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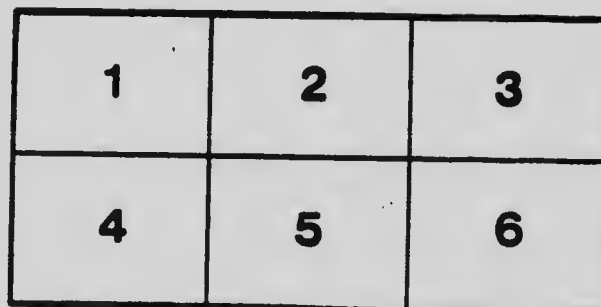
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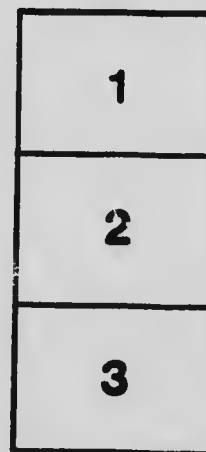
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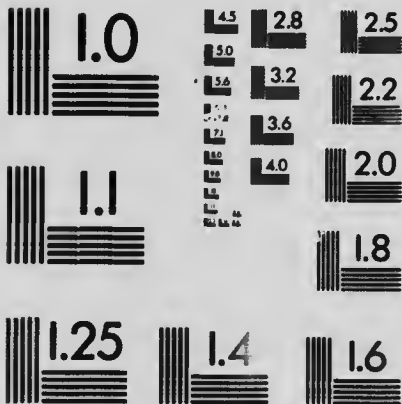
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"TURNING HE SAW A LITTLE WIZENED OLD MAN."

THE WILDERNESS

BY
JOSEPH HOCKING

AUTHOR OF
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WHEN HE SAW A LITTLE OLD MAN

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CHAPTER I

A CHANCE MEETING

"It's a terrible night."

"Yes, when God A'mighty sends rain in this country, He sends it in bucketfuls, in sheets, in deluges. It doan't seem natural somehow."

"We've wanted it long enough, and the farmers up at Whistlers Hollow have had special prayer meetin's at the Methody Chapel. I hear as 'ow Peter Boundy 'ave turned religious."

"Prayin' for rain, 'ave they?"

"Well, their prayers 'ave been answered; but, personally, I believe in lettin' the A'mighty 'tend to His own bisness in His own way. Do you hear it now? If it keeps on like this we shall be drowned by the mornin'."

"No, the ground's too high. But we may as well go to bed. Nobody'll come to-night."

"Come!—not unless they come in a boat. Good Lor', look at it! It's fair blindin', and it's colder, too." The man shivered as he spoke.

The woman to whom he had spoken went to the door of the little inn, and stood a few minutes watching the downpour of rain, and listening to the wind which howled among the trees.

No other house was near, for the inn stood at a

cross-roads in a thinly populated district in South Australia. There was a farmstead a mile north of the inn and another half a mile east. The occupants of these were the nearest neighbours of the man and the woman who kept the inn at the cross-roads. There was a village some four miles away, and a little town in an opposite direction six miles distant, and the inn-keeper and his wife made a living out of passing farmers and the occasional travellers who found it necessary to traverse the roads on which the house stood. They also had a small tract of land of their own, but their main source of income was the wayside tavern.

For weeks there had been a great drought. Day after day the sky had looked as hard as brass, and the heat had been terrific. Vainly the farmers had looked for a sign of rain, and as night after night the sun had set in a "hard and copper sky," they had begun to fear that their hopes of a good harvest would end in mockery. Besides, their live stock suffered terribly, and as one by one the springs dried up, many saw blank ruin staring them in the face. That was why more than one had begun to think that the lack of rain was God's judgment on them for their sins, and why they had turned to God, even as the people of Israel turned to Him in far past days.

"No," said the woman presently, "no one will come to-night. It'll be dark in a few minutes, and if any one had intended to come on here, they'd stop at Nova. There, listen to that!"

A great clap of thunder made the house shake as she spoke, causing the woman to come in quickly.

"Yes, the Lord is answering their prayers," said the woman.

"I hope they'll be satisfied," said the man. "As for me, I believe in letting the Almighty tend to His

own business. There, you may as well shut the door, and we can go to bed."

Scarcely had he spoken, however, than both heard a voice outside.

"Holloa, there! Can some one take my horse? I'm nearly done for."

The man went to the door, and saw a horse and rider.

"Help me off, will you? By heaven, this will do for me!"

"The stable door is right before you," said the man. "It's not worth my while being drenched," he added to himself.

With difficulty the rider dismounted. Evidently he was very weak. He staggered, when his feet touched the ground, and he had to cling to the horse for support.

There was a door uniting the stable to the kitchen of the inn, and the innkeeper went into the stable and opened the door.

"Here you are," he said to the traveller, "bring the nag here."

The man led the horse into the stable, and then, when they were out of the rain, cried out, "Bring me a drop of brandy, quick! I'm done for! Quick!—can't you see?"

It was evident that the traveller spoke the truth. He had gasped the words, and no sooner had he spoken them than he fell into a violent fit of coughing, which almost convulsed him.

"Give—me—me something to—to sit on," he panted presently.

The innkeeper pushed a rough stool towards him, on which he almost fell, clinging to the other's arm as he did so,

"There," he said presently, "that's over. I shall be stronger in a minute, but I'm done for; by God, I'm done for. Brandy, man, brandy."

The woman, who had heard everything, brought some brandy, which he drank greedily.

"There," he said, "I'm better now. You'll attend to the mare, won't you?"

"You haven't a dry thread on you," said the woman.

"No, I know. Did you ever see such rain? I've a change in that package there; but I expect it's as wet as what I've got on. I daresay you can lend me some things while mine are drying?"

"I don't know," said the woman doubtfully.

"Oh, don't fear. I can pay you," said the stranger. "Heavens, how cold it has turned!"

By this time he had reached the kitchen, where a candle was burning, and the woman gave him a searching glance.

He was a young man, not more than thirty at most, and his general appearance caused the woman to regard him kindly.

"He looks as though he might be a swell," she said to herself.

"You mustn't stay in them things with that cough of yours," she said. "I daresay some of Aaron's will suit you. Come this way."

She led him into an adjoining room, and took some clothes from a peg and threw them on a rough bed. Then she opened a drawer and drew forth some under-clothing.

"There," she said, "rub yourself dry and then put on these."

"Thank you," he said; and then he had another attack of coughing.

"Hadn't you better go to bed?" said the woman doubtfully. "I can bring you some supper in here."

"No," he said presently; "I'll not give in. I know what that means. There, I'm better now, and, by heaven! I'll cheat the sexton as long as I can. Another sip of brandy, mother, and I'll be all right."

He drank some more brandy, and seemed stronger. Then the woman left him alone.

"I know I ought to go to bed," he muttered, "but I won't. I'll fight as long as I've breath."

A few minutes later he appeared in the kitchen again, attired in the inn-keeper's holiday clothes.

"I look a swell, don't I?" he said. "I feel better, too. Some supper, mother, and I'll be all right."

He threw a couple of sovereigns on the table as he spoke. "Just to show you that I'm playing the game fairly," he added.

"Yes, you look better," she said, and although he wore her husband's ill-fitting garments, she saw that he had unmistakably the look of a man who belonged to a world altogether unknown to her. Moreover, in spite of the fact that he looked very thin and ill, and in spite also of marks of dissipation on his face, he was rather a handsome fellow. He was perhaps five feet ten inches in height, or even more, his form was well knit, and he did not walk with the gait common to the men who stayed at the inn. His head was covered with a mass of wavy brown hair, and a short, curly beard of the same colour grew on his cheeks.

"Did you ever see such weather?" he cried. "The devil is surely having a frolic."

"It's God, sending us the rain we want," said the woman. "There's your supper."

The man sat down before a basin of broth, which at

first he did not seem to relish, but presently he ate with more appetite, and emptied the dish.

"Have some cold mutton?" asked the woman.

"No, thank you. I'm all right now."

"Yes, you look better," said the man, who had silently watched him. "You are English?"

"What makes you think so?"

"It's thirty years since we left home, but I haven't forgotten. You are not Australian born and bred. Besides——"

"Besides what?"

"Oh, well, you are different."

"Yes, you are right. I'm not Australian born and bred. I—I—but there, it doesn't matter. What a night it is. It's lucky I came across you here. I wouldn't have lived through the night."

"You *were* well-nigh done up."

The stranger shivered.

"Got any whisky?" he said.

"Whisky's not what you need," said the woman.

"You'd better go to bed."

"Not yet. I—I dare not. I really must have some whisky, mother."

"We've got plenty of brandy," said the man.

"Brandy and hot water might do you good."

"Yes—yes," he cried eagerly. "Brandy grog, as they call it at home."

"Where did you come from?" said the woman.

"From, from—never mind. You needn't fear, mother; I'm all right. And you've got the money. Be quick, old man, I'm shivering."

The man poured some hot water into a glass, which had evidently been used in the first instance for some kind of preserve, and placed it before him.

"Have some sugar?" he said.

"Yes. Whoever heard of brandy grog without sugar? Ah, that's better. Richard's himself again, eh?"

"Richard—is that your name?"

"Why not? It's a good name, anyhow."

"Richard what?"

"What's the odds? Richard Green, or Smith, or Brown. Who knows? Who cares?"

"You're respectable?" said the woman.

"Respectable—haven't I given you two sovereigns? What greater proof can you have? My word, what a night! Come, Aaron, join me in a drink. It's unsociable drinking alone."

"Only one glass, Aaron, mind that," said the woman sternly.

"All right," said Aaron, preparing the decoction, "just one glass. You'd better go to bed, Mary. Nobody else'll come to-night."

"I'll go to bed when you do," said the woman. "I don't think it's raining as hard as it was. Hark! there's somebody at the door."

"It's only the wind," said Aaron, sipping his grog. "Nobody'll come to-night."

"Holloa, there!"

"There, can't you hear?" And she looked suspiciously towards the visitor.

"By heavens! it's some other poor beggar caught in the storm," said the stranger. "Good, that means company, and we can make a night of it."

The man's face was flushed, and a bright light flashed from his eyes. Evidently the spirit was having its effect on him.

Aaron opened the door and looked out. The late traveller had already dismounted, and stood at the door.

A CHANCE MEETING

"You can put me up for the night?" said the newcomer. "I can't get on to Nova in this weather, and it's so dark I can hardly see my hand before me."

"Of course we can," cried the first-comer. "Where've you come from?"

"From Golders Creek, twelve miles away. It was not so bad when I started. My word! the heavens are telling."

A few minutes later, the horse having been cared for, the second visitor came into the room. The woman started as she saw him. But for the fact that he was strong and bronzed and healthy, he seemed a duplicate of the other man. He was about the same age, and very nearly of the same stature. But there were no marks of dissipation on his face, no suggestion of the hectic flush which told the other man's story.

The water ran from his clothes in little pools on the floor. They were rough settler's clothes, but they did not hide the fact that he, too, belonged to the class called "gentlemen."

"You might be twin brothers!" gasped the woman.

"That's what struck me," said the first-comer with a laugh, "except that our friend here has apparently several points of advantage over me. And yet, mother, I'll take my oath that I never saw him before."

"You are as alike as two peas," the woman said. "And yet when I come to look at you again, you are not so much alike after all."

"The great question with me is," said the newcomer, and his voice was deep and strong, "have you got any dry rags to offer me?"

"No," said the woman; "the other has got Aaron's only other suit."

"So I have; and yet you are as wet as a drowned

rat. Look here, you hung mine before your back-kitchen fire. Aren't they about dry ? ”

“They might be,” said the woman ; “that is, those that were in the package might be. They weren't so very wet.”

“Go and see, mother. By gad ! it's not pleasant to stand in clothes as wet as those.”

“If they are not dry, don't worry,” said the newcomer. “I'll just wring out my jacket, and I can stand before the fire while the other things dry on me.”

“Why, it'll kill you.”

“Kill me ! ” cried the other with a laugh. “I'm too tough for that. I've slept many a time in the open air, with not a dry thread on me, and haven't been a bit the worse. Not that it's pleasant,” he added.

The woman came back again. “Yes,” she said, “this suit is dry. It looks nearly new, too.”

“Will you lend them me ? ”

“With pleasure. Your coming is a godsend. Get into them quickly, and come back. We can make a night of it.”

A few minutes later the second-comer came back into the room again, attired in the other's clothes. There could be no doubt about it. The two men were remarkably alike, and the suit of tweed which he had donned made him more than ever resemble the man who sat at the table with his brandy grog before him.

“You look killing, man. My word ! if the old woman is right, I'm a presentable fellow. But come, eat your broth, and let's talk. By the way, what may I call you ? Mother here has given me my name—Richard.”

“Just so. Then you'd better call me John. John succeeded Richard, didn't he ? ”

"Yes; but Richard of the lion-heart was a jolly sight better chap than John, for he was a good deal of a cad. Still, one name's as good as another. I'm Richard, and you are John. Come, man, eat your supper." Whereupon John sat down before his broth and demolished it with an appetite.

"Got anything else?" he said; "cold meat, or anything?"

The woman placed some before him, and he attacked it with vigour.

"You play a good game with the knife and fork, John."

"Yes, Richard," said the other. "All my family have been good trenchermen, and, 'pon my word, to all appearance you'd look all the better if you followed my example."

"I—oh, I've had my supper," said the other; and in spite of his endeavour to be cheerful he spoke sadly.

Outside, the wind howled and the rain fell in torrents. There were long weeks of drought to atone for, and the thirsty land eagerly drank up what the heavens were sending. The air became colder and colder, and presently all drew around the fire which the woman had made.

"I don't feel a bit like bed," said Richard, suppressing a shudder. "Do you want to turn in?"

"No," replied the other; "I don't know that I do."

The two men whom chance had thus thrown together looked steadily at each other, while the innkeeper and his wife yawned as if they were tired and sleepy.

"Look here," said the man who had assumed the name of Richard, "if you and your wife want to go to bed, there's no need for you to stay up. We're all right."

The woman looked at them suspiciously. It seemed

to her suspicious that these two men, who were so strangely alike, should be led to come to the inn on the same night and in such weather. And yet, after all, why should it be strange? With the exception of the likeness, there was nothing uncommon in such an occurrence. There was nothing in the house to plunder, and they looked like gentlemen.

"There's nothing more you want?" she said.

"No, nothing."

"Come on, Aaron," she said, "I'm tired, and sleepy. Come to bed."

After some altercation Aaron, who evidently stood in fear of his wife, followed her, leaving the two travellers together.

"I'm jolly glad you've come, stranger," said Richard, "glad to have a man to talk with. Won't you drink?"

"No; but I'll have a smoke."

He filled his pipe as he spoke, while the other watched him narrowly.

CHAPTER II

DULVERTON'S STORY

It was some minutes before either spoke again. The man who had assumed the name of Richard lay wearily back in a rough armchair, at one time looking into the wood fire which crackled and glowed in the open chimney, and at another casting questioning glances at his companion, who sat smoking quietly. At last Richard spoke.

"The old woman was right," he said. "It is a long time since I seriously examined my features in a looking-glass, but from what I can remember of myself we might be twin brothers. We are about the same height, and our hair is of precisely the same colour. And then, as if Nature determined to do the thing thoroughly, she has given us the same cast of features, the same colour for our eyes."

The other gazed at his companion steadily, but made no remark. He did not appear to be a talkative man.

"Not but what you have the advantage of me," went on Richard; "you must be a couple of stone heavier than I, and I'll dare swear that you've not a creaky place in your whole system?"

"No, I don't know what illness means."

The other sighed. "Great Heavens! what wouldn't I give if I could say the same?"

"You look a bit dicky."

"Dicky! I'm a dead man—that is, I am afraid I am. I ought to be in bed now."

"Why don't you go?"

"I'm afraid. I daren't lie down in the dark. I know it's cowardly, but it's a fact. I'm nothing but a bundle of disease and weakness. Heart, lungs, nerves—I'm all wrong."

Again the other looked at him steadily.

"D.T.'s?" he said, and there was a suggestion of contempt in his voice.

"I've had 'em. But that's not all. My pluck's gone. I don't mind lying down in the day so much—but at night, when it's pitch dark! Ugh!"

The man shivered as he spoke.

"You don't understand," he went on. "You are as strong as a horse; but to wake up in a cold sweat, to shiver, and yet feel that your blood is boiling; to imagine all sorts of ghastly terrors—I tell you, man, it's hell, hell!"

"It must be."

"Yes, I'm afraid I'm done for, and yet I don't want to die. Besides, I never had so much to live for as I have now."

"No?" There was an inquiring look in his eyes, but beyond the interrogating syllable he spoke no word.

Again the man who had assumed the name of Richard scanned his companion's face. He seemed to wish to speak freely, and yet was afraid. The other did not help him, however. He sat smoking quietly, looking, for the most part, into the fire.

Presently sounds reached them, which showed that the innkeeper and his wife were asleep.

"Won't you drink? It's vile brandy, but it's better than nothing. Besides, it makes one forget."

"No, I won't drink."

"Of course, you're wise."

"Yes, it's death to a man's constitution, especially in this climate."

"My God! don't I know it?"

Still the other kept silent. He did not seem to be interested in his companion's history.

"I say—John."

"Yes."

"Been in this country long?"

"Yes, a few years."

"What led you to come out here?"

"What leads people here generally?"

"Been successful?"

"No. I'm not that sort." This he said bitterly.

"And yet you're one of the steady, dependable sort. And you are strong and capable."

"Does that count?"

"It's supposed to. It's a maxim of the copy-books."

"Well, it hasn't counted with me."

Richard hesitated for some time before speaking again. It was true they had met in a country where the conventions were but little observed, and where confidences were asked for and given freely; but he did not seem at ease in the other's presence. He took another sip of his grog before he spoke again.

"You have the stamp of Harrow and Oxford on you," he said presently.

"Clifton and Cambridge," was the reply.

"Ah, I thought I wasn't far wrong. I went to Eton—and Oxford."

"Yes?"

"I didn't stay at Oxford long. I was sent down. I was always a sort of Ishmael. I could never settle

down into the conventional groove. I left home in a hurry. Nothing serious, you understand, but I—I thought it wise to hook it. I suppose I nearly broke my father's heart; only son, you know."

Still the other made no remark, although it was evident that his companion desired to be confidential.

