

to forget his troubles, and snatching hold of her he covered her with kisses.

'Oh, Maurice,' she whispered, as he drew her into the little orchard, where they could see all round, 'what has thee done? Where's Leverton? 'Dost ask first for him, lass?' he answered, sadly. 'He's all right, for aught I know.'

'Dear, thee should remember neighbours say 'hou hadst killed he or he thee, or both yon stranger.'

'Nay, I know naught o' any stranger, nor o' Leverton either. He's a-hiding watching for me, I'll be bound; he've agot what'll send me to prison any day. I were a-coming home 'cross the beech grove, just awhistlin' and thinkin' o' thee, when I cum across a snare and a hare in it. I never laid it, Rachel. I'd sworn for thy sake to give up poaching, but flesh and blood cannot stand a hare in one's path, and a' took it out; when out lept Leverton and dree more. He couldn't beat me turning,' he said, with a bit of his old smile; 'but, there he has his proof. I'd go to prison an it would win thee, but thy grandfather would allus be acasting it up to me; and I'm acum to tell thee thou'rt free,' and he shook with his own deep sob. 'Thou must na think o' one as will not know where to lay his head.'

'Nay,' said Rachel, very quietly and steadily, 'I'm troth-plighted to thee, Maurice. I feel all one as if we were married! Sumnerhurst Church, I'll not leave loving thee nor forsake thought of thee till death do us part. If thou'rt courage to wait, come and seek when the storms be over-past, and thou'lt find me the same.'

He took her in his arms again. 'Thou'rt, true and holy, like the angel in the church, Rachel, and I'm na worthy o' thee. God bless thee and reward thee.'

As they stood under the fruit trees the white petals showered on them like snow in the light breeze; their hopes seemed falling as fast under the moonlight, which looked tranquilly down on their sorrow. 'Art thou safe here?' said Rachel, at length. 'No; I mun be gone,' he answered, peering anxiously round. 'Leverton will leave no stun unturned to catch me, and he'll seek me sooner here nor anywhere. God bless thee, darling, true heart and brave,' and he disappeared in the shadow of the great trees.

A woman's share in such partings is much the hardest; a man has to do battle with life, and cannot brood over his sorrows, while with her 'it walks up and down with her, sits with her, lies in her bed, and talks with her.' As she crept upstairs she felt stunned. Her life had made a plunge, indeed; she felt ten years older than four short days ago. Leverton had altogether vanished. The nine days' wonder of the murder and the disappearance of the two young men died away; the rather stolid life of No Man's Land did not trouble itself about anything for very long, and except to his father and Rachel, poor Maurice was as if he had never been. The days went on long and drearily to her. No one can conceive the utter solitude of an outlying cottage in so thinly peopled a district, and 'if it had not been for the little white hen,' Rachel thought sometimes she should have gone out of her mind.

Maurice gave no sign; he could neither read nor write. The posts were slow and uncertain in those days, and rarely used. Rachel herself could not write, and only 'read in Bible and Prayer Book.' Any one who has had much intercourse with the poor knows how, in almost every family, there has been a lost one, never heard of since his departure into the wide world, and expected vainly and patiently, sometimes 'a matter o' fifty year.'

At the end of about three years there was a dull booming of cannon heard from Hurst Castle, Portsmouth, wherever, in short, there were forts in reach, and a vehement ringing of bells at church, where they heard there had been 'a famous victory'; and later more guns and more ringing for the peace after it. Also, six weeks after, the only result of it that seemed much to concern No Man's Land, viz. Leverton's appearance. He had been seized by a press-gang, he said, and sent off immediately to a distant station, and only released when both ships and men were disbanded.

A few days after, he appeared at the clerk's. Unwelcome as he was to Rachel, she could not refuse a greeting and congratulation in such circumstances, particularly as he looked ill and worn and depressed. He seemed to have some incomprehensible pleasure in coming, for he would sit an hour or two at a time, without speaking, in the chimney corner, smoking with old Silas. Rachel at first used always to leave the room, but as he neither spoke to her nor looked at her, and hardly seemed conscious of her presence, she soon went on with her ironing or her cooking as if he were not there. She had some sort of soothing influence over him, however, though she did not know it; if she stayed long away he grew restless and uneasy. He said he was too ill to take to keeping again, even if there had been a place vacant. Altogether it was hardly possible to recognise the high-spirited over-bearing Ralph in the silent, almost sullen, depressed man. Rachel was surprised that people did not remark it, but he exerted himself more in public, and emotions are not delicately noted in village life.

As for the murder, 'it were a long time ago; it warn't their business. The man were none of theirs, and Ralph was; and most like he knew naught about it. He had brought his ship papers all right home with him, which everybody might see,' and so the matter dropped.

And soon a rumour arose that Maurice was dead, no one could say how or when, but Rachel utterly refused to believe it. Leverton went on coming, and the old man consulted him about everything; he seemed to grow more cheerful as Rachel grew more dispirited. At last, after some weeks, she was struggling on a windy day with some drying clothes, when he came out and helped her.

'Ye work too hard, Rachel; I wish ye'd let me help ye. I wish ye'd let me help ye through life; the thought o' ye has been wi'me all these weary days. Why won't ye hearken what I hae to say?'

