

"As you please, sir." In that case I'll go off at once and look about me for a room."

"Stay, Mr. Wincher," cried Lucius, as the old man shuffled off towards the door; "I should be sorry for you to leave this house penniless. Here are a couple of sovereigns, which will enable you to live for a week or so while you look for a new service."

"A new service, sir!" echoed Mr. Wincher bitterly. "Do you think that at my age situations are plentiful? No, sir, thank you; I couldn't take money from you, not if it was to save me from starvation. I shall seek no new service. Mr. Sivewright was never a very liberal paymaster, and since we came to this house he has given us no wages except a small allowance for our food. But our wants are few, and we contrived to save the best part of our wages while we were in Bond-street. No, sir, I am not afraid to face the world, hard as it is to the old. I shall get a few odd jobs to do among the poor folks, I daresay, even without a character, and I shall be able to rub along somehow."

Thus refusing Lucius's proffered aid, Mr. Wincher put on his hat and went out. Lucius went into the room which contained the chief part of Mr. Sivewright's collection, and waited there with the door open until Mr. Wincher's good lady should make her appearance, ready for departure.

He looked round at the chaotic mass of property wonderingly. How much had been plundered? The shabby old glass cases of china seemed full enough, yet who could tell how they had been thinned by the dexterous hand of one who knew the exact value of each separate object? It seemed hard that the fruit of Homer Sivewright's toil should have been thus lessened; it seemed strange that he, who was a professed cynic, should have so entirely trusted his old servant, only to be victimised by him at last.

Mrs. Wincher made her appearance, after an interval of about half an hour, laden with three bundles of various shapes and sizes, but all of the simplest description, two bandboxes, an ancient and dilapidated umbrella, a small collection of hard ware in a hamper without a lid, a faded Paisley shawl across her arm, a bottle-green cloth cloak of antediluvian shape and style, and sundry small ornaments in the way of pendants, a brown-crockery tea-pot, a pasteboard, and a pepperbox.

"They're our few little comforts, sir," she said apologetically, as divers of these minor objects slid from her grasp and rolled upon the stone floor of the hall. "I suppose if we was sent to Newgate as prisoners we shouldn't be allowed to have 'em; but as there's no crime brought against us yet—with profound irony—"I've took the liberty to bring 'em. Perhaps you'd like to look through my bundles, Dr. Davory, to make sure as there's none of the brickbat hidden amongst my good gentleman's wardrobe."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Wincher. I won't trouble you to open your bundles," answered Lucius, whose keen eye had taken note of the manner of goods contained in those flabby envelopes.

Thus absolved from the necessity of exhibiting these treasures, Mrs. Wincher built them up in a neat pyramid by the side of the hall-door, with infinite pains, as if the monument were intended to be permanent, and then seated herself meekly on the lowest step of the staircase.

"I suppose as there's no objections to my resting my pore feet a bit, Dr. Davory," she said plaintively, "though me and my good gentleman is dismissed."

"You are quite at liberty to rest yourself, Mrs. Wincher," replied Lucius. "But I don't mean to take my eye off you till you're out of this house," he added mentally.

He paced the hall and the room adjoining till the bell at the outer gate announced Mr. Wincher's return. Mrs. Wincher went to admit her lord and master, who presently appeared with a small truck or hand-barrow, in which, aided by his wife, he deposited the pyramid of goods and chattels, which process involved a good deal more careful fitting-in of curiously-shaped objects into odd corners. Everything, however, having been finally adjusted to the satisfaction of both parties, Mr. Wincher reentered the house for the last time, while Mrs. Wincher waited on the steps, and delivered the keys to Lucius. Every key was neatly labelled with a slip of parchment, whereon was inscribed its number in Homer Sivewright's crabbed penmanship.

"Those are all the keys, sir, just as my master gave them to me when we first came here," said Mr. Wincher. "I've got a bit of a lodging. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to take down the address, as I should be glad to learn if ever you find out the real party that took the silver out of the chest, and likewise tampered with the medicine."

"If ever I find any evidence of your innocence you shall hear of it, Mr. Wincher," answered Lucius gravely. "What is the address?"

"Mrs. Hickett's, Crown- and -Anchor-alley, Bridge-street, sir; not a quarter of an hour's walk from here."

Lucius wrote the address in his pocket-book without another word.

This last duty performed the Winchers departed, and Lucius felt that he had taken the one step most likely to insure the safety of his patient.

"If not they, who else?" he said to himself, thinking of the arsenic in the medicine bottle.