"I've fairly gone it for the last seven years. I've gone—heaven only knows where I haven't gone. Sometimes I've managed to pick up the allowance that was sent to me, and sometimes I've had to rough it. I've been most things—digger, backwoodsman, sheep farmer, sailor, cabdriver. I liked the cabdriving best; I was always fond of horses. After all, give a man a horse and he's never without a companion."

"That's so."

"Of course, I wrote home from time to time, but I was seldom long enough in one place to get replies to my letters. I only waited when I was stony broke. I imagine that some of my father's letters to me are like the devil, they are travelling to and fro in the world and going up and down in it. That's Scripture, isn't it?"

"It sounds something like it."

"Oh, I know I've been a fool. No one better. It's no use talking about it now; but I belong to a good family, a Devon family. Perhaps you've heard of it—the Dulvertons of Devon are fairly well known."

The other gave a start at the name, but he only said:

"Yes, I've heard of them."

"My branch of the family are well off, too. Some of the best farms in Devonshire belong to my—belong to me, in fact."

"But——"

"Oh, yes, I know what you are thinking. You are

asking why I am here. But I only knew of it a few days ago. I'm on my way home. If—if I'm able, I shall ride to Belingam to-morrow. I ought to get there in the evening if I ride fairly hard, and from there I can get a train."

The other sighed as if enviously.

"You see," went on Richard, "my father was squire, and held a high position in the county—indeed, he reigned over our district as a sort of little king. His will was law. He was a very proud man, too; that was why—why he gave me a good allowance to clear out."

"What did you do?"

"Oh, there was a kind of drinking orgy. I paid attentions to a farmer's daughter, and the man who wanted to marry her picked a quarrel with me. We had all been drinking hard, although I was only twenty-one—barely that, in fact."

"Well?"

"Well, I was strong in those days, and I nearly killed him. In fact, it was believed that I had killed him; he lay like a log for hours. It was said, too, that I didn't fight fair—stabbed him, in fact; but that's a lie. Anyhow, the affair created a terrible uproar, and but for my father's position I should have been sent to gaol. As it was, I had to lie low for several days; but when it was certain that Nick Brewer would get well, my father bundled me off."

"And you've been away ever since?"

"Seven years. I was glad to go. I wanted to have my fling. Yes, and I've had it! I've had it!"

"And haven't you wanted to go home?"

"Not I. My father was always a strict man, of the religious order, and could not stand my ways. Of course, I've been a terrible disappointment to him;

but there, if there's a despicable thing on earth, it's a plaster-of-Paris saint. The fact is, I was better away, and I stayed away. Not but that there have been times when I have wanted to go back. I have a sort of sneaking respectability in me, after all. Of course, there was nothing serious in the Mary Liddicoat business, and—and well, my father had always meant me to marry Miriam Donnithorne. She's the daughter of a neighbouring squire. She was only a kid of about fifteen when I hooked it, but she was a beautiful kid, and even then I used to think of her as—as the girl I meant to marry some day. She must be nearly twenty-two by now. Her father and mine fixed it up among themselves just after she was born. You see, the two estates meet."

"Then your father is——?"

"Dulverton—Bob Dulverton—christened Robert Granville Dulverton. A good name, eh?"

"A very fine name."

For some minutes after this there was a silence between them. Dulverton drank more grog, while the other stared moodily into the fire.

"You don't seem very curious," remarked Dulverton presently.

"Why should I be?"

"Oh, no reason at all; only, in its way, my story is a bit of a romance. You see, I'm a sort of prodigal son—a lost hero, and that sort of thing."

"Well, you say you are on your way home. Your father will doubtless kill the fatted calf, and there will be music and dancing."

"My father's dead."

"Then—then——"

"Yes, I'm the squire of Dulverton Manor. The news came to me—let me see—yes, last Monday. I

was up in the bush, and I came across an old Devonshire newspaper. It gave an account of his funeral."

"And then you started for home?"

"Yes. For a time the news knocked me all of a heap. You see, my father—well, he was my father, and I'd treated him—well, I expect I nearly broke his heart. I suppose my mother died when I was born, and—and I was all he had. He never married again. I know I ought to have been his joy and pride, and all that sort of thing. But I turned out a waster. As I say, what I read nearly knocked me over. I didn't say a word to any one about it. I—well, I didn't feel as if I could; but I started off at once. I say, do you think I'll live to reach England?"

"Why not?"

"Because I've played fast and loose with my constitution, and I know—well, I feel like a dying man."

"Supposing you don't turn up, who will the estate go to?"

"To my Cousin Arthur, I suppose. Oh, yes, of course, it will go to my Uncle Arthur first, and then to my cousin. A precious couple they are, too. My uncle is a lawyer—as mean a hound as ever lived; while his son is worse than his father. But for my uncle—well, that affair with Nick Brewer would have been patched up better than it was. In fact, it has been my belief that he wanted to get me out of the country. He wanted me to kill myself, so that everything might come to him. I'd rather that the veriest stranger—a fellow like you, for example—should come into the estates, than that lot. Oh, they are mean cusses, both of them."

"Then the estates are waiting for you?"

"Yes, everything. The newspaper said as much. All I've to do is to go back and claim my own. I've

my father's letters—that is, those that have reached me—and a lot of other papers here."

He took a packet from his pocket as he spoke. "It's all there," he said, patting it.

"But your appearance has altered in seven years. There's always a great change between a boy of twenty-one and a man of twenty-eight. Besides, as you say, you've gone the whole hog during those years, and there's nothing that alters a man's appearance so much."

"You are thinking there may be another—well, Tichborne case?"

"There's no knowing."

"Oh, yes, my uncle would try it on if he dared; but I've got the Dulverton face. And besides, with all those papers there could be no question of—of difficulty."

"Well," said the other, rising, "I think I'll go to bed. I hope you'll be better in the morning, and that good luck will attend you."

"I say, don't go to bed yet."

"Why not?"

"Why, why—to tell you the truth, I am afraid to—to go to bed. I'm in a funk. I daren't lie down. I have a sort of presentiment that if I lie down in the dark I shall never get up again."

"Don't be such a fool, man."

"I can't help it. As I told you, I am a bundle of weakness, and disease, and shattered nerves. My word! even if I do live to get home, I shall be a pretty successor to my father. Oh, do sit down again!"

"It's late, and the fire is going out."

"Old Aaron said there was plenty of wood in the spence. Get some, man. I'm too weak to get out of this chair, or I'd do it myself. Listen how it rains."

The wind had dropped, but the rain fell steadily and heavily. The young men could hear it as it fell. Dulverton shivered as he listened.

"Do humour me, there's a good chap. I know I'm poor company; but for pity's sake sit with me an hour or two longer. I shan't mind when daylight comes."

"Very well," said the other, after hesitating a second, "I'll have another pipe, then."

He went to the spence as he spoke, and took some logs of wood, and threw them on the fire. Then he threw himself on the chair, and sat moodily watching while the fire grew bright again.

"You know pretty well all about me now," said Dulverton. "But you have a story to tell, too, I know. Fellows like you don't leave England for a settler's life without strong reasons. And yet you don't look the sort likely to go to the devil. Besides, you don't drink."

To this he got no reply.

"You say you went to Cambridge. I'll warrant you took a good degree."

"No, I didn't take a degree."

"What! pilled? I can't believe it."

"No. I left at the end of two years."

"Not sent down?"

"No."

He spoke almost angrily, and there was a savage glitter in his eyes.

Dulverton looked at him keenly. Now that he had told his own story, he became more and more interested in his chance companion. There was silence between them for perhaps a minute.

"You didn't tell me your name, did you?" said Dulverton.

"No," said the other moodily. "If I did perhaps you'd——" He stopped suddenly.

"What?" asked Dulverton.

The man rose from his chair, walked to the door, and opened it. The rain fell steadily, heavily, sullenly. The night was as black as pitch.

"It was lucky we happened on this place," he said. "Even a strong man might perish on a night like this without shelter. The water courses will have become rivers, the streams will be torrents. It's coming down in sheets."

He lit another candle, and then filled his pipe.

"You were saying——" said Dulverton, who had been watching him closely.

"I was saying that if I told you my name you would perhaps—but what if you did? It wouldn't matter."

"Look here, old chap—what is it?"

"What is it? There's no need that I should rake up the past; but you've been doing it, and—well—you've made me feel—great God! what wouldn't I have given for your chance!"

"I expect you've had your chance. Fellows brought up as you've been always have."

The other laughed.

"Look here, Dulverton," he said, "you were born with a good name. You've done your best to spoil the pitch, but you haven't been able to do it. It's all ready for you to go back to Devonshire and play the game."

"I hope to God I'll be able to get there. But what about you?"

"Me? Oh, I've——"

"Yes; what have you done? Tell me. Perhaps it's not so bad after all."

"I—oh, I've done nothing."

"Nothing! Then, my dear fellow, come back to England with me. Perhaps your father——"

"My father! I say, I can't stand this!"

"What's the matter?"

"Look here, Dulverton——" He started to his feet again and paced the room. "Yes, I'll tell you," he went on. "I shall enjoy seeing your face when you hear. And—well, what do I care what you think, or say, or do? I'm beyond all that now."

He spoke with passion. The silent man seemed to long for speech.

He sat down again, took a burning ember from the fire and relit his pipe.

"Yes, you've told me your story, and now I'll tell you mine," he went on; "and I can assure you it is not a repetition of yours."

CHAPTER III

ENDELLION'S STORY

"You told me you were an Eton boy, and went on to Oxford," he said, "while I went to Clifton, and then to Cambridge. Of course, Clifton has not quite the name that Eton has; it belongs to a rather different class. My father sent me there that I might become a scholar rather than a man of leisure. He said he had high ideals for his son."

He laughed bitterly as he spoke, and then went on:

"I did well at Clifton, indeed I was specially mentioned as having had a brilliant school career, and went up to Trinity, Cambridge, with all sorts of honours. I was captain of our first eleven, too, and have met Eton chaps often at cricket. I must have visited Eton more than once while you were there. I don't want to blow my own trumpet, but I thought I might as well tell you."

"I was doing well at Cambridge, too. I intended going in for the Bar, and saw visions of myself as a future Lord Chancellor."

"A sort of pattern youth," said Dulverton.

"No, not that. But I belonged to the reading set, and unless my name has been scraped out, you may see it honourably placed, not only for study, but for sports. I won all sorts of prizes for tennis and for golf. As for

cricket, I had the biggest batting average in the Varsity team."

"Varsity team! Let me see, that's——"

"Seven years ago—yes."

"Then your name is——"

"Endellion; yes."

"What, the Endellion whose name stunk in the nostrils of—— I say, forgive me. I didn't think."

"Oh, it doesn't matter. Of course, Endellion is not a common name. Indeed, as far as I know, I'm the only man alive who possesses it. A grand possession, eh? Yes, I, too, am an only son; but I am the only son of the biggest blackguard that ever walked God's earth. You know the story—every one does. It's known wherever the English tongue is spoken, and although seven years have passed, no one seems to have forgotten it. Endellion! Every newspaper in England had it on its posters. You respect, revere your father. You speak of him as having an honourable name, as one who was regarded with reverence for his honour and integrity. But mine! Fraud, swindler, liar, blackmailer, ruiner of women, murderer—and all done under the cloak of religion. That was my father. Ralph Endellion, floater of bogus companies, clever scoundrel, one for whom no carrion was too vile. Every day during the long-drawn-out trial the papers devoted columns to his enormities. His picture was posted everywhere, and his case was discussed by every debauchee, every swindler, every low woman in the country. I've a lot to be thankful for in that direction, haven't I? Most men mention their father's name with pride. They can always rake up something in their praise. But I——"

He sucked hard at his pipe, and although his eyes rested on the fire, he never saw the flames which leapt

up, never heard the hissing of the rain-drops which from time to time found their way down the chimney.

"Of course, in a sense, I have a good name, too," he went on presently. "Endellion is the name of an old Cornish parish, and an old Cornish family. My people owned nothing but a stony farm, but I suppose they were as proud as Lucifer. In the past they ranked as equals of the Treilawneys, the Killigrews, the Trevanions, and the Carews. But my father sold the old place, and went to London. Of course, his career is well known. In a few years he became known as a daring and successful speculator. He made hundreds of thousands, millions—on paper. I was the only son. I scarcely ever saw my mother. My father hinted to me that she was a bad woman, and that he was obliged to send her away. I was sent to Clifton, and was made much of. It seemed quite natural to me that I should have plenty of pocket-money, my own horses, and more luxuries than any boy in the place. But I worked hard, and went to Cambridge as an exhibitioner. My father pretended to be very pleased. The money was nothing, he said, but the honour was everything.

"As I said, I worked hard at Cambridge. I did myself very well, but I was by nature a student. I suppose some of my Greek odes are talked of to this day.

"Then came the crash. My father's fortune was built up on chicanery, fraud, swindling, forged papers. Nothing had been too low for him. His name was execrated all over the land, for he had been the ruin of thousands. During the trial, not only his business dealings, but his private life became public. He who had been giving thousands to churches, Sunday-schools, and charities of all sorts, he who had been chairman of

religious meetings, and had actually given speeches on how to Christianise the world, had been living the life of a libertine of the worst kind. He had been guilty of the basest things. My mother, whom he had represented to me as a bad woman, had been dragged to a lunatic asylum by him. She was not mad, but she knew his secrets, and he was afraid of her. So he had bribed some doctors to declare her insane. After spending years in the asylum she committed suicide.

"Of course he was condemned to penal servitude. He ought to have been hanged. But his career was not finished. He tried to get away, and in the attempt murdered one of the gaolers. Even then he escaped his proper doom by committing suicide. How he managed to do it no one knew, but he was as cunning as the devil.

"Now you know who I am, and whose son I am. Of course, as soon as the trial came on, I had to leave Cambridge.

"I had been ignorant of my father's infamies, as ignorant as a Maori baby. I had kept a clean record, and I had been spoken of as an open-handed, generous kind of fellow. I suppose people were sorry for me, but this I know, every one I had known avoided me as though I were a pestilence. The sins of my father were indeed visited on me. Not a door was open to me, not a friendly hand was held out to me—not one. I suppose people believed I had inherited my father's nature. And I was penniless. I had nothing but my personal belongings.

"Remember, I was twenty years of age, I had no profession, and while I had done well at school and at the Varsity, I was fit for nothing.

"Still, I was young. I was as strong as a horse, I flattered myself that I was not a fool, and hope was

still strong within me. I made a Quixotic sort of vow. I said I would rise above my difficulties, breast the waves of circumstance, and grapple with my evil star. I vowed, too, that I would do it without subterfuges, and without deceit.

"The name of Endellion has been disgraced. I said to myself, 'I will wipe out the disgrace, I will make it honoured. What others have done, I will do. I am more heavily handicapped than others, but what of that?'"

Dulverton, who had been listening like one spell-bound, moved in his chair, and his eyes flashed.

"Yes," he said—"well, what did you do?"

"Do!" said the other bitterly; "I went to people I knew, I asked them to give me employment. Not one of them held out a helping hand—not one. I think they were afraid. I was boycotted in every way. My name had been black-balled at the clubs. Those who had at one time been ready to lick my boots looked the other way when they saw me.

"Still, I did not give up hope. I said I would go among strangers, and seek work among them; but no sooner did I mention my name than I was shown to the door, for I would not hide my name. You see how trustful, how Quixotic I was. I believed in the kindness of human nature, and I could not believe that Christian people would make me suffer for my father's crimes. Besides, Ralph Endellion's name was a synonym for all that was vile, and I determined to make the name of Ralph Endellion honoured."

"But surely you had *some* luck," said Dulverton.

"Yes, twice. Once an old Quaker, who had lost heavily through my father, said he would give me a chance. He gave me a clerkship at twenty-five shillings a week. But I had to go. My fellow-clerks

made it impossible. The meanest of them professed scorn for any one bearing the name of Endellion.

"I got another job, and pretty much the same kind of thing followed. A fellow insulted me, and I thrashed him. That, of course, led to my dismissal. I tried for jobs as a railway porter, as a waiter in restaurants, but no sooner did I tell my name than employment became impossible. For, remember, my determination was to live a respectable life, and to rise by worth.

"Well, I needn't continue the story. I was the son of Ralph Endellion, and bore his name, so what hope had I? One day, out of curiosity, I visited Madame Tussaud's, and there in the Chamber of Horrors was the wax image of my father. Strong fellow as I am, I nearly fainted as I saw it. Before long a crowd gathered around me. I saw them nodding towards me, I heard them whispering. They had discovered who I was. An official came up to me.

"'Look here, young fellow,' he said, 'the best thing you can do is to hook it.'

"And hook it I did. By this time I had pawned nearly all my personal belongings, and spent the money. Winter was coming on, and I saw that unless I changed my name, and perhaps did the work of a navvy, I should have to starve. I had done my best, but I had failed, miserably failed. No one wanted me, and all whom I had known avoided me, and I contemplated chucking myself in the Thames."

"But there's a woman to come in, isn't there?" said Dulverton.

"What do you mean?"

"You were twenty years of age. Surely there was some woman in love with you, to whom you could turn for help. There's always a woman, isn't there?"

"No," replied Endellion. "I was never a woman's man. I'm not made that way. You see, I belonged to the reading set at Cambridge, and although I wasn't a hermit, I never had any love affairs."

"Well, what did you do?"

"One day I was down by London Bridge, and, as I told you, I contemplated chucking myself in the river, but I happened to see a foreign-looking boat in the river. I went to the captain, and asked for a job. He hardly *saw* enough English to understand me, but I had picked up a little Italian, and so made him know what I wanted. I had no papers to show, but he did not seem to mind that. Besides, he wanted hands, and took me on. After that, for three years, I knocked about the world, first in one vessel, and then in another. Presently I came here, and got a job on a cattle ranch. The farmer never read the newspapers, and knew nothing about Ralph Endellion. Since then I've lived out here, and have buried myself. I've never gone to the towns; somehow I've shrunk from going anywhere where I might possibly be known. Three days ago I left the place where I've been working, and— Here I am."

"And that's all?"

"That's all."

In the room near by Aaron and Mary Beel gave forth sounds which showed that they were asleep.

The rain continued to fall in torrents, and again the fire began to burn low.

"Put on some more wood," said Dulverton.

"What's the use? It's time we turned in." Still, he put on the wood.

"You've had a terrible time," said Dulverton.

He did not use those words, but gave expression to several unprintable adjectives.

"At any rate, you know why I am here," said Endellion.

"And you say you haven't been successful?"

"I've saved three hundred pounds. But what is that? I'm nearly twenty-eight now, and know no more how to get a living in England than I did eight years ago. Besides, I shrink from going back."

