

Ralph was free of his hateful business ; the King would not employ him again ; he would live at home now, and rule Overfield well : he and his father together. Ah ! and what if Beatrice consented to rule it with him ! Surely now—— He turned and looked at his father as he thought of it, and their eyes met.

Chris leaned a little closer.

"Beatrice !" he said. "What if she—— ?"

The old man nodded tenderly, and his drawn eyes shone in his face.

"Oh ! Chris—I was thinking that——"

Then Nicholas came out of his maze.

Ever since his entrance into the palace, except when he had flared out at the King, he had moved and stood and sat in a solemn bewilderment. The effect of the changed atmosphere had been to paralyse his simple and sturdy faculties ; and his face had grown unintelligent during the process. More than once Chris had been seized with internal laughter, in spite of the tragedy ; the rustic squire was so strangely incongruous with the situation. But he awoke now.

"God bless me !" he said wonderingly. "It is all over and done. God——"

Chris gave a short yelp of laughter.

"Dear Nick," he said, "yes. God bless you indeed ! You spoke up well !"

"Did I do right, sir," said the other to Sir James, "I could not help it. I——"

"Oh ! Nick," said the old man, and leaned forward and put his hand on his knee.

Nicholas preened himself as he sat there ; he would tell Mary how he had bearded his Majesty, and what a diplomatist was her husband.