He went once more to Lucille's room but hardly crossed the threshold. The sick girl was sleeping, and the nurse gave a very fair account

of her. He told Mrs. Milderson her duties—how she was to attend to Mr. Sivewright as well as to his grand-daughter, and told her farther, more how he had just dismissed the old servants.

"I am going in search of some one to take their place," he said, having made up his mind upon that head some time ago.

He went round the lower part of the house, tried all the keys, saw that all the doors were secured—those opening on the garden bolted and barred as firmly as if they had belonged to a besieged citadel. He looked through all the labels, but found no key to the staircase door up-stairs; a circumstance that annoyed him, as he had a particular desire to examine those rooms on the top story. Then, having made all safe, he went out, locking the hall-door and the iron gate after him, and proceeded straightway to Mr. Otranto's office.

Here he told that functionary exactly what he had done. Mr. Otranto chewed the end of his pen, and smiled upon his client, with the calm smile of intellectual superiority.

"Now, I daresay you think you've been and gone and done a very clever thing," he said, when Lucius had unbosomed himself; "but I can just tell you you're on the wrong tack—a good hundred knots out of your course. That old party isn't in the robbery; and as to the pison, it's not for me to argue with a professional gent like you; no sorter should alter his crepidam, as we say in the Classics; but I wouldn't mind laying even money that the pison is only your fancy. You've been worrying yourself about this blessed business till you've got nervous, so you goes and sniffs at the physis, and jumps at the conclusion that it's pisoned."

"I have not jumped at any conclusion," replied Lucius. "My opinion is supported by an infallible test."

He told Mr. Otranto that he wanted to find a thoroughly honest man and woman, who would take the place of the Winchers at Cedar House—a man who would act as night watchman, and a woman who would perform such trifling domestic duties as were needed. Mr. Otranto, who had minions of all kinds at his beck and call, did know of just such a couple—an ex-policeman, who had left the force on account of an accident that had lamed him, and a tidy body, ex-policeman's wife. If Mr. Davoren wished, they should be at Cedar House in two hours' time.

"Let them meet me at the gate at three o'clock," said Lucius. "I must go round among my patients in the mean while."

His day's work still waited to be done, and it was long past twelve—dinner-time in the Shad-rack district. He had to endure reproachful looks from some of his patients, but bore all with perfect good-temper, and did his very best for all. Happily the people believed in him, and were grateful for all the good he had done among them.

At three o'clock he was at the iron gate, where he found Mr. Magsby, the ex-policeman, and his wife—a comfortable-looking young woman with a bundle and a baby, for which latter circumstance Lucius had not bargained, and for which Mrs. Magsby duly apologised.

"Which Mr. Otranto may not have told you, sir, as I couldn't leave the baby behind, but she's as good a little dear as ever drew breath, and never cries, and in a large house will be no ill-convenience."

"Perhaps not, if she never cries," said Lucius, "but if she does cry, you must smother her, rather than let her voice be heard up-stairs." And then he touched the small cheek kindly with his finger, and smiled upon the little one, after a fashion which at once won Mrs. Magsby's heart.

Mr. Magsby's lameness was little more than a halt in his walk, and, although sufficient to disable him as a public servant, was no hindrance to him as a night-watchman. Altogether Lucius decided that the Magsbys would do. He inducted them in the gloomy old kitchen and the room with the presses, where Mr. and Mrs. Wincher's turn-up bedstead yawned disconsolate and empty, and where there were such bits of humble furniture as would suffice for the absolute needs of life.

Mrs. Magsby pronounced the apartments roomy and commodious, but somewhat wanting in cheerfulness. "But me and Magsby have took care of all manner of houses," she added with resignation, "and we can make ourselves comfortable almost anywhere, provided we've a bit of 'firing to bile the kettle for our cup o' tea and a mouthful of victuals."

Lucius showed Mr. Magsby the premises—the door opening upon the hidden staircase, all the ins and outs of the place, and told him what was expected of him.

After this induction of the Magsbys, he went up-stairs and saw Lucille. She was awake, but her mind still wandered. She looked at him with a far-off unrecognising gaze that went to his heart, and murmured some broken sentence in which the name of "father" was the only word he could distinctly hear.

"Pray to our Father in heaven, dearest," said Lucius, tenderly supporting the weary head, which moved so restlessly upon the pillow. He is the only Father who never wrongs His children; in whose love and wisdom we can believe, come weal, come woe."

He stayed by the bedside a little while, gave his instructions to Mrs. Milderson, and then went to the other sick-room.

Here he found Mr. Sivewright, fretful and impatient, but decidedly improved since the suspension of the medicine; a fact which that gentleman dwelt upon in a somewhat cynical spirit.