"And yet you don't mean to end your days out here."

"God forbid. Man, you don't know how I long for the old life—to meet refined, cultured men and women; to hold up my head among those of my own class; to enjoy all the pleasures of an English gentleman; to have a place of honour in my native land. But every road seems a *cul de sac*."

"With two hundred pounds you might start a ranch of your own."

"Yes, and perhaps I might succeed; but I hate the thought of en'ling my days among cattle. If it comes to that, my last employer practically offered to make his farm over to me, if——"

"If what?"

"If I'd marry his daughter. I suppose she fell in love with me. But fancy marrying a great horse marine of a woman like that! no, I couldn't do it."

"What are you going to do then?"

"I don't know. I suppose I'll drag along somehow. Besides, what does it matter? I'm only a bit of flotsam."

A silence fell between them. Endellion thought he had noted a change in Dulverton's manner since he had told his story.

"Endellion," said Dulverton presently.

"Yes."

"I think I'll have to go to bed after all. I oughtn't

to have stayed up so long ; but—but—well—I forgot. Do you mind helping me ? You—you remember all the old woman said about the room, don't you ? ”

Endellion rose quickly to his feet. “ Of course I'll help you. Are you ill ? ”

“ Yes, I'm afraid I am. It's different from what I ever felt before.”

Instantly Endellion led him into the bedroom which Mary Beel had allotted to them, and a few minutes later Dulverton was in bed.

“ Endellion ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ I'm dying.”

“ Nonsense, my dear fellow. You've caught a chill riding in the rain. You'll be all right in the morning.”

“ Anyhow, you'll stay by me, won't you ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Don't let the light go out.”

“ No, I'll keep a candle burning till daylight.”

“ I say, Endellion ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Do you mind not turning in ? I think I should feel better if—if I knew you were sitting beside me. You are not tired, are you ? ”

“ Very well, I'll sit with you till daylight.”

A little later Dulverton had fallen into a troubled sleep, while Ralph Endellion sat by his bedside, with a strange, hard look in his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

TEMPTATION

THE next day Robert Dulverton was too ill to leave his bed, too ill to partake of food, or to know who was near him. He raved incessantly, but there seemed no meaning in all he said. Sometimes he talked of Eton, sometimes of China and India, and of South America. But as Mary Beel said, "it was all silly babble."

At first the innkeeper and his wife seemed sorry that they had opened their doors to him. They didn't want a corpse in their house, they said, but when Endellion told them that they should be fully paid, they made no further demur.

Neither the innkeeper nor his wife asked any questions about names. It mattered nothing to them what the sick man was called. Little notice was taken of names in that remote region, where men so often elected to hide their identity.

But the man was ill, and they waited on him in a rough way, in the main taking their orders from Endellion, who sat hour after hour by the sick man's side.

The next day he was worse still. A raging fever burnt in his veins, and his sufferings seemed terrible. Mary Beel shook her head, and began to think of what arrangements could be made for the funeral, and won-

dered how much Endellion would give her for her trouble.

Meanwhile the rain continued to pour; not so heavily as at first, but still heavily, and continuously. By the afternoon of the second day, however, it abated somewhat.

"There's a doctor at Ontobia, isn't there, mother?" Endellion asked.

"There used to be. Whether there is now, I don't know. We never have a doctor. I know as much about curing people as a doctor. But this man will die."

"We'll see, anyhow," said Endellion. "He's quiet now, and if there's a chance of saving him, he must be saved."

"It isn't possible to get to Ontobia," remarked Aaron. "The creek will be a great roaring river. No horse will be able to cross it for twenty-four hours, even although we have no more rain."

"I'll have a try," said Endellion.

"You are a fool, John," remarked Aaron, using an adjective which I have omitted.

"All right," replied the young man, "but I'll ride to Ontobia."

Before he went, however, he took the precaution of hiding Dulverton's personal belongings. He did not trust the Beels overmuch.

Late that night he returned with the doctor, who was a young man, scarcely older than Endellion, and had been a student at Guy's Hospital.

Dr. Jack Grigg examined the patient carefully, and learned from Mary Beel all she knew about him.

"He'll die, won't he?" asked the woman.

"Some time for certain," remarked Grigg, "but he may get through this time. We'll have a try to get

him through, anyhow. Meanwhile, old woman, you may comfort yourself that you've done very well for him, as well as I could have done myself."

"I know'd that," replied Mary Beel.

"You may as well go to bed," he said to Endellion, when they were alone together. "You had no sleep last night, and you need it. I'll sit up with your brother to-night, but I must get back first thing in the morning."

"Why do you call him my brother?" asked Endellion.

"Because he is," replied Grigg. "I should say you were twin brothers, for that matter. If he were well and strong as you are, I should hardly know one from the other."

The doctor had lived long enough in the bush to refrain from asking any questions about names. One name was as good as another in that part of the world.

"He's not my brother, however," remarked Endellion.

"Tell that to the Marines," was the reply. "Have you plenty of tobacco?"

"Plenty."

"That's good. Now get off somewhere and lie down."

Endellion made no protest, but lay down before the kitchen fire, for the weather was cold. Not a single soul had been to the house since he came, except the doctor and two men who worked for Aaron Beel and his wife.

"Will he pull through?" asked Endellion, the following morning, as the doctor prepared to depart.

"Doubtful; but he may. I've managed to lower the fever, and I should say that it will be gone by to-morrow. He's in a comatose condition now, and

will probably remain so till to-morrow. I can't get here to-morrow, but I'll try to look in the day after. If he lives, he'll owe his life to you. But he's done his best to kill himself. He hasn't the constitution of a robin."

The doctor rode away, leaving Endellion to care for the sick man. All that day and the next he nursed him, nursed him as tenderly as if he had been his brother. Sometimes the sick man seemed to know him, and to appreciate what was done for him, but mostly he was in an unconscious condition.

When the doctor came again he seemed better, but Grigg looked very serious.

"He's done for," he said, taking Endellion aside.

"I thought he was better," remarked the young man.

"The candle always gives an extra light just before it goes out," replied the doctor. "If he hadn't ruined his constitution, he'd have pulled through, but he's evidently gone the whole hog for the last few years. He hasn't a sound organ in his system. He may last another twenty-four hours, but not more. Still, you've done your best for him. You were both brought up—gentlemen, eh?"

Endellion was silent.

"None of my business, of course," remarked the doctor, giving him a sharp glance. "But I should say that he'll be conscious in a couple of hours. If you want to have any instructions from him as—as to—his—his affairs, you'd better make the most of the time his mind is clear. He won't last long. I'll try to come again to-morrow, but I don't expect to find him alive."

Again the doctor left him. Grigg hadn't many patients, but they were long distances apart, and he

was seldom sent for except in dire cases. A thirty-mile ride lay before him then.

As had been predicted, Dulverton seemed much better two hours later. His mind was clear, and he spoke with comparative ease. But he seemed to know that he had not long to live.

"You've been jolly good to me, old man," he said, "but it's no good. I've been a fool, and I must pay the price."

"But you seem better," said Endellion, trying to comfort him.

"But I know I'm dying all the same," replied Dulverton. "After all, it may be best. I should have been no use as squire. I knew I was as good as done for when I came to this hole. Even if I'd gone back, I expect I should have—well, God only knows what I should have done. As for little Miriam—she must be a beautiful woman now. Her photograph is among those things."

Endellion did not speak; indeed, there seemed nothing to say.

"I suppose everything will go to Uncle Arthur, and after him to his cub of a son," he muttered presently. "I don't think I'd mind so much but for that."

"Is he so bad as that?"

"A meaner hound never lived. As for Arthur, he's about my age, and a more despicable cad never stepped in shoe-leather."

For a little time there was a silence.

"It is a beautiful old place," went on the sick man presently, "just beautiful. You've seen pictures of Haddon Hall; well, Dulverton Manor is just like that—just like that, only prettier. The old park lands are lovely, simply lovely. The estates are worth several thousands a year, too, and everything,

everything will come to that mean-spirited cub. No, I wouldn't mind but for that."

"Get better, and cheat him out of it."

"I would I could, for—yes, I've no doubt about it—he'll try to marry Miriam. He always tried to poison her mind against me as a boy."

"I say, don't excite yourself," said Endellion.

"I wish I could give everything to you," said Dulverton, as a new light came into his eyes. "You are just a trump, old man, and you've had a beast of a time. Well, why not? Why can't I give everything to you?"

"You can't; the land will be entailed. Most old estates are."

"Not all of it. I'll leave you my heir! You've been a brother to me, just a brother. And you'd make a splendid squire, and we are alike, too. We might be twin brothers. If you were to go back and say you were me, no one would doubt you—no one—no one! Oh, it would be splendid to—to—keep them out of—everything. My father always despised Uncle Arthur and his cub. He used to call them the biggest liars in Devonshire. And you could have all my papers, too! All of 'em."

"Thank you, Dulverton, but it's impossible. Of course it is. Such a thing would be found out in a week. Besides—I—I couldn't, you know!"

"Why not? I'm my father's heir, and I leave everything to you—everything. That's it. It will atone for the rotten time you've had, and you'd make a splendid squire."

"Thank you, old chap; it's good of you to talk like this, but you say your uncle's a lawyer. Well, do you think he'd—he'd——"

"But I give everything to you."

"But you couldn't. You admit that most of the land is entailed, so you see——"

"But I will!" The thought had aroused the dying man to an unnatural strength. "Bring me some paper, and a pen and ink, will you?"

More to humour him than for anything else, Endellion brought him what he had asked for, noting as he did so the feverish anxiety in the other's eyes.

"Lift me up," he said.

Endellion lifted him up, and the dying man seized the pen.

"I give everything I have here in Australia, and all I possess in Dulverton, Devon, England, or elsewhere, to my good friend Ralph Endellion. I'm dying, but my mind is sound.

"Robert Granville Dulverton."

"Thank you, old man," said Endellion, "but it wouldn't stand in a court of law. I don't know much about such things, but I do know that there are always a lot of formalities to be observed, such as witnesses, and that sort of thing."

"Witnesses!" cried the dying man, "yes, witnesses! Here, Aaron and Mary, come quickly."

He was greatly excited, and spoke more loudly than Endellion thought possible.

Aaron Beel and his wife came in.

"Can you write?" asked Dulverton.

"I can write my name," said Aaron. "I can't read nothing but easy print, but I can write my name."

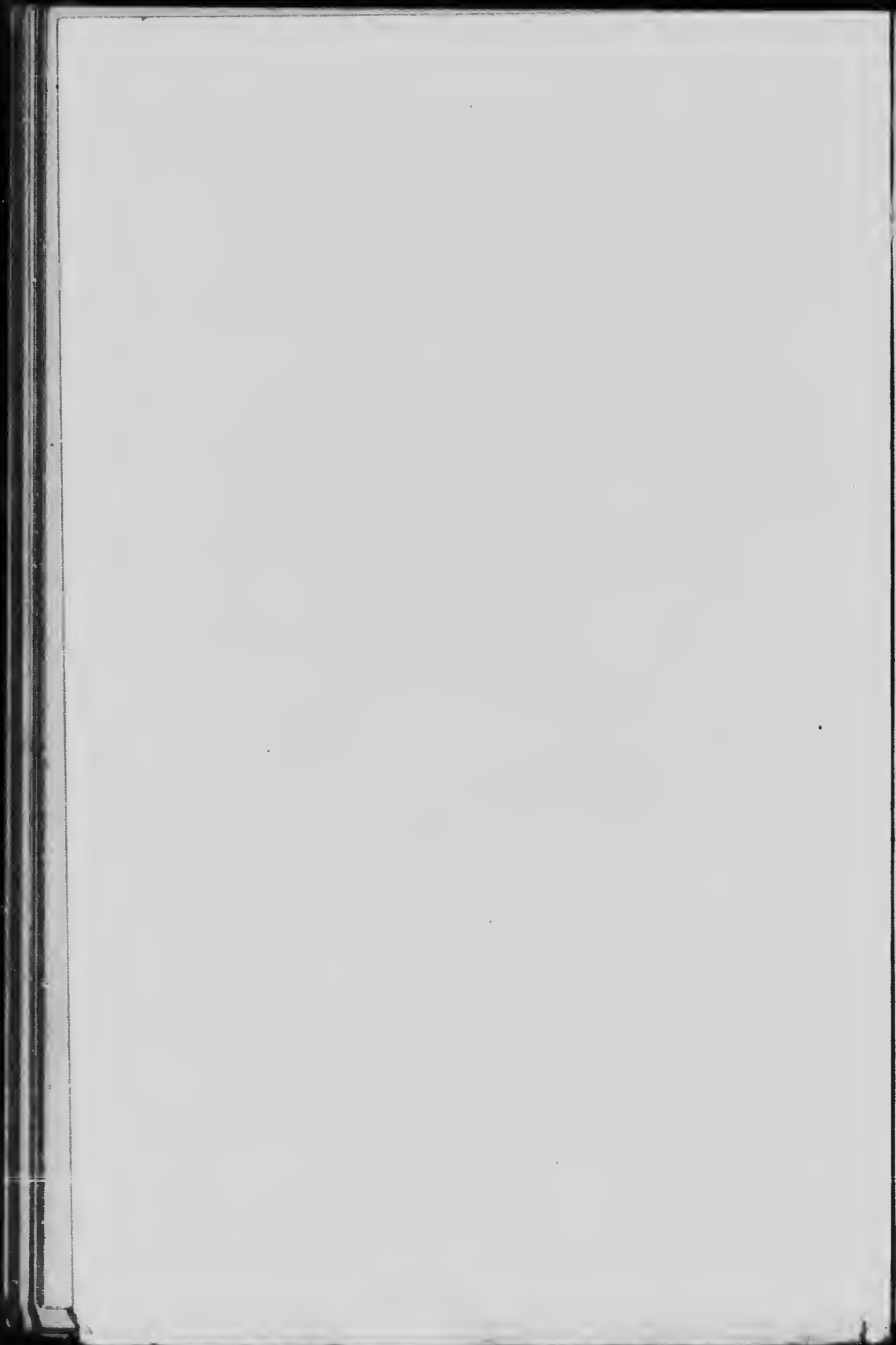
"Write it there," panted Dulverton.

Both Aaron and his wife wrote their names.

Dulverton lay back on his bed.



"ENDELLION LIFTED HIM UP AND THE DYING MAN SEIZED THE PEN."



"There," he said, "I've done what I can. Mind, I give everything to you, everything."

"Thank you, my dear fellow," said Endellion. "It's awfully good of you. I shall never cease to be grateful to you."

He did not tell him that he regarded the paper as absolutely worthless. It would seem cruel. Evidently Dulverton found joy in what he had done.

"You've had rotten luck," he murmured—"rotten luck; and you are a white man if ever there was one. And it'll give you your chance. I've been a mean cuss all my life, but I'm glad I thought of this. It—it makes dying easier."

His unnatural efforts had left him very weak, and he lay back panting. Endellion gave him some of the medicine that the doctor had left.

"I say, Dulverton," said Endellion, "I'm afraid I'm not much of a Christian; what I've gone through has—has knocked it out of me. But Beel says there's a minister that lives over at Ontobia. I'll fetch him if you like."

"No, no, don't leave me. I can't bear the thought of your leaving me."

"Let me send some one for him then."

"No, no, there wouldn't be time. I'm going fast now. I feel it. Besides, I want no parsons, no strangers. But you'll stay by me, won't you, Ralph?"

"Yes, I'll stay with you, if you wish it."

"I do wish it—and I've—no one else."

For some time he lay panting, his eyes closed. Evidently he was suffering a relapse after his excitement.

Presently he spoke again, but this time it was in a whisper.

"Endellion—Ralph."

"Yes, old man."

"Could you say a prayer? I've been a mean, bad cuss, but—but could you?"

"I—I, no," stammered Endellion. "I—I remember the Lord's prayer," he added.

"Will you say it?"

Ralph Endellion knelt by the rough bed, and repeated the prayer, uttered by millions of lips throughout the ages, the prayer which the Lord of Life taught His disciples.

"Our Father which art in heaven," he said hoarsely.

"That's it," whispered the other. "I remember now. 'Our Father.' That's it. Go on."

And Endellion went on—on to the end, and together they said "Amen."

"God have mercy on me, through Jesus Christ," added Dulverton.

For many minutes all was silent. More than once Endellion thought that all was over. Aaron Beel went to his wife, and told her that their visitor was dead.

After a while he opened his eyes again.

"I give everything to you, everything," he panted. "I've—I've signed my name. Perhaps—perhaps—you'll marry little Miriam. You'll look after all the old servants, won't you?"

"Yes, yes," said Endellion, like a man in a dream.

Again there was a silence, during which Aaron Beel and his wife came into the room.

"Is he dead?" asked the woman. She had been more hard and callous than her husband throughout everything.

"I don't think so."

Together the three watched in silence.

"He's dead," said the woman presently ; " we may as well go."

As if in answer the dying man opened his eyes.

"It's all yours, Ralph," he said. " You'll do good with it, and—and keep out——"

He did not finish the sentence ; instead he began to gasp as if for life. A film came over his eyes.

"God be merciful to me, through Jesus Christ," he said, and all was over.

Aaron Beel left the room with his wife, while Ralph Endellion stayed kneeling by the side of the dead man.

A week later a young man was seen in Melbourne Harbour looking eagerly at a great ocean steamer. More than one passer-by turned to have a second look at him. Although he was bronzed and bearded, he did not possess the appearance of a typical Australian. Those who knew England said he was reminiscent of an English university. His clothes were perfectly made, and he wore them well. He was tall, and well knit too, and when he walked he suggested an athlete. But it was not these things which attracted attention. It was the look in his large dark eyes. He was looking at the vessel, but he also seemed to be looking beyond it, as though he saw something in the distance which was hidden from others.

Presently an officer left the vessel.

"Bound for England ?" asked the young man.

"Yes."

"When do you start ?"

"To-morrow at noon."

"Full complement of passengers ?"

"We've room for a few more."

"Thank you."

The young man left the wharf, left the city, in fact.

He walked with long, rapid strides, as though he wanted to get out into the country quickly. Presently he was beyond the crowds, and then he wandered around like one thinking deeply—as though he were fighting some great battle, in fact.

Throughout the whole night he remained out there alone, and when morning came he returned to the city. He found his way to a shipping office, and booked a passage by the outgoing steamer.

“Will you sign your name here?” said the clerk, when he had paid the passage money.

The young man seized a pen, and hesitated. He looked at the pen as if in doubt.