'Oh, Leverton,' she answered, wrenching her hands away from him, 'how can ye? I feel as good as married to Maurice, and I'll never forsake him.' 'But if he's dead?' said Leverton, sadly. 'He ben't dead; I dunna believe it. I shall ha' him back again. I wanna b'lieve it.'

Leverton set his teeth and went back into the house without a word. Still he came as before; the old man, apparently out of sheer contradiction, seemed as if he could not do without him, and Leverton took it all in good part.

He made no way with Rachel, but she grew used to seeing him there, and buried in her own thoughts, hardly seemed aware when he was by. He went on with a patience and perseverance which in a better cause would have been beyond praise, to save her and help her with her grandfather, to ward off trouble and anxiety; and she could not but be grateful to him when he turned off a scolding from the fierce and sullen old man, and advised him always, as Rachel saw, wisely and well.

To be continued.

WHY DON'T HE MARRY?

WELL, as far as that goes, reasons are always plentiful. To a young man of fortune, a marriage is an "occasion" and a family event, and the family machinery to be set in motion somewhat cumbersome. Perhaps it's too much trouble. Most people with incomes ranging between £300 and £800 "haven't got the means." Young people with smaller incomes have "plenty of means," but can't always find a partner to their taste—or what not. How do I know why everybody don't marry? I think they do as much as in them lies, and so does the Registrar-General. I can at least tell you why Mobbs don't—and if that will enlighten you at all on the subject I shall be pleased. Gentle reader, allow me to harrow your feelings with a tale of horror which shall make your blood run cold.

William Pike was a great chum of Mobbs's, and William Pike was going to be married. He had sent Mobbs a neat little note conveying the intelligence that he was about to take as his wife

Miss Mary Tiggs, daughter of Mr. Felix Tiggs, grocer and provision dealer, and requesting him to act as his "best man" on the occasion.

Mobbs had replied, "he should be most happy," and immediately became so abjectly miserable and nervous that it was evident to his landlady that he had something on his mind.

Now—Mobbs was a bachelor, and everybody said a confirmed one—so there is no doubt about it. He was very particular in arranging beforehand the little speech he intended to make on the occasion of the wedding breakfast. He made several inquiries respecting his friend's chosen bride, but could ascertain nothing further than that she was believed to be the only daughter of Mr. Felix Tiggs, grocer and provision dealer.

Well, the day came at last, and Mr. Mobbs did act as Mr. Pike's best man. He accomplished this feat principally by treading on the bridesmaids' dresses, and then getting very red in the face and apologising for it. Then he got into the carriage with the bride by mistake, and in getting out again, also very red, he undid his neck-tie which had taken him three-quarters of an hour that morning in arranging to his taste, and Pike always said Mobbs was an oracle in neck-ties. Altogether Mobbs got so confused and so red, and so in everybody's way, that he wished himself at Jerusalem instead of attending at the marriage of Mr. Pike and Miss Tiggs at St. John's Church, Kingsland, London.

Then there was the wedding breakfast.

"I'll take a little chicken, Mr. Mobbs, if you please," said the bride, and if you believe me that gentleman handed her cold tongue.

Mary Tiggs was really a pretty girl—she had beautiful brown hair, with streaks of gold in it as the sun shone upon her head—soft, sweet eyes, and such a mouth, it was a wonder that everybody didn't stop in the street and snatch a kiss at the price of forty shillings a piece!

Mobbs punched Mr. Pike in the ribs and whispered—"Well, my boy, I respect your choice—she's a stunner!"—which delicate compliment the bridegroom acknowledged in a befitting manner.

The usual toast of "bride and bridegroom's health" being the next business, Mr. Mobbs prepared himself for the ordeal with several glasses of wine, and rose to make his little speech.

When he got on his legs and found everybody looking at him, he became of a vivid beet-root colour. All the rest of his blood that couldn't fly up into his face seemed to him to rush down into his boots. His beautifully worded address he forgot altogether, and when, after some moments employed gazing at nothing, with a sickly smile, having found his voice, he could only jerk out a few sentences as follows:—

"Present occasion—m'sure—most happy my life—really didn't know—ever had more pleasure—friend Mr. Pike—the bride—I mean the bridegroom—that is the newly wedded pair—may torch of Hymen—not to be put out—I mean extinguished—that is not extinguished—all their lives—health, wealth, and happiness—proudest day of my life—m'sure—pose the health Mr. and Mrs. Pike."

Rapturous applause, of course.

The bridegroom rose to return thanks to Mr. Mobbs and the company, and in the course of his speech made use of this remarkable expression in reference to his friend—"Mobbs, why don't you marry?"

Now Mobbs was very wily. Having previously ascertained that Miss Mary Tiggs was an only daughter, he thought of a capital mode of reply, by which he could at the same time answer Mr. Pike's question without embarrassment and compliment Mr. Pike's wife. He, therefore, rose and said, "Really Bill—I mean Mr. Pike—never in my life—a girl suited me—hope I ain't rude—half as much—as Mrs. Pike—joy of her—ole feller—if she only had a sister, now—marry her to-morrow—blow'd if I would'n't."

Much tittering among the bridesmaids, who all discovered that their noses wanted blowing at once, and accordingly buried their faces in pocket-handkerchiefs made with a little bit of cambric and a great bit of lace.

Mr. Tiggs felt called upon at once to rise in a paternal manner. He begged to state that he