"You may remember that at the beginning of our acquaintance I professed myself a sceptic with regard to medical science," he said with his harsh laugh, "and I cannot say that my experience even of your skill has been calculated to conquer my prejudices. You are a very good fellow, Lucius, but the only effect of your medicines for the last month or so has been to make me feel nearer death than ever I felt before. I seem to be twice the man I was since I left off that confounded tonic of yours."

"I am very glad to hear it—not glad that the tonic has failed, but that you are better. Try to believe in me a little, however, in spite of this, and take the medicine which I will bring you this evening with my own hands."

The patient gave a faint groan.

"Your medicines make me ill," he said; "I'll take no more of them."

"So be it," answered Lucius. "I told you from the first that in your case I depended upon repose and good diet more than upon drugs. We will see what nature unassisted will do."

"Have you sent away those thieves?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Wincher? Yes, they are gone."

"So ends three-and-twenty years' service! And I thought them faithful!" said Mr. Sivewright with a sigh. "And by what models of honesty have you replaced these traitors?"

Lucius explained his arrangements, to which Mr. Sivewright gave but doubtful approval.

He inquired anxiously about Lucille, and seemed grieved to find that she was too ill to come to him as usual.

"Though for these many years past I have doubted the existence of any relationship between us, she has made herself dear to me somehow, in spite of myself. God knows I have tried to shut my heart against her. When my son abandoned me, I swore never to care for any living creature—never again to subject myself to the anguish that an ingrate can inflict."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### HOW GEOFFREY ENJOYED THE GARDEN PARTY.

WHILE Lucius Davoren was thus occupied at the east end of London, Geoffrey Hossack was making the best of an existence which he had made up his mind to consider utterly joyless, so long as adverse fate denied him the one desire of his heart. For him in vain warm August skies were deeply blue, and the bosky dells and glades of the New Forest still untouched by autumn's splendid decay. For him vainly ran the bright river between banks perfumed with wild flowers. He beheld these things from the lofty standpoint of discontent, and in his heart called Nature a poor creature.

"I would rather be mewed up in Whitecross-street prison, or in the Venetian Piombi, with Janet for my wife, than enjoy all that earth can give of natural beauty or artificial splendor without her," he said to himself, when his cousins had bored him into a misanthropical mood by their insistence upon the charms of rural life, as exemplified at Hillersdon Grange.

"I'm afraid you have no soul for nature," said Belle, when she had kept Geoffrey on his feet for an hour in the cramped old-fashioned hot-houses, where she went in desperately for fern and orchids, and imitated Lady Baker on a small scale.

"I'm afraid not—for nature in flower-pots," answered Geoffrey, with an unsympathetic yawn. "I daresay these Calopogons, and Gymnadenia, and what's-its-names are very grand, but I've seen finer growing wild in the valleys on the southern side of the Rocky Mountains. You English people only get nature in miniature—a poor etiolated creature. You have no notion of the goddess Gea in her Titanic vigour, as she appears on 'the other side.'"

"Meaning America?" said Belle contemptuously, as if that western continent were something too vulgar for her serious consideration.

The sun shone upon lady Baker's life as gaily as if fine weather had been a matter as much within her ladyship's power of provision as the luncheon from Gunter's, or the costumes for the tableaux vivants. The lady herself was radiant as the sunlight. Everybody had come—everybody worth receiving, at any rate. She gave Geoffrey a smile of particular cordiality as she shook hands with him, and murmured the conventional "How good of you to come early!"

Belle and Dessie were speedily told off for croquet: a sport for which Geoffrey professed an unmitigated dislike, in a most churlish spirit his cousins thought. Thus released from attendance on these fair ones, he roamed the vast gardens at large, finding solitudes in that spacious domain, even on such a day as this. In these secluded walks—where he only occasionally encountered a stray couple engaged in that sentimental converse which he slangily denominated "spoonying"—Mr. Hossack indulged his own thoughts, which also were of a spooney character. Here, he thought, Janet Davoren had been happy in the brief summer-tide of her life; here she had felt the first joys and pains of an innocent girlish love, and here, alas, had given that peerless blossom of the soul, a girl's first love, to a scoundrel. The thought of this filled him with a savage jealousy.

"I wish I had fired that shot out yonder instead of Lucius," he said to himself. "Egad, I'd have made sure my ball went through him. There should have been no shilly-shally about my fire."

Luncheon found Mr. Hossack more attentive to the various Rhine wines than to *pâté de foie*

*gras* or chicken-salad, or even the wants of the damsel who sat next him. He was out of humor with all the world. His artfully-worded advertisement had appeared several times, and had produced no response. He began to think the Fates were opposed to his happiness.