“Won’t that nib suit you?” asked the clerk.

“It’s too fine,” was the reply. “Haven’t you anything broader?”

“Yes, here’s a broad ‘J,’” said the clerk, “how’ll that do?”

“It’s just the thing,” was the reply.

Then he wrote with a steady hand, Robert Granville Dulverton.

CHAPTER V

DRIFTING WITH THE TIDE

RALPH ENDELLION had not signed his name as Robert Granville Dulverton without many struggles and many heart-searchings. Even when he had done so, he had by no means made up his mind upon his future course of action. It was entirely suggested by the words of the dying man. It had seemed to him as though there were nothing for him but to spend his life in the Australian bush, when the words of Dulverton caused him to see, as if in a flash of light, a splendid future.

He attached little or no importance to the scrap of paper, which nevertheless he guarded with great care. What value had half a sheet of crumpled paper? No court of law, he felt sure, would uphold the gift of a dying man made to him under such circumstances. If Arthur Dulverton and his son were such men as had been described to him, they would fight to the last ditch rather than yield to him. Besides, Arthur Dulverton was a litigious lawyer, well versed in all the technicalities of British law. He would have plenty of money too, while he, Endellion, possessed only two hundred pounds, a large part of which would be swallowed up in his journey home.

Besides, even if he determined to take advantage

of the dying man's bequest, he would have to go back to England as Ralph Endellion, a name that would shut him out of every house he desired to enter, and make it impossible for him to hold up his head in his native land. And he shrank from doing this. He remembered his experiences in trying to obtain a livelihood years before. He remembered how his name had been struck off the list of members of the club where he had been honoured. He called to mind the looks of loathing and scorn which had been bestowed upon him, and the taunting words which even the junior clerks in the offices where he had gained employment hurled at him.

No, he could not go back to England as Ralph Endellion. It would prejudice, if not destroy, his chances at the very start. One might as well be branded as a felon as go back to England bearing such a name.

And yet he had done nothing to merit such disgrace. He was simply paying the penalty of another's crimes, and the thought filled him with rage, black rage. What wonder if he sought to have his revenge on those who had treated him so shabbily? What other course remained? He did not love Australia, nor the rough life he had been leading, rather it was repugnant to him. He was a student by nature, and had scholarly tastes. He longed to surround himself with refined, cultured people, to have access to good libraries, to meet his intellectual and social equals. What chance was there for him in Australia? He was not a business man, and did not possess business qualifications, neither had he any desire to be a farmer. What, then, had Australia to offer him? Only a living death. And he was young and strong and vigorous. Had he not been cursed with a great curse, he felt sure he

could have taken an honourable place in society, in law, in politics. But every door seemed closed to him. For years he had done his best, only to fail.

And now his chance had come. Nay, was it chance? Was it not a kind of Providence which opened the door of a glorious future to him? He went over the situation point by point. First, he strongly resembled Robert Dulverton. Of course, he knew that if they stood side by side it would be easy to distinguish one from another. But still they were alike—the same height, the same build, the same cast of features, the same age. Both had hair and eyes of the same colour. Besides, a man of twenty-eight would naturally be different from a boy of twenty-one, so that even if any in Devonshire said he did not exactly resemble the lad who had left seven years before, no doubts would be raised. Dulverton had lived a riotous life, and that would account for everything. Dulverton's voice, for example, had been somewhat throaty and raucous—well, naturally the voice would change. The main point was that he sufficiently resembled the other to—to—no, he would not put it into words—yet. The doctor had told him they might be twin brothers, so had Aaron Beel and his wife. Again, would any of his old associates know him? He remembered himself as a boy of twenty-one. He was very pale, very thin. It is true he was an athlete, but he was at least two stone lighter than he was now. Besides, he had grown a beard, and that had altered him materially.

Then he had read and re-read the papers which Dulverton had left him. There were cuttings from the newspapers, his father's letters, all containing scraps of information about the life in Devonshire, and about the old Manor House. Then there was a long letter from Miriam Donnithorne, and her photograph.

This would also help him. Besides all this, during his mental wanderings Dulverton had talked a great deal about his home life, and Eton and Oxford.

Of course, there would be awkward questions, references to events of which he knew nothing, and that sort of thing. This, of course, must lead to systematic deceit, and——

No, he could not do it. Of course he could not. It was madness. He would never have thought of it had not Dulverton himself suggested it. It was this that had started the idea. The dying man's words had burnt themselves into his brain. "If you were to go back and say you were me, no one would doubt you, no one, no one!" At first he had cast away the thought as the product of a madman's brain, but it had returned, always returned.

Then something else happened. After Dulverton's death, when searching his belongings, he had happened upon a little black book which he had at first left unnoticed. It contained a résumé of a part of Dulverton's life. Evidently he had been a man of moods, and in one of his moods he had started writing a diary, but he had prefaced the diary by a sketch of his early life. The diary had been abandoned after a few days, but the sketch had put him into possession of a great deal of knowledge. Surely fate was playing into his hands.

Of course he would not, could not, do such a thing. He simply could not, and yet, why not? Had not Dulverton willed to make him his heir? His father was dead, he was an only child, and everything, as a natural consequence, came to him. Therefore he had a moral right to give everything to whom he would, and he had given everything to him, Ralph Endellion. And, even supposing the will could not be legally

supported, his will to give him everything was just the same. Yes, morally he was Robert Dulverton's heir. Besides, suppose he did not make his claim? What then? Everything would go to the man, or the son of the man, whom the owner despised and detested. Both old Robert Dulverton and his son hated the thought that either Arthur Dulverton or his son should enter into possession.

Besides, had not he, Ralph Endellion, his own future to consider? He had been cruelly treated. For years he had suffered, had been exiled for crimes of which he was as innocent as the man in the moon, and of which the world knew he was innocent. And yet he had been boycotted, shunned, expelled from society, driven from home. Chance, or fate, or something, had opened up new possibilities to him. What should he do? There were three courses open.

First, he could stay in Australia and spend his days as a sheep-farmer's assistant, and perhaps, perhaps he might become the owner of a farm himself. But he loathed the idea. He wanted the companionship of men of his own class, he longed to be in the old country. He wanted—yes, he had had dreams of becoming great not only in law, but in politics. No, the life of Australia, especially the life he would have to live, was hateful. Had he possessed business abilities, he might have done something in the commercial world, but he did not; he hated business, and could never succeed. Besides, Australia was not England.

Second, he could go back to England, and claim such of Dulverton's property as was not entailed. That scrap of paper might be of value. It *might*. But in that case his prospects would be prejudiced at the start. He would have to make his claim as Ralph

Endellion, and Arthur Dulverton would contest his claim. That would mean that his name would get into the newspapers, all the old miserable past would be resurrected, it would be hinted that because he was the son of his father, he had forged the paper; there might be suggestions of foul play, and heaven only knew what besides. If he made good his claim he would be regarded with suspicion, and he saw himself boycotted again, while people would point him out as the son of Endellion the swindler, the libertine, the murderer, who had got hold of money by very suspicious means. While if he failed—— he dreaded the very thought.

Then there was the third course. Yes, the old temptation recurred. There the way seemed plain. The innocent would not suffer because of him, and he would be only fulfilling the desires of the man whom he had nursed until he died. Yes, and he would be a good squire. He could do a great deal of good; he could be, and he would be, a blessing to the whole countryside.

And therefore, directly after Robert Dulverton was buried, he made his way to Melbourne. Even then he had settled nothing. At least, he said he had not. Nevertheless, he had taken the first step in the direction of that which his conscience condemned but his heart coveted. Of course, he told himself that his conscience did not condemn him; but all the same, even after he had seen the vessel in Melbourne Harbour, he had spent a whole night in the country struggling with the problem that faced him, and even when he thought his mind was made up, he had hesitated about signing the name in the shipping office.

Still, he had signed it:

“Robert Granville Dulverton.”

His hand was steady, and the writing was firm and clear and bold.

"I hope you'll have a pleasant passage, Mr. Dulverton," said the clerk.

"Thank you. I've no doubt I shall."

"Have you been away from England long?" asked the clerk, with the freedom common to Australians.

"Seven years."

"So long! Why, you must have been a mere boy when you came?"

"Twenty-one."

"Well, you'll find things changed."

"Yes, and I shall be changed too."

"Naturally. Coming to Australia at the age you did, seven years makes a great difference."

"You think so?"

"I know it. I've been in this office a number of years, and I've seen many come and go. Yes, seven years at your age makes a great difference. Good-day. I expect there'll be great rejoicings when you get back."

"I shouldn't be surprised."

He left the office, and then bought many things which he thought he might need for his journey. By eleven o'clock he was on the deck of the vessel. He had seen his state-room, seen that his luggage was safely on board, and was already imagining what might happen when he reached home—*home!*

Not that he had made up his mind. At least, he said not. He was simply going back to England. Of course, he would make his way to Dulverton Manor, and would probably tell the story of his strange meeting with Robert Dulverton at the Cross Roads Inn. He might even show the scrap of paper which Dulverton

and Aaron Beel had signed, and then leave the rest to chance. Or, he might go to some London solicitor, and ask him his opinion concerning the validity of the "will." He was not sure. He was simply going to England; then events must decide his future.

He had not been on board long before he found his way to the library of the vessel. It seemed ages to him since he had handled a book, and he eagerly opened a volume of Shakespeare. The book opened at *Macbeth*, and as he read old memories revived. Page succeeded page. It was as though the past seven years were wiped out, and he were a student again.

"If chance will make me King,
Then chance may crown me,"

he read, and stopped. The drama opened up before his vision, he saw the march of events until the terrible end. In a sense, he saw his own circumstances mirrored in the great tragedy.

"If chance will make me King,
Then chance may crown me."

Had not that been his argument?

He closed the book, but opened it again quickly.

"I'll read something pleasant," he said. "Let me see how the trial scene in *The Merchant of Venice* appears to me after all these years."

Again he became enthralled by the magic of the great master. He saw all the characters gathered in the great judgment hall. The Duke sat on the judgment seat. Bassanio pleaded the cause of his friend, and offered the price of the bond many times over, while Shylock sharpened his knife.

"And I beseech you
Wrest once the law to your authority.
To do a great right do a little wrong,
And curb this cruel devil of his will."

Yes, that was it: "*To do a great right, do a little wrong.*" Was not the wrong he had contemplated very little? He would be harming no one, and——

"It must not be; there is no power in Venice
Can alter a decree established.
'Twill be recorded for a precedent,
And many an error by the same example
Will rush into the State. It cannot be."

He threw the book down, and went on deck. The shores of Australia were becoming dimmer and dimmer; he had turned over a new leaf in the book of his life.

"No," he said with determination, "nothing is done. The fact that I have signed my name as Dulverton goes for nothing. There are dozens of Dulvertons in England. I have taken no irrevocable step, and I will not, no, I will not. I'm simply going back to England, that's all. The lie on the register must not count."

People on board evidently desired to be friendly, but he was glad to note that they took no account of his name. Well, why should they? Before the day was over he had conversations with several people, and he was flattered by the attention bestowed on him.

More than one person had remarked upon his fine physique, his handsome face, and his striking personality. He had been careful when at Melbourne to go to a good tailor, and was delighted to find that the man knew his business. Indeed, when he had dressed for dinner, and looked at himself in the mirror, he could hardly believe that the elegant figure reflected there could be the rough settler that rode up to the Cross Roads Inn in the drenching rain. He knew the value of good clothes, and he knew, too, that he was a good representative of the young, educated, well-born Englishman.

"But I will take no decided step yet," he said. "I will allow events to decide, and, if they decide, am I responsible? I will just do nothing."

"I say, excuse me, but is your name Dulverton?"

The speaker was a man some few years older than himself, and they were just leaving the dinner-table.

The question startled him.

"I asked you," went on the speaker, "because I think I must have met you before. I daresay you will not remember it; but you were at Eton, weren't you? My brother was there, and was in the Eton team which played against Harrow at Lord's. I met you in the pavilion after the match. My brother, Dick Trevor, you know, introduced us. I am Horace Trevor."

"I seem to remember; why, of course I do. How are you?"

He had begun to play his part before he knew. Besides, he had known Dick Trevor at Cambridge, and he had once seen Horace Trevor at the Oxford and Cambridge boat race.

"I thought I knew your face," went on Trevor, "so I asked the captain who you were. When I knew your name was Dulverton, I thought I'd speak. Shall we go into the smoke-room, or would you rather go on deck?"

"I—I think I'd rather go on deck."

"I'm from Somerset, you know," went on Trevor, "so we shall be sure to meet in days to come. Of course, you're going back to Devonshire. I saw the account of your father's death. I suppose you've lived a roving life these last few years?"

He shrugged his shoulders, while a meaning look came into the other's eyes.

"Oh, excuse me," he said, with a laugh, "but a man's youth should not be remembered against him."

And—and—well, I was on the point of being sent down myself. But everybody's forgotten it now."

"Naturally," replied Endellion. "But I expect I was a sort of holy terror, in the old days."

"And now you are going back to settle down as a model landlord. I heard that you were away somewhere. I didn't know where, but I thought you'd have been back, and have taken possession long ago."

"I—I didn't know of—of my father's death till quite lately," replied Endellion. "I knew of it first through an old newspaper which fell into my hands. I was up country, you know—had been in the bush a long time."

"I didn't think it would have been so hard," he thought. "It's come upon me suddenly, too, and I'm dragged, in spite of myself, into the business."

"And so you started as soon as you knew?"

"Of course; it was a dreadful shock, but I could do no other."

"Well, you'll have a great time when you get back. My word, Dulverton, but for a bad boy you've turned out remarkably well, and I should think your people will be proud of their new squire."

Endellion laughed. "Perhaps they'll not recognise me," he said.

"Oh, there'll be no doubt about that," replied Trevor. "No one can mistake the Dulverton face, and the Dulverton eyes. Of course you've changed—that's natural; but even I, who have only seen you once before, remembered you. Indeed, I was surprised to see you looking so well. You see, from what we heard about you, you were——"

"Going to the devil generally, besides drinking myself to death," said Endellion.

"Something like that," replied Trevor.

“ Well, perhaps my old dad was wise to send me off. A man learns wisdom knocking around the world ; and among other things, he learns that no constitution can stand hard drinking, especially in hot climates.”

“ By jove, that’s true ; but shan’t we go into the smoke-room ? I feel a bit chilly.”

Like a man in a dream, Endellion accompanied him

CHAPTER VI

"MAASTER ROBERT"

"LIFE's a topsy-turvy business," said Trevor presently.

"Yes," replied Endellion. "But what led you to make that very original remark just now?"

"I suppose it was meeting you like this. It has naturally raked up old memories. That was a great day at Lord's when we met, wasn't it? I am always proud that a Trevor saved the match."

"Yes," said Endellion, who had not the slightest remembrance of the match; "let's see, Dick was rather brilliant, wasn't he?"

"No; why, of course, you remember the circumstances? Dick couldn't bat for nuts—never could. But he was a bowler. As you know, he fielded very well, but his bowling was his strong point. Harrow was out in the second innings for a hundred and seventy-nine, and as the first innings left them nearly equal, Eton had—let me see—a hundred and seventy-three to win: yes, that was it, a hundred and seventy-three. There had been rain, and the pitch was tricky, so Harrow felt pretty sure of victory. The safe thing for Eton was to play for a draw. But the wickets went down in a very dangerous way. Straker was Harrow's great bowler that year, and he was on the top of his game. On the other hand,

Winchester was Eton's crack batsman, and made runs rapidly, but when nine wickets were down for a hundred and forty the Harrow people shouted like mad. They had the match in their pockets. Of course Dick went in last. As I said, he couldn't bat for nuts, and we all expected a duck. But he was a quiet, plucky beggar was Dick, and put on his pads as coolly as if nothing depended on him.

"'Keep up your stumps,' said the captain; 'that's your business, Trevor.'

"'I suppose I may make a few runs if I can,' replied Dick.

"'Winchester'll do that if you keep up your end,' said the Eton captain, and then, when he went out, he said, 'He'll be out first ball. He never could handle a bat; but he's bowled well, so I can't complain.' But, of course, you remember, Dulverton?"

"Of course. He did keep up his end."

"Not only that; he sent Straker's bowling all over the field. I was never so excited in my life; and when a hundred and seventy went up, I just shouted myself hoarse. Then Winchester was as near caught as could be; in fact, he ought to have been caught, and would have been, but the Harrow long-leg lost his head with excitement. Then there was an over, and Dick had to face Straker's bowling. My heart was in my mouth, I tell you; as for my mother, who was sitting by me, I thought she would have fainted, while the pater looked as pale as if he were going to be hanged. Three balls Dick played without making a run, and then Straker sent him a lob, a cruel, twisty lob. But Dick played it, and sent the ball right on to the pavilion. It might have been Grace, you know. Shouted! I shouted myself hoarse; and as for the pater—well, he bought the

horse which Dick had been coveting for months. Dick told me afterwards that he just shut his eyes and hit for all he was worth, never expecting to have any luck. As for the mater—well, you should have seen her!"

"Of course, I remember now," said Endellion, who had been recalling the account given in the papers. "The Eton chaps carried Dick shoulder high, didn't they?"

"Ah, I thought you'd remember. And you—why, you got screwed that night."

Again Endellion shrugged his shoulders. "Don't rake up these things against me," he said.

"Well, it is a shame," said Trevor, "and I don't think your father was quite fair to send you to Oxford. I wasn't a bit surprised when I heard you were sent down."

"I've developed the tastes of a student since," said Endellion. "I tell you, you'll find me wonderfully improved. When I get back I'm going to atone for past misdemeanours. I've sown my wild oats, and I'm going to be a model squire. I tell you, I shall surprise everybody."

"I can quite believe it," said Trevor. "Of course, as Dick used to say, you were always a good chap at bottom."

"What's Dick doing now?" asked Endellion.

"Oh, he married old Beeson's daughter."

"What, Beeson of Blackdown?"

"Exactly. Of course the mater was awfully anxious about him, because—well, of course, the Trevor estates naturally came to me. Dick failed for the army, and wouldn't look at the church; but he kept his eyes open. He fell in love with Mary Beeson, and now he's better off than I. Of course, it's my belief that Mary

proposed to Dick, but there you are—he's on his feet, has two kids."

"Lucky dog!" said Endellion.

"Yes, there you are. Dick never had any brains, and yet—why, Dick's in Parliament!"

"No?"

