

with her? Is she generally knocked over in that uncomfortable manner by the sight of a stranger? And she is on her way back to the highly respectable lunatic asylum whence she escaped?

'Miss Mimi, are you sure? Do you mean to say you never saw her before?'

'Never, to the best of my belief. Why? Does she seem to say that she knows me?'

Jemima Ann is silent. There is a mystery here, and she feels that discretion may be judicious.

'Who is the venerable party anyhow? She is a nice kindly-looking body, too, the sort of motherly soul one would like for a nurse or that.'

'She is Mrs. Tinker—Mrs. Susan Tinker.'

'Susan Tinker. Euphonious cognomen!' laughed Mimi. 'What else is she, oh, reticent Jemima Ann!'

'Well, she is housekeeper to Madame Valentine. She has been her housekeeper for more than twenty years.'

Jemima is just about lifting the tray to go, but Mlle. Mimi springs erect so suddenly, utters an exclamation so sharply that she drops her load.

'Land above!' she exclaims in terror, 'what is the matter with you?'

'Who did you say?' Mimi cries out breathlessly; 'housekeeper for whom?'

'Madame Valentine—old Madame Valentine of the cottage. So then you do know something of the secret after all?'

Mlle. Mimi is standing up. A flush sweeps over the pearly fairness of her face then it fades and leaves her very pale. She turns abruptly away, walks to a window, and stands with her back to the curious Jemima Ann. She stands for fully five minutes staring out; but she sees nothing of the dull darkening street, the leaden October sky, the few passers-by, the ugly shops over the way. The blue eyes gleaming with a light not good to see.

'Don't go,' she says at last, turning round as she sees Jemima Ann gathering up the tray. 'I want to ask you a question. Who is Madame Valentine?'

'Who is she? Why she is Madame Valentine, though why madame any more than other folks I don't know, except that she is very rich—immensely rich and aristocratic. Oh, my goodness!' says Jemima Ann, despairing of conveying any idea of the pinnacle of patrician loftiness and wealth which Madame Valentine has attained.

'Rich and aristocratic! What in the world then,' asks Mimi, with a gesture of infinite contempt out of the window, 'does she do here?'

'It ain't such a bad place, Claugville ain't,' retorts Jemima, rather hurt; 'but she don't live here. Sue don't live no. here, Mrs. Tinker says, for good; she just goes about. She has houses and places everywhere, in cities and in the country. She came here three or four years ago, and took a fancy to a place out of town, and thought the air agreed with her. So she bought the cottage, and comes for a month or two every fall stuce. And her nephew likes it for the shooting—partridges and that. She is going away next week, and won't come again till next September.'

'Her nephew?' Mimi repeats quickly. 'Who is her nephew?'

'Mr. Vane Valentine, a young English gentleman, and her heir. You oughter see him a ridin' through the town, mounted on a big black horse, as tall and straight as anything, and looking as if everybody he met was dirt under his feet!' cries Jemima Ann, in a burst of enthusiastic admiration.

Indeed! Mr. Vane Valentine puts on heirs, does he? So he is the heir! I knew there was a British cousin, and an heir to the title. Do you know that high-stepping young gentleman will be a baronet one day, Jemima Ann?

'Yes,' says Jemima Ann; 'Mrs. Tinker told me. But how do you come to know? You ain't acquainted with him, are you?'

'I have not that pleasure—at present, I may have, possibly, before long. No—don't ask questions; all you have to do is to answer them. There are only the old lady and this patrician nephew.'

'That's all. Mr. Valentine is dead.'

'Yes. But used there not to be some one else—a son?'

Jemima Ann looks at her with ever-growing curiosity. But her back is to the waning light, and there is nothing to be seen.

'It's odd,' she says, 'that you should know about that; not many people do. Even Mrs. Tinker hates to talk of it. But, yes—there was a son.'

'What became of him?'

'Well, he went wild, and ran away, and made a low marriage, and was cut off, and drowned. I don't know nothin' more—I don't, indeed. I only found that out by chance. And now I must go,' says, nervously, Jemima Ann, 'for it is nearly six, and aunt will be back, and the hands' supper is to get.'

Mimi makes no effort to detain her; but when she is alone she stands for a very long time quite still, the dark look deepening and ever deepening in her face. She hears the house door open, and the shrill, vinegar voice of Mrs. Hopkins—hears the sweet,