"I suppose if a man is pretty well provided for in the way of three-per-cent he must hope for nothing else from Fortune," he thought, as he punished her ladyship's cabinet hooks.

Luncheon over, Mr. Hossack conducted his damsel to the sunny greensward, where enthusiastic archers—seven-and-twenty ladies to five gentlemen—were stringing their Cupid bows for a grand match. Here he shunted her into the care of one of the five male archers, all of whom looked ineffably bored, and anon departed whither he cared not—anywhere, anywhere out of this world of luncheons, croquet, flirtation, and frivolity.

Wandering at random, he came by and by to an obscure outskirts of the Mardenholme grounds, given over to the cultivation of huge rhododendrons, where there was a little wicket-gate opening into a green lane. He made his escape from Mardenholme altogether by this gate, glad to get away from the polite world, as represented by the croquet-players and toxophilites, and above all by those exacting first cousins of his, Belle and Dessie.

The green lane was rustic and secluded, well sheltered from the westward sloping sun by spreading boughs of chestnut and sycamore, with here and there the grander bulk of an oak making an oasis of deep shadow in the afternoon sunlight. Altogether a pleasant lane, even for the indulgence of saddest thoughts.

It was on the side of a hill. Right and left of him stretched undulating meadow-land, small enclosures between those straggling unkempt hedges which make the glory of English landscape, and below, almost at his feet as it were, lay a little village nestling in a cup-shaped valley, so snugly sheltered by those gently-sloping meads, so fenced from north and east by those tall screens of foliage, that one might fancy the bleak winds of winter must roll high above those modest roofs, ruffling no leaf in those simple gardens; that hails and snows and frosts must waste their fury on the encircling hills, and leave this chosen nook unassailed; that even the tax-gatherer must forget its existence.

There were about half a dozen cottages, the perfection of rusticity—gardens running over with roses, beehives, honeysuckle; a village inn, so innocent and domestic of aspect that one would suppose nothing could be farther from the thoughts of its patrons than strong drink of any kind; a little high-shouldered old church, with a squat square tower and crumbly white-washed wall; a green burial-ground, that went up and down like the waves of the sea, overshadowed by two vast yews, whose never-withering foliage canopied those rustic graves from January to December.

There was a little patch of greensward in the midst of the houses, and some feet below the churchyard, no two edifices in this village being on the same level. Here a meditative donkey cropped the soft herbage at leisure, and here on the bosom of a crystalline pool swam half a dozen geese, untroubled by forebodings of Michaelmas.

It was altogether a deliciously rustic picture, and Geoffrey, for the first time since his return to Hampshire, felt reconciled to Nature.

"This is better than all the tattered orchids in Lady Baker's collection," he mused, as he perched himself on a stile and took out his cigar-case for a quiet smoke. "Why do great ladies cultivate lady's slippers and pitcher-plants when for less money they might surround themselves with model villages and happy peasantry? Has the rôle of Lady Bountiful gone quite out of fashion, I wonder?"

He lighted his cigar and meditated upon life in general, dreamily contemplating the cottages and wondering about their inmates, as he had often wondered about the inhabitants of the dull old houses in the dull old country towns. These cottages seemed above the ordinary level, cleaner, brighter, more prosperous-looking. He could not fancy wife-beating or any other iniquity going on within those homely plastered walls. Those twinkling diamond-paned lattices seemed transparent as a good man's conscience, and in most of these dwellings the outer door stood wide open, as if the inmates invited inspection. He could see an eight-day clock, a dresser decked out with many-coloured crockery ware, a little round table spread for tea, a cradle, a snug arm-chair, a wicker birdcage, a row of geranium pots—all the furniture of home. He felt that he had alighted upon a small Arcadia.

While he sat thus musing, slowly smoking, very loth to go back to the civilised world, pert country cousins, and tableaux vivants, and tepid ices, and classical music, and general inanity, the door of that solitary cottage whose interior did not invite inspection was suddenly opened, and a child came skipping out—a child who wore a broad-brimmed Leghorn hat, with long yellow tresses streaming beneath it, and a pretty holland pinafore, and displayed symmetrical legs clad in blue stockings—a child after the order of Mr. Millais.

Geoffrey made as if he would have fallen off the stile; the half-smoked cigar fell from his hand. For a few moments he sat transfixed and statue-like, and could only stare. Then, with a sudden rush, he darted across the little strip of green, and clasped this butterfly child in his arms.

"Why, it's my little Flossie!" he cried rapturously, smothering the small face with kisses,