"He is; and has made a speech on Leasehold Enfranchisement. He's a good practical farmer too. And yet there are fellows with ten times Dick's brains who are on the stream. Oh, yes, life's a topsy-turvy business. Take your own case now. You actually got sent down from Oxford, and yet here you are on your way home to one of the finest places in Devonshire. Well, suppose you'd died, or hadn't seen that paper—then——"

"I suppose Uncle Arthur or his son would have come in for everything."

"Exactly. And that reminds me. Just at the very time you left England there was that poor chap Endellion, son of the fellow who—who—but you remember. Did you know Endellion, by the way?"

"Yes, I've met him," replied Endellion quietly. He lit a match with a steady hand, and then went on:

"What's become of the poor beggar, by the way?"

"Don't know. I think I heard he was dead. But it was a terrible business. I suppose he was a brilliant fellow. I met him once, and do you know, Dulverton, he resembled you somewhat."

"I've heard it mentioned before, but, if I remember aright, he was a pale, thin fellow."

"Yes, but Dick says he was made of steel wire. Of course he hadn't your build, but he was like you all the same. My word, though, he had hard luck. He thought he was the son of a millionaire, and had all sorts of fine prospects, and then——"

"Yes, he was clean bowled over, and—and kicked out of everything."

"Of course it was hard, but it couldn't be helped. Why, think of his father, the worst villain in Europe. The name fairly stunk. How could people meet him in clubs, and in their houses? Besides, I suppose he lost every penny."

"Exactly," said Endellion. His face had not moved a muscle during this conversation, neither did he betray any emotion whatever. "All the same, it was jolly hard for him."

"Yes; but what could one do? The only thing for him was just to drop out."

"Did you say he was dead?"

"I heard something about it. A good thing too. Of course the whole thing was shockingly sad, and death must have been welcome to him."

"He was always regarded as a good chap, I suppose?"

"Yes; but with a name and a father like that——"

For a moment there was silence, while the two men smoked their cigars.

"Suppose," said Endellion at length—"suppose he were to turn up here, on this boat, for example, how should we treat him?"

"I wonder?" said Trevor. "I think I'm a pretty broad-minded sort of fellow; but I do not know if I—I—— Well, I'm afraid I couldn't know him. His father's case was—so—so ghastly! One *couldn't* be friendly with him, you know."

"And yet he did nothing wrong."

"No; but—but—well, of course, you can't put it in words, can you? You naturally link his name with his father's, don't you see? Suppose I were to walk on deck with him. 'Who's that fellow walking with

Trevor ?' some one would say. 'Oh, Endellion, son of the Endellion who—who——' Of course you see, Dulverton ?"

"Yes, I see," replied the other quietly.

He had been passing through a severe ordeal, and yet, in a sense, he had enjoyed it. He had been able to talk of himself as some one other than himself. He had learned how another regarded him, and, in spite of himself, he felt a grim sort of pleasure in hoodwinking the world.

"Won't you have a whisky ?" said Trevor at length.

"No, thanks."

"Well, you are a reformed character. When you get back you'll be taking the chair at some temperance meeting which the vicar of your parish will be organising."

Endellion laughed. "Everything is possible," he said.

Trevor looked at him steadily. "'Pon my word, Dulverton, I can hardly realise it," he said.

"Realise what ?"

"The change in you."

"You are thinking of the Ethiopian's skin and the leopard's spots, eh ? The truth is, I've had a few shocks, and—and—well, the news of my father's death gave me a blow."

He took his pocket-book from his pocket as he spoke, and extracted a newspaper cutting. "When a fellow has left home, as I did, and comes across a thing like that——" he remarked, as he passed it to the other.

Trevor took it and read. "Yes," he said. "I understand. Well, I hope you'll have a good time in Devonshire."

“Of—of course, I shall feel—jolly strange,” he said.

“Yes—you will,” replied Trevor after a few seconds’ silence.

Presently, when Endellion was alone, he reflected upon his meeting with Trevor, and their subsequent conversation.

“Everything played into my hands,” he muttered—“everything. I meant to—to have been silent. I meant to take no further step to deceive, but it seemed as though I couldn’t do otherwise. Talk about the difficulty of deceiving people; the difficulty is in telling the truth. If I told Trevor I was Endellion he wouldn’t believe it, and if, at length, I did persuade him to believe it, I should be thrown overboard. And—and, no, I couldn’t bear to make it known. I hate the name of Endellion. Trevor says he’s dead. Well, let him be dead. At least, I won’t try to resurrect him. Why need I be squeamish? Circumstances, through no fault of mine, have made my life a hell through some of the best years a man can have. Well, now, I’ll let circumstances alone. It’s too late to draw back now—and—and I don’t want to draw back.”

The voyage passed without any further incident worthy of note. Trevor had made it known that his friend was going back to England to inherit a fine property in Devonshire, and this, added to other things, made him very popular. Girls reserved their sweetest smiles for him, while all the men welcomed him into their circles. During the festivities which were organised no one was more sought after than he, and when at length the vessel drew near Plymouth regrets were expressed on all hands that he decided to land there.

It was on an evening early in April when the vessel entered Plymouth Harbour. It had been hot

summer when he left Australia, and now, by coming to England, he had escaped winter, and was arriving in one of the loveliest counties in England at the loveliest time of the year. The spring was well advanced that year, and, although Endellion felt that his home-coming was anything but ideal, there was a feeling of pleasure in his heart as he noted the tinge of green that was creeping over hill and dale. He pictured the Dulverton Manor lands, thought over the plans he had been making, and wondered.

What should he do? Even yet he had not taken the irrevocable step. It was true he had assumed the name of Dulverton, and acted the part of the heir to the Dulverton estates during the long voyage, but he had not yet finally committed himself. There was still time to draw back. Up to the present he had not spent a penny of the Dulverton money, and had made no claim to the property. The fact that Horace Trevor had professed to recognise him, and had spoken of him as Robert Dulverton to his travelling acquaintances, had not made him responsible. Of course, he had denied nothing; but why should he?

For, as will be seen, Ralph Endellion's temptation was a severe one. He had been embittered against the world. He had, for no fault of his own, been hounded out of his native land. He had struggled hard to wipe out the disgrace which had covered his name, but in vain. And now there was thrown in his way such a chance as scarcely any man ever had before. It is true he continued to doubt about taking it, but the desire to do so had grown with each succeeding day. Perhaps Trevor's attitude towards him had been a greater factor in his life than he had thought. Besides, the treatment he had received had dulled his sensibilities, and had taken away the fine edge of conscience.

He longed to i: revenged on the world that had treated him so cruelly, longed, too, to enter the doors of the Temple of Life, which for years had been closed to him.

And Devonshire looked very fair as the vessel sailed into the historic harbour that April evening. Light, fleecy clouds sailed in the sky, and the sun was setting in a blaze of glory. He was coming home!

There was a good deal of hand-shaking as he left the vessel. He was not the only one of the passengers who landed at Plymouth, but he was the only one who elected to spend the night there. All except Trevor arranged to catch an express train to London, and Trevor found to his delight that a local train would take him home just before midnight.

"I shall be sure to look you up before long," said the Somersetshire man to Endellion as they parted.

"And you shall be as welcome as the flowers," was his reply.

When he was alone in his hotel, he again read Dulverton's papers. Not that there was any need. He had committed every line to heart before leaving Australia; still, there seemed to him a kind of assurance in again perusing them. He had no fear that he would be able to carry off the deception satisfactorily. His many talks with Trevor had been a great help to him in this direction, for Trevor knew Dulverton Manor well, and had talked about it freely. And Endellion had absorbed all that Trevor had said like a piece of blotting paper, taking care all the time not to commit himself in any way.

"I don't know what I'll do even yet," he said, when he went to bed. Nevertheless, when morning came, he went to the station at Plymouth, and booked for Little Petherick, which was the station nearest Dulverton Manor House.

Never, surely, did country look half so fair as Devonshire looked to Ralph Endellion on that glorious April morning. It seemed to him like a veritable paradise, everything fascinated him—the wooded hills, the broad, rich lands, the nestling villages and farmsteads, the quiet railway stations at which they stopped, and the quaint dialect of the peasants.

He had debated that morning before leaving Plymouth whether he should send a wire announcing his arrival; but decided not to do so, for even yet he said he had not made up his mind.

"Little Petherick, Little Petherick," droned the porters, as at length the train drew up at the little wayside station, while Endellion's heart beat fast and furiously. Yes, his heart failed him at the last. He dared not take the step. Still, he stepped from the train, and waited while the porters lifted out his luggage.

"I'll go up to the house as a stranger, and tell the people there that I was with Dulverton at the last," he said to himself; "that shall be my excuse for coming."

With this thought in his mind he walked towards the little station gateway.

"Wy, to be sure, ted'n Maaster Robert, ez et? Iss tes, tes for sure!"

He turned and saw the station-master, who had been promoted from head porter.

"Welcome 'ome, zur. I be glad to zee 'ee. I be for sure. Doan't 'ee knaw me, zur? I'm 'Enery Bray, who've been at this staashun more'n twenty 'ear. Doan't 'ee mind the tricks you used to play on me?"

"You recognise me, then?" said Endellion.

"Recognise 'ee, zur; I knawed the minnit I zet my eyes top 'ee. You be grawed oulder and stouter,

but tes the same faace, zur. Seven 'ears ain't a made so much difference as that."

The station-master's words were the deciding element at this point of Endellion's career.

"They all conspire to make me Robert Dulverton, in spite of myself," he said. "Well, I'll play the part."

"I'm glad to see you, Henry," he said, holding out his hand. "It's good of you to bid me welcome home!"

"I be proud and glad to do ut, zur. 'Ere, booyes, 'ere's Maaster Robert Dulverton come. Now then, give 'im a cheer. God bless 'ee, zur."

In spite of himself, Endellion was moved by the enthusiasm of these simple people.

"Do 'em knaw up at the 'ouse that you be comin', zur?"

"No, Henry. I thought I'd surprise 'em."

"Just like 'ee, Maaster Robert. Your uncle and cousin will laive in quick sticks when they d' zee 'ee. It'll be a bit of a shocker for 'em."

"You think so?"

"It will that. But that's all right. We sh'll zee a bit of life now you be 'ome again, zur."

"I'll try and mend my old ways, and be a good master and friend to you all, Henry," said Endellion.

"Can you get me a horse and trap?"

"Iss, to be sure. Ould Henny Yelland is still alive, zur, and 'e've got the same ould mare. You do mind ould Smiler?"

"Rather!" cried Endellion. The way the man had accepted him caused his spirits to rise.

A few minutes later, with the thanks of the porters still ringing in his ears, for the *largesse* he had distributed, he was seated in Henny Yelland's trap, on his way to Dulverton Manor House.

CHAPTER VII

THE VERDICT OF PETERS

HENRY YELLAND, or "Enny," as he was commonly called, was a little wizened man, who earned his living by cultivating a few acres of land, and by doing odd jobs with his noted mare, for Smiler, the mare in question, *was* noted. Enny declared that there was no such underlip in Devonshire, as that which Smiler possessed. This underlip was responsible for the mare's name. Years before she had been regarded as a mare of great spirit, because she shied at everything. No matter what it was, Smiler shied at it. This led to Enny, who was noted for underfeeding the animal, declaring that he gave her too much oats. Smiler was cured of her shying, however, by being blindfolded, and as Enny's method of blindfolding the animal was rather primitive, he became the subject of many rustic witticisms. Especially was this the case in the winter, when the weather was cold. Owing to a rather unpleasant infirmity, he invariably had a drop of water at the end of his nose

"Where's yer 'ankercher, Enny?" one porter would shout when he appeared at the station.

"Oa, 'ee've a tied it ovver Smiler's eyes," the other would answer.

"No ted'n, tha's Katern Ann's best vail, you vule."

Of course this was followed by loud gusts of laughter.

Eenny was noted for three things: first, for being the owner of Smiler; second, for having a wife of whom he stood in mortal fear, and to whom he had to tell everything; and third, for being an insatiable gossip.

Eenny eyed Endellion keenly as he got into the trap.

"You d' mind me, Maaster Robert?" he remarked, after they had gone some little distance along the road.

"As if I'd be likely to forget you," said Endellion.

"How's Katern Ann?"

"To think of yer mindin' she too!" said Eenny.

"She'll be purty proud when I tell 'er."

"I must come and see her as soon as I can," said Endellion. He would have liked to have asked about the children, but was not sure there were any. The chaff of the porters had made it perfectly safe for him to mention his wife.

"You be chaanged, Maaster Robert, but I knawed 'ee the minnit I seed 'ee."

A silence fell between them for a few seconds, for both felt somewhat ill at ease—for very different reasons, however.

"We thought you was never comin'," said Eenny at length. "We 'eerd you wos dead, and aw—we 'eerd lots ov things. You zee, Maaster Robert, tes a goodish bit now since the Squire died, so to spaik."

"Yes, I was away in the bush. It was only by chance that I came across a newspaper, and so learnt what had happened."

"You doan't zay zo. 'Ow vur wos 'ee from a poast offis then, Maaster Robert?"

"Oh, twenty miles at least."

"Must a bin a wish't plaace. But there, of course, yer uncle, he took on everything, so to spaik."

"My Uncle Arthur?"

"Iss, fer sure. You'll 'scuse me, Maaster Robert, but 'ee's in fer risin' the rents oal round. He's goin' on as though everything do belong to 'ee. I d' fancy 'ee waan't be ovver plaized to zee you."

"No?" He was not quite sure how to act; all the same he was anxious to obtain all the information possible.

"You waan't put up my rent, will 'ee, Maaster Robert? 'Scuse me for spaikin' so plain like; but I knawed 'ee as a booy, Maaster Robert, and—and I d' vind it terble 'ard to make a livin'."

"I'll see that you're fairly treated, Enny," said Endellion. "You say that my uncle has taken possession?"

"Iss, he and young Maaster Arthur. People du zay that th' oull man ev gived up lawyerin' altogether on account of comin' in to Dulverton. Both on 'em du maake out that you wos killed in furrin paarts, but noan of us b'leaved ut. You shud a heerd Katern Ann when I towld 'er what wos bein' zed. 'Muster Robert ded!' ses she; 'ted'n like un to go and git killed. 'Ee'll kum 'ome oal rite,' ses she. Still people 'ave purtly talked."

"You don't seem to like my uncle," said Endellion.

"We doan't knaw much 'bout 'im in thaise parts," replied Enny. "As you d' knaw, Maaster Robert, th' oull squire did'n 'ave 'em doun 'ere very much, but e've got a name for bein' a 'ard man, a 'ard man, so to spaik. Forgive me, a poor workin' man, spaikin' so 'bout my betters, sir; but, as you may zay, you axed me."

"Oh, pray don't mind me, Enny," said Endellion. "Of course I've been away so long that I don't know how things have gone. You can tell me all you know."

"Thank 'ee, zur. Besides, I've 'eerd as 'ow you never did git on well with your cousin; but of course, it mayn't be true."

"Well, you see he was a pattern boy, and—I wasn't."

"Ah, that's et; but for oal that us be oal main glad to zee 'ee, Maaster Robert. Ther, Hallivick Farm do luke purty, don't it? You'll be purtly pleased to go and zee the ould plaaces, waan't 'ee then, zur?"

"Naturally," said Endellion. He was afraid to volunteer any statements, as he knew neither the names of the farms nor the owners. When he took possession he would naturally look up all the details in connection with the estate, but at present he knew he must weigh every word before speaking.

"Who farms Hallivick now?" he asked.

"Oa, Pitter Cundy is there still. Pitter'll never laive et. 'Ee d' know which side his bread es buttered. Ah, I can zee what you be lakin' ver, Maaster Robert."

"What?" asked Endellion, who had noted every lane, every turning, and every cottage since they had started.

"Why, ver the fust sight of Dulverton, so to spaik. Iss, us can zee et when we git to the brow of this hill."

Endellion's heart beat rapidly. In a sense it seemed to him as though he were really Robert Dulverton, and the part he was playing became less and less difficult. For weeks he had been called Dulverton, and now, on his arrival in Devonshire, he had been taken for Robert Dulverton, and that without any question; it seemed natural for him to be the wayward son, going home to his fortune.

A few minutes later they reached the brow of the hill, and there, situated on a slope on the opposite side of the valley, was the house of which for long weeks he

had been dreaming. His heart thrilled as he saw it. It was all that Robert Dulverton had described it, and more. Never had he seen such a lovely homestead. Tall elms and oaks grew in profusion all around it, while broad park lands stretched from the gardens to the river, which coiled its way down the valley, shining like a broad riband of steel. The house itself was built of stone, the grey granite so common in Devonshire, and fulfilled the fondest dreams of those who love an old manor house.

Endellion looked and looked, as though he were fascinated by its homelikeness, its restfulness, its loveliness.

"Butiful ould plaace. I wonder 'ow you cud ever a left et, Maaster Robert."

"So do I," he almost gasped.

"'Twud a bin a pity for th' ould lawyer to 'ave 'ad et; but I shudden be serprised like ef he wur to fight fur't now."

But Endellion did not heed him. His eyes were feeding on the beauty of the old homestead.

"Ther, and you can zee Squire Donnithorne's from here too," said Enny.

"Where?—I did not know—that is——"

"W'y, you must a zeed et 'underds of times from 'ere," cried Enny. "Ther, look."

Endellion's eyes followed the direction of Enny's whip, and saw a large, square, bewindowed mansion, some two or three miles away.

"Miss Miriam isn't married, is she?"

"Ain't 'eerd nothin' 'bout et," replied Enny. "I have 'eerd that young Maaster Arthur d' main to marry 'er; but then we doan't knaw nothing."

Endellion felt that he hated Arthur Dulverton, and he vowed that this marriage should never be. He

was squire of Dulverton, and—but his thoughts refused to shape themselves further.

The trap slowly descended into the valley, and as he drew near to the house the unreality of his proposed claim appealed to him. How dare he go up to the house which had been owned by the Dulvertons for so many generations, and claim to be the owner? But another element had also entered his life. Perhaps he had inherited something of his father's nature. After all, the essence of life was risk, and there was something fascinating in the excitement of making his claim. There was speculating blood in his veins, which made him long to stake everything at one throw of the dice.

He knew he had a difficult part to play, but no fear entered his heart. Moreover, at this time the moral element of the question did not trouble him. For no fault of his own he had been robbed of everything he held most dear, and now he was going to take the chance which had been offered him. Still, as we have said, he realised his difficulties. He did not know the geography of the house, he had no information concerning the position of a single room. All that he could learn he had learnt, but there were many things of which he was entirely ignorant. If he could only tide over a day or two without arousing suspicion the rest would be easy, but those first few days would be full of pitfalls.

