss, and to Mr. Robert, and I'll send the things." Declina went down the street—if street it could be called—laughing, and almost ran into the arms of Mr. Bright, who was coming out of one of the cottages. There was a smile of satisfaction on his good-natured countenance, which deepened as his good-tempered eyes rested on the lovely face and slim figure in its plain morning-dress. "Oh, Miss Deane, good-morning! How do you do?" he said in cheery accents, and mopping his brow as he raised his hat. "I am very glad to see you. Hot, isn't it? But I've been rushing about—fearfully busy. Never had a more delightful morning's work, though, never! Are you going this way, and may I come with you for a minute or two? Thank you, thank you! The fact is, I wanted to tell you—some moment. Hi, Robins!" He called to a man who lumbered across the street to him. "Robins, come up to the Hall. I want you for some work at once. In half an hour, you understand; and bring two or three other men with you. Yes, I'm awfully busy," he went on to Declina. "Lord Gaunt's sudden return has brought a rush of work upon me—quite a rush. There's such a tremendous lot to do, and in such a short time. He talks of coming down at the end of the week, and not only talks of it, but means it. I'm to get as much of the Hall put straight in the time as I can, and the remainder afterwards. Been engaging servants all the morning, and wiring up to London for those I can't get here, and other things. The workmen will set to work to-day, or to-morrow at least. Lord Gaunt has given me carte blanche." He laughed with satisfaction, and mopped his forehead again. "It was, 'Do what you like, but don't bother me with more than you can help.' Just like him. A strange man you'll think him, Miss Deane, but with all his abruptness and eccentricity, one of the best-hearted men in the world." He sighed and was silent for a moment. "There's to be rather a large establishment. The horses are coming down at once. I'm sure I don't know how I shall get the stables ready. And, oh, Miss Deane—I—really—scarcely like to say it, for I'm afraid you'll think it presumptuous of his lordship—well, scarcely presumptuous, but— but strange."

"What is it, Mr. Bright?" asked Declina, smiling at his hesitation and nervousness. "Well," he said, still reluctantly, "the fact is, that whenever I consulted Lord Gaunt about the house—I mean the things he would like to have done—he said, 'Ask Miss Deane; she promised to help you; I didn't.'" Declina colored. "I'll Oh, but—" Mr. Bright put his hand upon her arm with timid earnestness. "I was afraid you would think it strange. But you wouldn't feel offended if you knew Lord Gaunt as well as I do. It's his way to take things seriously. And you promised, you know; you promised!" "Did I?" said Declina, with a faintly troubled look in her eyes. "Yes, indeed you did. And—and see here, my dear young lady," he went on, earnestly and yet deprecatingly. (To be continued.)

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