Still, the fact that Trevor, the station-master, the porters, and Enny Yelland had all accepted him as Robert Dulverton without question gave him confidence, and it was with grim determination in his heart that he got out of the trap when at length it drew up at the Manor House door. All the same, he felt that he was going into a strange house like a man blindfolded..

"Just ring the bell, will you, Enny?" he said, as he pretended to look after his baggage.

"To be zure," said Enny, anxious to keep himself in evidence. Oh, what a story he would have to tell Katern Ann on his return!

A few seconds later he heard the clanking of a bell, followed by the sound of footsteps. The door opened, and the face of an old man, perhaps seventy years of age, appeared. Endellion felt that his real ordeal had commenced.

"Holloa, Maaster Pitters, I've brot 'ee somebody," said Enny excitedly.

Endellion kept his face away for a moment. He felt his head whirling.

"Who is it?" asked the old serving man.

"Why, caan't 'ee zee?"

Endellion turned his face to the door, and walked slowly towards it. When he came within a yard of the man he stopped, and gazed steadily at him. For several seconds they stood looking at each other. Recognition, doubt, bewilderment, delight, fear, were all in turn expressed on the old serving man's face, then he cried out:

"May the Lord be praised, 'tis Master Robert!"

"You know me then, Peters? 'Tis nearly eight years now. A long time, eh? But, 'pon my word, you look as young as ever."

"Yes, I recognise you, sir, I recognise you. You're changed, sir, but I recognise you. Welcome home, sir, welcome home!"

He caught hold of Endellion's hand, and his eyes grew dim with tears.

"Another look, sir, to assure myself that it is Master Robert, and no other."

He rubbed his eyes, and looked again steadily.

"You've altered, sir, yes, you've altered; but it's the same face, the same face. I should have knowed you anywhere, sir."

"I'm afraid I didn't write my father often, Peters," said Endellion, "but I think I remember telling him I'd changed."

"Yes, sir; oh, why didn't you come home before? The master grieved, sir, grieved! I think it broke his heart at the last. But he was very proud, sir, very proud. Ah, but I forgot; I shouldn't be talking like this. Forgive me, Master Robert, but your coming has—has upset me. Not but what I am glad to see you. Oh, yes, thank God you've come. I hope, sir, that the house will go on the same as ever. You'll excuse me, sir, but the old master used to fear about things. You know he loved every stick on the place, sir; and of course your—your going away was a sad grief to him."

Enny Yelland was sent away by this time, and the two stood together.

"I understand, Peters, I understand," said Endellion. "And you needn't fear. I'm a changed man, and I'll do my duty to—to every one."

"Forgive me, sir, but—but—I hope you understand. I used to play with you when you were nothing but a baby, and I'm afraid I took liberties in giving you advice when you were growing up. But I loved you, Master Bob—you know that. That was why——"

"Yes, I understand, Peters. No wonder you were fearful about me. But you needn't fear for the future."

"I was afraid you'd never come home, Master Bob, and then I was afraid that if you did come home you—you—— Well, you know, Master Bob. Forgive me, but

I've been a servant in this house, boy and man, for more than fifty years."

"Of course I forgive you, Peters; and now tell me everything."

They stood in the entrance hall, and Peters went on excitedly:

"Oh, you don't know how upset I am, sir. I am not as young as I used to be, and the loss of the old master nearly killed me. But I shall have some one to live for now, sir. And that reminds me—I ought to have told you before—they're here now, sir; they've been here for the last hour."

"Who's been here?"

"Your uncle, Master Bob. Excuse me for calling you by the old name, but I love to think of you that way."

"My Uncle Arthur?"

"Yes, and your cousin, and the lawyers."

"The lawyers! What lawyers?"

"Come into the dining-room a minute, sir; we can talk better there. They are in the library at this very minute."

"But why?"

"I don't know, Master Bob; none of us know, but we've heard things, and it seems as though there's truth in it. But of course, now you've come, it'll make all the difference. All the same, I wish you'd sent word that you were coming."

"Truth in what? Tell me, Peters."

"Well, sir, they said you were dead."

"Who said so?"

"Your uncle. He said it was more than a year since your father heard from you, and—and— Well, anyhow, he's acted as though he was master for months now. And young Mr. Arthur has been ordering

us around as though—well, you know *his* way, Master Bob. And Mrs. Dixon has been given notice to leave, because—well——”

“What, Peters?”

“We don’t know anything, sir, but some have it that he’s going to marry Miss Miriam Donnithorne. But even if that were true, he’d want a housekeeper just the same. Besides, Mrs. Dixon has been housekeeper here for more than twenty years.”

Endellion’s mind worked quickly. He did not know who Mrs. Dixon was, but Peters’ remarks had given him the information needed.

“Anyhow, my uncle is here, with Arthur and the lawyers?”

“Mr. Binns, the steward, is here also,” replied Peters. “From what I can find out, Mr. Binns has been called upon to submit all his books to your uncle.”

“But Uncle Arthur was not my father’s lawyer,” said Endellion.

“No, sir, and that’s why things have been delayed. Mr. Dolgeth has protested against your uncle’s proceedings, sir.”

“And is Mr. Dolgeth there now?”

“Yes, Master Bob.”

A bright light flashed into Endellion’s eyes. The situation had become interesting. Already he felt a strong antagonism towards Robert Dulverton’s uncle, and he wanted to strike the decisive blow at once.

“Peters,” he said, “show me into the library as though I were a stranger.”

Peters understood in a second.

“Yes, sir,” he said; and his eyes flashed with satisfaction.

“Master Robert has come back,” he said quietly, as he opened the library door.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MEETING

As we have seen, Ralph Endellion realised the difficulty of the task before him. He knew that he was playing for tremendous stakes, and that any false move on his part would cause all his plans to crumble to the ground like a castle of cards. In many respects he was like a man skating on very thin ice: if the ice broke he would be submerged in unfathomable depths.

But he was not afraid. He had calculated everything to the smallest detail, and felt confident. Of course his great weapon, not only of attack, but of defence, was his likeness to Robert Dulverton. That lay at the heart of the whole business. One man after another had, without any suggestion from him, taken him for Dulverton without question. It is true that if he were examined closely some might detect trifles in his personal appearance which might raise doubt. But this could be easily explained by the fact that he had been away from England more than seven years, years which must naturally cause great changes. Then he had had the advantage of being with Dulverton during his last days, and of hearing him talk about his home life. He also possessed all Dulverton's papers, including the "diary," which contained information of inestimable value. He was therefore well prepared

to play the part into which, as it seemed to him, circumstances had forced him.

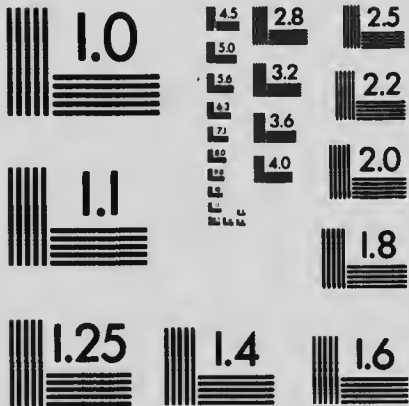
He also possessed nerves of iron, and a keen, quick mind. He was not a boastful or over-confident man, but he knew that if it came to a battle of wits he would be able to hold his own. He feared neither Arthur Dulverton nor his son; rather, he felt a kind of joy in thwarting their plans, and disappointing them in their hopes. He had been led to dislike them out there in the Cross Roads Inn, and what he had since heard had strengthened the feeling. For weeks he had been in doubt what to do, but now that he had arrived at Dulverton he determined to go forward, never faltering.

All the same he realised the weakness of his position. There might be numbers of people whom he ought to know, but of whose identity he was absolutely ignorant: the steward, for example, and his father's lawyer, and Mrs. Dixon; each or all of these might place him in a position of great difficulty. What if awkward searching questions were asked? Suppose he were denounced as an impostor—what then? Having gone so far, he meant to go on to victory; but there were difficulties. Of course he had faced those difficulties, and was prepared to meet them. He had had the advantage of being reared as an English gentleman, just as Robert Dulverton had. He also had gone to a public school, and then had passed on to a university. He could shoot, and ride, and fence, and knew what would be expected of him. He had visited Eton, although he had been educated at Clifton; he also knew Balliol College well, although he was a Cambridge man. He knew Dulverton's handwriting too, and had no difficulty in producing calligraphy that was practically identical with it.



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Of course there were risks, but he must take them. Everything had conspired to make him Robert Dulverton, and he saw no sufficient reason for being any one else. Horace Trevor, at a time when he had wellnigh abandoned his project, had made it almost impossible for him to pretend to be any one else, and when, on his arrival at Little Petherick station, he had, in his heart, forsworn the whole scheme, the station-master had hailed him as heir to Dulverton Manor. Besides, had not Robert Dulverton made him his heir? And had not circumstances made it impossible for him to appear under his true name? Circumstances had hounded Ralph Endellion out of the country, and circumstances had brought Robert Dulverton back to his father's house.

There was nothing for it, then, but to play his game boldly, taking no more risks than were absolutely necessary, but taking those that were necessary with bold confidence.

That was why he decided to make his way without delay into the room where Arthur Dulverton and his son were making their claim to the estates, and to risk his whole position by one decisive step.

There was something dramatic in his entrance. At the table situated in the middle of the room sat four men. He had no difficulty in recognising Lawyer Dulverton and his son—he detected the family likeness in a second—the steward also: he was fairly sure of him on account of the big rent books at his side, and by a certain instinct for which he could not account. As for the other, he must be the late squire's lawyer.

"Peters," said Lawyer Dulverton, who had not heard the old man clearly, "I thought I told you that on no account were we to be disturbed."

"Mr. Robert has come back, sir," repeated the old man quietly, but with a note of triumph in his voice nevertheless.

"What!"

Surprise, bewilderment, dismay were all expressed in the single word.

Endellion never hesitated. He stepped across the room, and came close to where Arthur Dulverton sat.

"How are you, Uncle Arthur?" he said, holding out his hand.

But the other did not take it. He sat staring at the young man as though he were incapable of movement. He was a short, thickly built man, and had evidently fared well in life. His hair was thick and bristly; it had once been jet black, but was now iron grey. His eyebrows were bushy, while underneath them gleamed a pair of steely grey eyes. His mouth and chin were cleanly shaved, but he wore a fringe of a beard—common to elderly men in the legal profession fifty years ago.

"You did not expect to see me back, eh?" went on Endellion, with easy assurance, and the tones of his voice suggested laughter. "I heard up at Little Petherick an hour ago that I was dead, and when Henry Bray caught sight of me he thought he had seen a ghost. Oh, but I'm not a ghost yet. Just feel my hand, Uncle, and welcome back your nephew."

Still Arthur Dulverton did not speak. He had, not an hour before, declared that his nephew was undoubtedly dead, and that, as the natural heir to the estates, he claimed the right to examine all papers, and to place matters on a satisfactory footing. Moreover, it seemed impossible that this bronzed and bearded young fellow, even although he bore an unmistakable likeness to his nephew, could be really

he. He knew as a certain fact that Robert Dulverton had lived a vagabond life, and had ruined his health by excesses. Only two years before a man who had come home from Australia had told him that he had seen him up in the bush, a mere wreck of a man, one who could not live much longer. And he had built upon it and rejoiced in it. Old Squire Dulverton knew it too. He had been a proud man, and talked little, but Arthur Dulverton knew that the news he had received from his son had nearly broken his heart. That was why, as month by month after his brother's death went by, and there was no news of young Dulverton, he felt sure that he lay in an unknown grave in some distant land. That, too, was why he determined to take possession. He had always envied the squire's position. He, as the younger son, had to adopt a profession, while his brother lived at the Manor House, and, worse still, his son Arthur must, if the heir ever came back, hold an inferior position to his cousin. Not that he was a poor man; he had, for that part of the country, a remunerative practice. But that did not satisfy him. He coveted Dulverton Manor. It had been his boyhood's home, and he longed for it, not so much for himself as for his son Arthur, who was a man after his own heart.

For months he had been rejoicing at the thought of Arthur as squire. He was not a wild, drinking, ne'er-do-well like Robert, but well-behaved, calculating, crafty, money-loving, and power-loving. Thus he had heard with satisfaction that his nephew was but the wreck of a man, and that his excesses must surely kill him before long.

How, then, could this tall, stalwart, bronzed man before him be his nephew? There was not a suggestion of disease in the muscular frame before him, no indica-

tion of a wild, dissolute, drink-sodden, disease-sodden life. On the other hand, his own son looked puny, insignificant beside him. And yet—and yet—what did it mean?

“Won’t you shake hands, Uncle?” cried Endellion.

“You are not my cousin.”

It was young Arthur Dulverton who spoke. The words escaped him in spite of himself, and he uttered them with a feeling of despair in his heart. The fact was he did not believe them. He felt sure that the young man who stood before them was his cousin; he had the same features, the same coloured hair and eyes, and of course no two men could so resemble each other. Yes, the dead man who had risen again might look an inch taller than his cousin as he knew him, and instead of being a physical wreck he was healthy, and strong, and handsome, but it was he—his cousin come back to claim his own.

Nevertheless, the words escaped him. They had passed his lips before he was aware. The reason for his speaking them was a desire to fight for his possession inch by inch. For weeks he had been thinking of the time when he would be looked upon as the heir of Dulverton Manor; it had, in fact, been one of the greatest longings of his life, for so much depended on it. As boys he and Robert had looked upon each other as rivals for the smile of Miriam Donnithorne, and Arthur believed that Miriam cherished the memory of Robert. But if he took possession of Dulverton, then it would be a proof that Robert was dead, and therefore he would be out of his way. And now the home-coming of his cousin had destroyed everything. He would claim everything, have everything, while he, Arthur, would be only the lawyer’s son. Thus it was a cry of despair, of struggle, of bitter

disappointment, and a desire to fight for the position he coveted.

"What, Arthur!" cried Endellion. "How are you? I not your cousin, eh? Am I so much altered as that? And yet I believe I have a scar on my right shin where you kicked me; it must be twelve or thirteen years ago. Don't you remember, Arthur? I wanted you to fight because—— But no, we won't rake up these things now. Here I am safe and sound."

Lawyer Dulverton listened like a man in a dream. The coming of his nephew had been so sudden, so unexpected, that it had bewildered him. It did not seem real. And yet there he stood before him.

"It is he!" he gasped.

"Yes, it is I, Uncle," said Endellion. "Bad pennies always seem to turn up, don't they? Oh, I can assure you I'm worth twenty dead men yet. I know I played the fool with myself years ago, and there was ground for people believing I was killing myself. But we Dulvertons are a tough race. Besides, I've put on the curb, Uncle, and now—— Well, I'm a changed man——another man, in fact——and will do credit to the old name. Won't you shake hands with me?"

"No," said Lawyer Dulverton, "I will not."

He was sorry in after days that he had adopted this attitude, but he was scarcely master of himself.

"But why?" asked Endellion. He knew he was passing through a severe ordeal, but he was very cool and collected.

"Because——because——yes, it would have been better if you had not come back," he replied, not realising how his words might be construed. "You went away in disgrace, and every one remembers it. You broke your father's heart, you brought a black shadow on the Dulverton name. If you had any sense of——of decency

in your heart—you—you would never have come back to—to again disgrace the name which, in spite of you, is honoured throughout the county."

"You think I made a mistake by living, eh?" said Endellion. "Well, perhaps I did; but then, as you know, I always had a contrary nature. I have always turned up at the wrong moment, and it seems as though such is the case now. But then, you see, I am here, Uncle, safe and sound, and as strong as a horse. And as I am here you might as well shake hands."

"No, I will not shake hands with the scapegrace who—who killed my brother," said the lawyer.

Endellion grasped the situation completely. He saw what his home-coming meant to the men before him, he understood their feelings. They were bewildered, almost maddened by the turn events had taken, and were not masters of themselves. In a sense he sympathised with them; all the same, a feeling of anger and scorn for them possessed him. He felt that he was the true heir to the Dulverton estates, while these men were angry at him for coming back to claim his own.

"You refuse to shake hands with me, do you?" he said.

"Yes, I do," replied Lawyer Dulverton.

"Well, perhaps it is no wonder. My coming must alter—well, your prospects," he said banteringly. "But may I ask what all these papers mean? And as you happen to be in my library, I should like to know what your business may be. I am—er—interested."

He spoke with perfect coolness, perfect naturalness, and yet his heart was very bitter towards Lawyer Dulverton and his son. He wanted to punish them.

For a few seconds there was silence. Lawyer

Dulverton and his son began to realise their own position, and could think of nothing to say. The others were so interested in the drama that was being played before their eyes that they were incapable of speech.

"You see, Mr.—Mr.—Robert, we did not expect you," said Mr. Binns, "and—well, Mr. Dulverton, as the squire's only brother, naturally wanted things settled. That was why I, your father's steward, who have known the estate for so many years, offered the books for examination."

"That's very kind of my uncle," said Endellion in a bantering tone, "very kind indeed, and I appreciate his interest very much. But, you see, I don't know that I'm in the humour for business just now, and— Well, I think I can attend to everything without my uncle's assistance."

Again there was silence. Although Endellion spoke very quietly the air was tense with excitement.

"And so, Binns," he went on, "you may as well put away all these papers just now, and when I am rested a little, say to-morrow, or the day after, you and I will go into everything at our leisure."

He seemed to regard the matter as settled, and walked towards the window, and looked at the beautiful landscape which presented itself to him.

"It is lovely," said Endellion, as if talking to himself. "During all the years I have been away I have seen nothing half so fine. It is just heavenly to be home again."

The words, simple as they were, aroused Arthur Dulverton to greater anger than ever. He was of a very choleric temperament at best, and as he saw all his desires brought to nothing by the home-coming of the ne'er-do-well son, he felt what he would have

termed "righteous indignation." Besides, he had always been known as a fighting lawyer, and hated giving up anything on which he had set his heart.

"How do we know you are my brother's son?" he cried. "How do we know that you are not an impostor?"

"What!"

Ralph Endellion turned upon him with flashing eyes. Up to now he had kept his temper admirable, but his nerves began to feel the strain.

"You will have to prove your identity," went on the lawyer. "It is all very well for you to come home here—and—and pretend to be the heir of one of the finest estates in Devonshire, and—and——"

The speech broke down miserably. He knew he was speaking to unbelieving ears. Only a few seconds before Peter Binns, the steward, had spoken to the newcomer as "Mr. Robert," while the look on the face of Mr. Dolgeth, who, to Arthur Dulverton's deep chagrin, had for years acted as the squire's solicitor, dismayed him.

As may be imagined, moreover, Endellion was not slow to understand. He had naturally a keen, penetrating, indeed a powerful mind, and the circumstances in which he was placed made him especially quick to see the current of events.

"I see," he said quietly. "It was not because of my moral shortcomings that you refused to welcome me, but because you claimed to be heir to my father's estates. My home-coming destroyed your plans. Well, perhaps it's natural. All the same, I think I have some little interest in the matter, and, as I said, I do not feel in the humour for business just now."

But Lawyer Dulverton was past reasoning just now. He was ready to fight against all odds.

"Prove your rights!" he cried. "Prove your rights!" He knew he was playing a very undignified part; he felt sure, too, that the man before them was his brother's scapegrace son, but he was not master of himself.

Still, the moment was a critical one, and Endellion knew it. He felt his face become blanched at the words which Arthur Dulverton spoke, and for a few seconds he hardly knew what to say. But again his wonderful likeness to Robert Dulverton helped him.

Mr. Binns had been listening like a man undecided what to do. Up to Endellion's entrance he had sided with Arthur Dulverton in everything. Mr. Dolgeth had pleaded for delay. He had urged that as there was no proof that Robert Dulverton was dead, time should be allowed to pass before Lawyer Dulverton should take possession. But Mr. Binns had taken the part of the man, who had promised him the continuance of his position as steward. Since Endellion's entrance he had been bewildered, undecided. The suddenness of his coming had somewhat unbalanced his mind, but as he considered the situation he made up his mind.

"How can any one doubt that this is Mr. Robert?" he said. "I knew him as a boy, and although his years of—of travel have naturally changed him, it is impossible not to——"

"Let me have a good look at him! Come to the window and let me see!"

It was young Arthur Dulverton who spoke. Ever since he had uttered the words, "You are not my cousin," he had been like one in a dream, but now his mind had become active again.

CHAPTER IX

THE SERVANTS' WELCOME

ENDELLION did not shrink. He knew how severe was the ordeal which young Arthur Dulverton had proposed, but his iron nerves stood him in good stead. If Lawyer Dulverton and his son were playing for big stakes, so was he, and he determined to play every card in his hand. Besides, all the fighting instincts in his nature were aroused, and it had become to him, not so much a matter of establishing his claims as Robert Dulverton, as that of winning a victory over the men who hated him.

"I am receiving a peculiar welcome from my relations," he said with a laugh, "but by all means let us come to the light. You always had keen eyes, corkscrew. What! don't you remember what I used to call you when you spied on me in the old days?"

Arthur Dulverton winced at the other's words. If he had had any doubts they were dispelled now. No one but his cousin had ever called him by this nickname.

"Ah, you thought I had forgotten the nickname, did you?" Endellion went on; "but you see I haven't. I remember lots of other things, too. Perhaps you would like to ask me about them?"

It was a bold move to make, but he thought it worth while. In reading Dulverton's diary he had

come across certain incidents relating to young Arthur Dulverton which he was sure that gentleman did not wish to come to light.

"Now," went on Endellion, going to the window, "do you recognise me, or do you wish me to tell some of those little anecdotes of the old days?"

Arthur Dulverton gave him one keen look, and then went sullenly back to his seat. He seemed to be debating in his own mind what to say and to do. Presently he turned to his father. "I think it's time for us to be going home," he said.

"You are satisfied, then?" asked the lawyer, looking out of his chair again.

"It's he right enough," he replied; then, angrily, he looked out of the window as though he were trying to understand what it all meant.

"I am quite aware," said Endellion, "that my sudden home-coming must have been a great surprise to you. But—well, naturally, I did not think there would be any doubt as to who I was. If, however, there is any further question, I shall be willing to submit to Mr. Dolgeth some of the letters which my father sent me. I am afraid they are not very complimentary to me, but—"

"There's not the slightest need, Mr. Robert," said Mr. Dolgeth, "not the slightest. I recognised you in a moment. Of course your coming was a great surprise—and—and has altered the whole outlook of things. Of course, too, one can quite understand that Mr. Arthur Dulverton and his son were—well—greatly disturbed. But as for any doubt as to who you are, it is quite out of the question—quite. What do you say, Binns?"

"Oh, quite," assented the steward, "and I for one am rejoiced to see you back, Mr. Robert. If there has

been any seeming coolness in my greeting, it is not from want of warmth of feeling, but from the fact that I was utterly overwhelmed—overcome, in fact. I heartily welcome you back, Mr. Robert, and so, I am sure, will every one for miles around. You will find everything in order, sir, and I shall be prepared to go into everything with you whenever you will. What do you say, Mr. Dolgeth?"

"Certainly, certainly," replied the lawyer. "I am sure every tenant on the estate, farmer and cottager alike, will greet Mr. Robert with joy."

"Lunch is served, Mr. Robert and gentlemen."

It was Peters who spoke, and again there was a tone of triumph in the old man's voice. He looked around the room as he spoke, and his eyes rested lovingly on his new master.

Endellion heaved a sigh of relief. He felt that the first great ordeal was over, and that he had come through it triumphantly. In spite of what Lawyer Dulverton and his son had said, he knew that not a shadow of doubt existed. His wonderful likeness to the dead man and his knowledge of the past had smoothed away all difficulties.

"Lunch!" he cried, "that's good. Of course you'll stay with me, gentlemen. And you too, Uncle, and Arthur, you will naturally remain."

"No, thank you," said the old lawyer. He was too deeply wounded to take his defeat easily. "I would rather not. Besides, I shall doubtless be in the way; you'll want to discuss affairs with—with Dolgeth and Binns."

"No, 'pon my word, not to-day," said Endellion. "Not a word of business shall pass my lips. There are too many other things to discuss, Uncle. I naturally want to hear about my—my father."

"I am afraid I am not the one to talk of him," was the reply. "I feel his loss too keenly, and not only that, but naturally think of the darkness which rested on his last days on account of—of——"

"His scapegrace son," said Endellion, as the other hesitated. "But you'll find I'm a changed man. As I told you, I pulled up, and I promise you that—that I shall be another man from what you knew me."

"I trust so," said Lawyer Dulverton. "I trust, too, that the name will not again be disgraced by any more Nick Brewer affairs."

"I promise you it shall not," replied Endellion. "You're sure you won't stay to lunch?"

"Perfectly sure, thank you. Come, Arthur."

"Peters," said Endellion, "my uncle and cousin are not staying to lunch; see them out, will you? Good-day, Uncle; good-day, Arthur, old chap. Don't be afraid to ride over, and look me up."

But neither of them spoke a word, although both of them felt murder in their hearts.

Endellion led the way into the dining-room, where the table was laid for five persons. His heart was beating wildly, but he kept himself well under control. His first action was to go straight to one of the windows and look out over the surrounding country. As he did so he gave a cry of delight. Never, he thought, had he seen anything so perfectly beautiful. The lawns and park land sloped away to the river, while beyond was a vast panorama of hill and dale.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, "but—but——"

"We quite understand, Mr. Robert," remarked Mr. Dolgeth. "Naturally you must feel overwhelmed at the sight of—of—well, these scenes of your boyhood. It would be wonderful if you did not, eh, Binns?"

"Certainly, certainly," replied the steward. "You must be greatly rejoiced to come back, Mr. Robert?"

"It's just heaven, just heaven!" cried the young man; "but I say, Peters, you've had places laid for five. Of course you thought that my uncle and cousin would have stayed. But what about Mrs. Dixon? If I remember aright——"

"Yes, Mr. Robert, Mrs. Dixon sometimes dined with the squire; he looked on her as a friend, you know, but, as I told you, your uncle had—well, discharged her."

"But is she not in the house?"

"Yes, sir. Of course I told her, and, sir, she wants to see you very much, only, seeing what had taken place, she——"

"Will you ask her to come in, Peters? And, by the way, I suppose all the servants know I have returned?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of course you told them. And I expect some of them were here when—that is, before I left home?"

"Two of them were, sir—there's Betsy, the cook, and Simmons, the upper housemaid."

"Then tell them to come in, Peters. Forgive me, gentlemen, if I act rather strangely, but you can guess how it feels coming back in this way."

A few seconds later the servants came trooping in. It was easy to see that they were in a wild state of excitement. Since Peters had told them of their new master's return, only the cook had known how to contain her joy. That lady, however, took a practical view of things.

"If Muster Bob is like he used to be, he'll be hungry," she cried, "and it's vur me to zee to it thet he d' 'ave a good lunch."

Endellion gave them a quick, searching glance. He

singled out Mrs. Dixon immediately. She had all the appearance of an old and tried housekeeper.

"Mrs. Dixon!" he cried.

The old lady came forward with tear-dimmed eyes.

"Thank God you've come home, Mr. Robert," she cried. "And—and you're not so much altered as I thought you would be. And—and——" here she burst out sobbing.

"Come, come now, Mrs. Dixon. No crying, or I shall think you are not glad to see me back."

"It's—it's for joy, Mr. Robert!" she sobbed.

"After all, Dulverton couldn't have been such a very bad chap," he reflected. "It's evident too, that I've struck a right chord."

"Well, cheer up, Mrs. Dixon," he said aloud. "I shall want you to do the honours of the table on this the day of my home-coming. As for you others, I'm very glad to see you all. I'm sure you served my father well, and I want you all to remain, and serve me well. I see that my old friend Betsy, the cook, remembers me well; don't you, Betsy?"

"I shud think I du, sur. You be bigger, and stouter, but you be just the zaam. God bless you, sur."

"Amen, Betsy. Then I remember Simmons, too. Well, I'm glad to be back, glad to see you all. Of course I feel a bit strange coming back in this way, but I shall settle down presently. Anyhow, I wanted to see you all before I had lunch, and I expect you wanted to see me, eh?"

"That wə ded, sur," was the general murmur.

"And aw we be main glad!"

"That's right. Well, I think you'll find me a good master. I'm older and, I hope, wiser than I was nearly eight years ago, and I'll promise you that none

of you shall be sorry that you have a new master. And now I want my lunch, and I'm sure Mr. Dolgeth and Mr. Binns want theirs, so we'll have it right away. As for you, well, I want Betsy to cook a special supper for the servants to-night, and then, later on, you shall have a regular jollification."

"Thank you, Muster Robert. God bless 'ee, sur! We be main glad you be come 'ome, sur," they murmured as they trooped away.

"To think that he shud a-minded me!" cried Betsy.

"And me, too," rejoined Simmons.

"He's purtly improved, too," said the cook. "He's kinder, and more considerate like, he es for sure. Well, he might a bin a bit wild, but he allus 'ad a good heart."

"It'll be a new plaace naow," remarked another. "We'll 'ave parties and dances, and oal that zoart a thing."

"Iss, and we shaan't be sent packin'. Gor jay! but Lawyer Dulverton will be mazed."

"A good job too! I shud'n a-stayed ef 'ee'd come."

"Nor I; but now we sh'll 'ave grand times. It du seem wonderful, doan't et? And ed'n Maaster Robert 'ansome, and waan't everybody go wild 'bout 'un?"

"They will fer sure. He doan't look like a drinkin', bad man 'to'al."

"No, he doan't. Well, p'r'aps 'ee wad'n zo bad. People d' allays crake a lot."

And so they talked. Evidently they were greatly rejoiced at their new master's return, and took no pains to conceal it.

As for Endellion, he took the place at the table which the others left for him, and Peters waited on him with evident affection. Indeed, the old man could scarcely repress his emotion. After the prospect

of Lawyer Dulverton taking possession of Dulverton Manor, it was joy beyond words to see "Mr. Bob" in his father's chair.

One thing disturbed him. "Mr. Bob" wouldn't take any wine with his lunch. He had uncorked a rare old vintage especially for him, and it dismayed him when he refused it.

"No, thank you, Peters," he said, as he noticed significant glances pass between the lawyer and the steward. "You remember the old weakness. Well, I'm going to do without it."

Still, lunch passed pleasantly. Mrs. Dixon, evidently proud of being asked to lunch, appeared very happy, and Mr. Dolgeth and Binns, being pleased at the turn things had taken, did their best to be agreeable to "Mr. Robert." In this way much information was imparted, although Endellion insisted that no business matters should be discussed.

Presently, when lunch was over, and Peters brought coffee and cigars, Mrs. Dixon rose to leave the room.

"You—you can't imagine how happy I am," she said; "this morning I was preparing to leave, and now——"

"You must prepare to stay, Mrs. Dixon," cried Endellion heartily.

"You don't wish me go, then?" she cried joyously.

"Go! Certainly not. I want none of the servants to go. I'm going to be a model squire, in order to atone for the old days."

"I always be—believed in you, Mr. Robert, and I—I always told the old master that you had a good heart. Which room will you have, Mr. Robert? Will you have your father's room, or another?"

A kind of fear chilled Endellion's heart. The

question of a sleeping room had not occurred to him.

"I—I don't think I will," he said presently—"that is, I don't think I'll have my father's room. I tell you what, you and I will go together and choose a bedroom during the afternoon. I have plenty to select from."

"Yes, sir, and I'll get all the sheets aired in readiness, but—but, sir, I was terribly angry when—when your uncle insisted on sleeping in your father's room on Tuesday night."

"He insisted on doing that, did he?"

"Yes, he seemed to regard it as his right. As for Mr. Arthur, he had the room you used to have."

An angry gleam flashed from Endellion's eyes. He resented these men so coolly taking possession.

"Well, that's come to an end now," he said quietly.

"As long as I know by five o'clock, sir, it'll be all right. You see, I shall want to put in a good fire."

"Oh yes; well, I'll let you know."

"You're sure you'll not go into any business matters this afternoon?" asked Mr. Dolgeth, when the house-keeper had gone.

"No," replied Endellion, "I don't feel as though I am fit for it—yet. I want a day or so to settle down. As you can imagine, everything feels strange. Besides, I have been away so long that I am ignorant as to how matters stand."

"Certainly, Mr. Robert," said Binns. "Of course we can understand. But I can leave you my books. If you like, I can stay with you and explain matters."

"No, there is no need to-day; besides, as I said, I am not equal to it. But leave the books, Binns. I may feel like looking at them. Also, there's a plan of the estate in the house, isn't there?"

The

"Yes, sir, of course; it's kept in the safe in the library. Peters has the keys."

"Exactly; and perhaps if you, Mr. Dolgeth, have any documents which will help me to discuss matters with you——"

"I'll send them over this very evening, Mr. Dulverton, by special messenger. Of course, as you know, I shall be glad to do anything for you. As Binns here knows, I opposed your uncle taking possession. Otherwise—well, I think he would have taken up his residence here before this."

A little later the lawyer and steward had left him. They were anxious to proclaim the news of his return, while Endellion was glad to be alone. He wanted time to realise his new surroundings, and to think over all that had taken place. Besides, the strain upon his nerves had been great, and he felt almost bewildered.

"It seems like a dream," he reflected, "just a dream. Everything has been so wonderful, so easy. I wonder now, I wonder——"

CHAPTER X

THE CHURCH AND THE VICAR

FOR some time Endellion did not even look at the books which Mr. Binns had left him. He was too overwhelmed by the course events had taken, and the ease with which he had taken possession. Had there been greater difficulty he would not have been so perturbed. But everything had gone without a hitch; he had been accepted as Robert Dulverton with hardly any dissent. Even Lawyer Dulverton, who was noted as a very litigious man, had hardly made a protest, while Arthur Dulverton had yielded to his claim quite tamely. As for Mr. Dolgeth, the lawyer, the steward, the housekeeper, and the servants, they had welcomed him with open arms.

"The ease, the ease of everything!" murmured the young man again and again—"that is what frightens me; not a question, not a doubt, not a serious protest. Well, after all, why not? Why should there be any doubt? I have only two facts to keep clearly before my mind: first, that Robert Granville Dulverton is not dead, but that he has come back to Devonshire to claim his heritage; and second, that Ralph Endellion does not exist. With those two facts before me there is nothing to fear—absolutely nothing."

Presently he left the house, and went into the

grounds. The old Manor House was more beautiful than he had expected; moreover it was large, and more important. It was an ideal residence for a large landowner; it was a perfect house for a man who loved beautiful surroundings, and who delighted in the restfulness of home. There was no suggestion of the *nouveau riche* anywhere. Everything had the charm of age, of affluence, and undoubted respectability. Moreover, everything was in perfect order. The drive was well kept, the gardens were weedless, the buildings were in good repair.

As he stepped into the garden an old man touched his forelock.

"Welcome 'ome, Muster Robert," he said. "You do mind me, doan't 'ee, zur?"

"Of course I do. Let me see, you are——"

"Luke Jory, zur. Iss, I thot you wud mind me. I be purty glad to zee 'ee, sur. I served yer father, as you do knaw, fur forty 'ear."

"Of course you did, and you were always a good servant."

"I've tried to be, zur. Ef coorse, I bean't the man I wos, but th' ould squire ne'er vound foat wi' me. 'We be growin' ould together, Luke,' 'ee used to zay. That wos wy I vound it 'ard to be sacked."

"Eh?"

"Iss, Muster Robert, Lawyer Dulverton tould me to go at the end of this week. He zed I was too ould to work. An', sur, 'twas 'ard. Yer see, I've bin 'ere oal my life, so to spaik."

"Of course you have, Luke, of course you have."

"And aw, sur, us 'ave prayed that you wud come 'ome, us 'ave, fer zure. 'Twud a-brok our 'earts to 'ave 'ad to laive, and to zee Lawyer Dulverton 'ave everything. He's a 'ard man, sur, wi'out any bowels of

compassion, sur. That's it, 'ee ain't got no bowels of compassion, Muster Robert, while 's fer young Arthur—well, sur, the plaace wudden a-bin the zaam. The Loard 'ave zent you back in anser to prayer, zur, tha's my belief."

"That's all right, Luke. Well, you needn't fear. You shall not be sent packing."

"Thank the Loard, zur. And then, zur, ther's my boy, Ziekel. You do mind Ziekel, Muster Robert? You used to call 'un Faiver Lurgy, cos you used to zay 'ee 'ad two stummicks to ait, and noan to work."

"Good! Did I say that?"

"Why: you do know you did. But 'ee ed'n a bad man, ed'n Ziekel. He do want a maaster, zur, and now that you be back, I believe you can saave 'un."

"How's that?"

"'E 'ave took to drink, zur, and his pore wife and children—well, but for me and Betsy it would go 'ard wi' 'em. Cud 'ee give 'un a 'elpin' 'and, zur, zo to spaik?"

"I'll see, Luke," said Endellion. "Anyhow, you may have a peaceful heart. I've told Peters to ask all the hands on the place to come to the house to-night for a servants' supper. I daresay he'll speak to you."

"Bless 'ee, zur, the Loard bless 'ee."

"I begin to feel my wings sprouting," laughed Endellion as he walked through the gardens. "Whatever Dulverton might have been, it is evident the servants are glad to see him, and, bad as he may have been, they infinitely prefer him to the uncle."

He found his way into the stable yard, and the stables, and coach-house, and everywhere he met with the same welcome. Nearly all the servants had been in

the place for many years, and all professed to remember him.

"Yer comin' 'll give us zummin to live fer, zur," was the oft-repeated cry, "and us be main glad to zee 'ee."

No man could have a more affectionate greeting from his servants.

Well, he would be a good master to them, and not one of them should ever regret his home-coming. He would forget all the vices of Robert Dulverton, and he would remember his virtues. Every man on the estate should be treated kindly. He would be a faithful steward of the talents committed to him. Oh yes, it was very pleasant to be in this old home of the Dulvertons, it was a joy to be greeted with such affection, and he would be worthy of it. He was harming no one, and he would harm no one. Rather all should be the better and the happier for his home-coming.

Presently, after walking through some meadows, he saw, lifting its square tower above the tree branches, the old parish church, and, almost unconsciously, he wended his way hither. The knowledge of it would be useful to him, and he wanted to see this temple in which his fathers had worshipped for so many generations.

"I wonder if the vicar has any sons, and if I ought to know them?" he reflected. "There is no mention of them in the diary nor in any of the letters. I must make judicious enquiries in relation to this."

He found his way into the churchyard. How quiet and restful everything was! There was no noise anywhere save for the occasional cawing of the rooks, and the twitter of the singing birds. Ah, what was this?

He saw a large tombstone, and a piece of land immediately around it enclosed with white marble.

Sacred to the Memory

OF

WILLIAM BORLASE,

THE ONLY CHILD OF THE

REV. WILLIAM BORLASE, M.A.,

VICAR OF THIS PARISH, WHO DIED ON THE TWENTY-NINTH OF MAY, 18—, AGED SIX YEARS.

“Suffer the little children to come unto Me.”

“Ah, my question is answered,” thought Endellion as he read. “Had he lived, he would have been just my age. Evidently, too, Mr. Borlase will not be a very young man.”

He came to the church porch, and entered it. How wonderfully everything harmonised! The church and the Manor House might have been designed by the same architect, and built at the same time. The same lichen-covered stone walls, the same mullioned windows characterised them. Everything was beautiful, and everything attracted him. Even the parish notices interested him. It seemed as though the interests of the parish of Little Petherick had become identical with his own.

The church door was unlocked, and he entered the building. It was not a large building, but it was in good repair, and it was restful.

“Which is my pew, I wonder?” thought Endellion, as he looked around the dimly lit edifice.

Ere long he found it, a large, square pew, with seats all around it. He noticed that the cushion covers were faded and worn. Most likely they had been used for many years. No doubt the squire came regularly, while Robert Dulverton also sat there as a boy. He happened upon a prayer-book lying on the book-rest, and opened it. Yes, there was the name written in a schoolboy's handwriting :

ROBERT GRANVILLE DULVERTON,
Dulverton Manor,
Nov. 7, 18—.

The young man almost shivered as he read the words. There was something almost awesome in the thought that the man who had died in his arms out there in the Australian bush had a few years before written his name in this prayer-book. But his mood quickly changed. In turning over the leaves of the prayer-book he came upon a slip of paper on which "Muster Bob" had evidently been giving expression to his artistic powers. Endellion saw the roughly drawn picture of an elderly clergyman clad in his surplice, and evidently in the act of preaching. Doubtless it was a caricature of the gentleman in question, for the nose of the preacher was of enormous proportions, and underneath had been written the words :

" Old Borry sounding his
trumpet.
Wot rot !! "

" I'm afraid I was not a very great admirer of the Reverend William Borlase," thought Endellion. " I called him ' old Borry,' I characterised his preaching as ' rot,' and I was not very reverent when I was in

church. I expect the squire was having a quiet nap while I was doing this. It is just as well that I should remember these things. Ah! what's this?"

Above him he saw a brass tablet. It was erected in memory of one of the Dulvertons. It recorded the fact that this particular gentleman was a good landlord, a good father, a generous giver to the poor, and a man of great piety.

"Evidently I had a very respectable ancestry," thought the young man as he read the tablet.

Indeed, before many minutes were over, he found that Robert Dulverton did not boast without reason when he said that his family was of great importance in the neighbourhood. In fact, the little church had been to a large extent a mausoleum of the Dulvertons for many generations. Nicholas Dulverton, George Dulverton, Roger Dulverton, Robert Dulverton, and many more had been laid there, and their virtues were piously recorded.

"I've a lot to live up to," thought Endellion; "all the same, I expect that many of my pious ancestors seldom went to bed sober, and if their biographies were faithfully written I should find some peculiar episodes in their lives. But what then? 'Speak no ill of the dead' is a good motto."

On leaving the church he heard the sound of a laughing, girlish voice, which sounded pleasantly on his ears. Looking in the direction from whence the sound came, he saw a low, ivy-covered house, which, seeing that a pathway from the churchyard ran into it, he decided was the vicarage.

"What, Bob Dulverton home! You surely don't mean it, Mr. Borlase?"

Unconsciously he drew nearer, and presently saw an elderly man walking by the side of a girlish form.

"At any rate, Peters has sent word to that effect. He thought I ought to know, he said, while two of the Manor House servants have come across with the same important news. I suppose they are wild with joy over there. Lawyer Dulverton has been sent about his business, and Mrs. Dixon, who had been discharged, is going around the house weeping for joy."

"Then—then you'll be going to the Manor House yourself?" said the girl.

"I—I—I don't quite know what I ought to do," said the vicar, for it was he; "you see Robert Dulverton insulted me very grossly before he left, and—and I think he ought to apologise before—I decide to call."

"What, after all these years? You can't mean it, Mr. Borlase!"

"I'm an old-fashioned man, Miriam.—I think I'm broadminded; but Robert Dulverton never paid the slightest heed to me, and I—I think his father was quite right in sending him out of England."

"But he was never really bad. I used to like him awfully, far better than Arthur."

"Well, to be perfectly frank, I didn't. Of course Arthur does not belong to this parish, but I know him as a worthy young man, and I believe he would have made a good squire. For my own part, I am not at all easy about the future. You see, I know what Robert Dulverton was, and the Ethiopian does not change its skin, nor the leopard its spots. I cannot help trembling at the influence the new squire is likely to have on the parish. That is why I should have rejoiced if—if Arthur Dulverton had in time become the squire."

"Then you don't believe in repentance? Come now, Mr. Borlase, confess that you don't believe in the doctrines you preach. Of course I don't often come

to your church because I live in another parish, but I'm sure you urge sinners to repentance, don't you?"

"Yes; that is—of course I do. But you see, Mirry, I have known Robert Dulverton from boyhood, and he was always a thorn in my side. If he had repented, why did not the squire ask him to come back? But he didn't. He sent him money to keep him away, even although his heart was breaking because of a childless old age. I suppose I ought to call, but—but I think I shall feel it my duty to speak very plainly to him, very plainly indeed."

"Aren't you a kind of spiritual father to the parish?" asked the girl demurely.

"Yes, yes, certainly, and it's the duty of the spiritual father, not only to instruct, but to admonish."

"I was only thinking of the attitude of the father in the story of the Prodigal Son," said the girl. "I don't find that the father there gave the returning prodigal a long sermon."

"Ah, that does not mean—that is, it needs explanation," replied the vicar.

"If you want to keep up the estrangement between you, I should certainly preach him a sermon," said the girl. "As for me, I propose calling on him right away."

"I would not if I were you," said the vicar; "I'm sure your father would not like it."

"But we were boy and girl together," protested the girl—"that is, he was a few years older than I, and I always regarded him as a kind of big brother."

"But you are no longer a child, Mirry, and I'm sure Mr. Donnithorne would approve of my advice. Every one will be talking about him, and if you were to call on the day he came home all the gossips in the parish would be discussing it. It—it would not sound well,

and your father would be angry; I'm sure he would. Of course you'll soon meet, but let the meeting come about some other way."

"I don't care a rush what people say," cried the girl, "and I certainly would call if I thought he'd like to see me. But I expect he'll be busy, and have hundreds of things to do, so perhaps I'd better go back home at once. All the same, I shall bring Dad over in the morning. He always liked Bob."

"Of course if Mr. Donnithorne brings you no one can say anything," admitted the vicar, "but I have doubts about my own line of action. Of course, in a sense, I ought to go at once—as the vicar of the parish it is my duty. All the same, he ought to apologise to me. I know he's squire now, and all that—but I'm an old-fashioned man, Mirry, I'm an old-fashioned man."

"His coming will make a tremendous difference to the parish," said the girl.

"It will indeed, and I trust, I sincerely trust, it may be for the good of the parish. Anyhow, we must hope for the best."

Endellion heard every word that was said. He did not realise that he was playing the part of an eaves-dropper, and he was so interested that he was eager to lose nothing.

"Evidently I've never been on good terms with my vicar," thought he. "'Old Borry,' as I used to call him, prefers Arthur, and is prepared to give me only a cold welcome. As for the girl, it is evidently the Miriam Donnithorne of whom I used to be so fond, and whom Arthur wants to marry. I see lively times ahead, I do indeed."

A moment later his heart gave a bound. A turn in the path revealed not only the vicar's face, but the

girl's. He paid but little heed to the former. Beyond the passing reflection that the caricature in the prayer-book was to a certain extent a portrait, he scarcely gave him a thought. All his attention was centred on the girl who walked by his side.

CHAPTER XI

MIRIAM DONNITHORNE

It was by no means a perfect face that Ralph Endellion saw. No one would, at first sight, have chosen her as an example of English beauty. She had neither the arts nor graces of a society girl, nor had she availed herself of those supposed aids to beauty by which so many seek to improve their appearance. Nevertheless, she was not plain. No girl a little over twenty who enjoys perfect health can be absolutely plain. Indeed, those who knew her best declared that Miriam Donnithorne was beautiful. For one thing, she possessed fine eyes, large, grey, lustrous. For another, her complexion was the result of vigorous life, a healthy mind, a healthy body, and exposure to God's pure air and sunshine. There was nothing delicate about it; neither, on the other hand, was there any suggestion of coarseness. Miriam Donnithorne was, above all things, a *natural* girl—natural in her speech, her manners, her appearance. More than one lover of poetry said that she reminded them of Lucy in Wordsworth's famous poem, and Endellion, even as he watched her, found himself thinking of the poet's lines :

“Then Nature said, ‘A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown ;

This child I to myself will take,
She shall be mine, and I will make
A lady of my own."

That was it. She was a lady of Nature's own making, simple, natural, healthy. What though her features were not perfect, according to certain standards of beauty? "Beauty born of murmuring sound" had passed into her face, and the pure, wholesome life she lived had given her nature's great boon—perfect health. Miriam Donnithorne never knew what a day's illness meant. She was never troubled with nervous headaches and sleepless nights. She was a keen tennis player, a good golfer, a fine rider, and, above all, a good Christian girl.

Endellion gazed at her long and steadily. Of course he had no doubt as to who she was. The conversation between her and the vicar had told him. He had sometimes fancied what Miriam Donnithorne, the girl whom Robert Dulverton had thought of marrying, would be like. Now he knew. She was different from the picture which had been born in his mind, but he was not disappointed, and he looked forward with some degree of pleasure to the time when they should meet and talk together. And yet the thought brought him an amount of uneasiness. He felt that, severe as was the ordeal through which he had already passed, his meeting with this young girl would be more severe. He knew that those large, truth-loving eyes would be far more searching than even those of the litigious lawyer. Not that he was afraid. His experiences during the last few hours had given him confidence; nevertheless, while he longed to talk with Miriam Donnithorne, the thought of doing so aroused vague doubts for which he could not account.

At length she passed out of his sight, and he found

himself again back in the old church. The building had a kind of fascination for him. Those brass and marble tablets seemed to speak to him. The Dulvertons, whose names were inscribed on them, some of whom had lived and died hundreds of years before, were somehow akin to him, and it seemed to him as though they had a kindly feeling towards him. The old pew in which the Dulvertons had sat for so many generations was no strange place, but the spot where his sires had worshipped. He tried to fancy what sort of men they had been. Possibly hard drinkers, hard riders, men with violent passions and coarse tastes. He felt sure they were very human, men who were tempted and fell, and perhaps repented. He knew, too, that they would be good lovers and good haters, but through everything would be true to the code of honour which would be their standard of life.

Presently he heard the sound of a heavy door moving on rusty hinges, and turning he saw a little wizened old man. Evidently some one come to lock up the church. He walked towards the door by which he had entered, and his footsteps echoed throughout the building. The little old man looked up as he heard him, and coming forward he pulled his forelock.

"Good arternoon, Muster Robert. Sarvent, sur. I 'eerd you wos 'ome, but I ded'n think to vind 'ee 'ere."

Endellion did not speak as he looked at the strange, stooping creature. There was something eerie about him, something out of accord with the brightness of the day.

"You be, and you bean't," grunted the little man.

"I don't understand you," said Endellion.

"That ed'n Maaster Bob," said the little man.

"What isn't Master Bob?" asked Endellion.

The little man was unnerving him.

"To zay, 'I don't understand you,' like that. Aw ess, you be changed."

The last words made him realise his position. He was not doubted; he was only failing to act his part.

"W'y, you do mind me?" went on the interlocutor, lifting his almost gnome-like face to Endellion. "W'y, I do mind when you wos born. 'Twas in the middle of the night, and when I heerd 'bout et, 'i went round to the six bell-ringers what used to ring the church bells in they days. Ther' was Jim Cunday, and Granfer Flew, and Jack Fraser, and Eli Boundy, and Jimmer Polmounter, what did come from Cornwall, same as I do, and, le' me zee now, who was the other? W'y, Siah Kernick, and we 'ad a pail o' bells right in the middle ov the night. And the squire was so plaised that he gived me aaf a crown and a pint ov cider."

This long speech gave Endellion time for thought.

"Of course," he cried, "you are the old sexton; and I used to play pranks with you."

The little man laughed gleefully.

"W'y, to be sure you did, Muster Robert. Why, you nearly feartened me out o' my wits when you walked round old Squire Godfrey's grave-stone nine times back'ards, to raise the devil. And when you'd finished, a bull bellowed in the field out there, and I thot th' Ould Fella 'ad come for me, to be sure. Oa, I was sure you'd mind Zacky Keast."

Again fortune had played into his hands; he knew the sexton's name.

"But I ded'n think to find 'ee 'ere, Maaster Robert, makin' sa bould, for you used to kip 'way from church, you ded. But I be purty glad, I be. Oa, sur, 'twas a wisht day for me when I digged the squire's grave."

Iss, an' 'twas a wisht day for everybody. I veeled as though I wished zomebody had to dig my grave. Not that people wud a-cared. There wudden be a churchful for me like there wos for the squire. Ax yer pardon, sur, for talkin' 'bout thaise things, but directly I 'eerd you'd come 'ome, I did think 'bout 'em."

"All right, Zacky. We'll have a long chat another day. Meanwhile, here's half a crown to buy some tobacco."

"Aw, and you've a-mind@d that too," cried Zacky, delighted.

"As though I should be likely to forget it," said Endellion, who had noted the stem of a dirty clay pipe peeping out of the sexton's pocket.

For half an hour or more he roamed through the park, and down by the shining river, while the stable boys, the coachman, and the servants watched him.

"Tes butiful to think 'bout 'avin' 'ee for a maaster, 'stead o' Lawyer Dulverton," they agreed, as presently he turned his face to the house.

When he entered he found Mrs. Dixon with tears of joy in her eyes.

"Mr. Robert," she cried, "I hope you won't mind, sir, but I've told the men they can light a bonfire on the Beacon. They did want to right bad. They're simply overcome with joy."

"Why, Mrs. Dixon?"

"Because you've come home, sir, and—and—because they are going to have you for a master."

In spite of himself he felt pleased. Even although he was not Robert Dulverton, he had succeeded in giving the servants pleasure. Well, and why not? He would be a better master than the man who had died in his arms in Australia, and every person on the estate should be the happier for his coming.

"Tea is ready for you, sir. I know you didn't care for it years ago, but I thought I'd have some ready."

"I'm afraid I care for tea as little as ever, but as you've ordered it, I'll have some; and, by the way, Mrs. Dixon——"

"Yes, sir."

"I was wondering if the—that is—my—father had a photograph of himself taken; that is, lately."

"I'll bring you all the photographs we have, sir. I—yes, I'm almost sure he had one taken a few weeks before he was taken ill."

Endellion found his heart beating wildly while Mrs. Dixon went to fetch the photograph. Why, he could not tell. It seemed to him as though the picture of Squire Dulverton would affect his future. The thought of it seemed to be associated with his own destiny, and he waited impatiently for the house-keeper's return.

Yes, he recognised the face. It was the face of the man he had met in Australia grown older. And yet there was a difference. No one could associate the late squire with recklessness and vice. Endellion, in looking at the picture before him, saw a man who had been correct in every department of life. He was a trifle severe, doubtless, but he was also honourable, just, and, to a certain extent, lovable. That he was proud no one could doubt, neither could there be a doubt that the late owner of the Dulverton estates would seek to do his duty by all.

Endellion felt somewhat uncomfortable as he looked at the picture. He found himself wondering what, if he could revisit the scenes of his lifetime, he would say if he found him in the place of the Dulvertons. It was true the face was stern and somewhat haughty, but the young man thought he detected a

grim smile on the clean-shaven lips, as though the old squire might have enjoyed the thought of his brother being kept out of the house he longed to enter as its undisputed master. On the whole, therefore, the sight of the photograph did not cause Endellion to turn aside from the road in which it seemed to him he had been led. The face of the old squire was indelibly engraved upon his memory, and that was nearly all.

From the study of the photograph he turned to the documents which Binns, the steward, had left for his inspection. There were others which Mr. Dolgeth had promised to send by special messenger, but these were enough to occupy all his time and attention.

He knew little of the workings of an estate, but, as we have said, he possessed a keen, penetrating mind, and he quickly grasped the purport of what he saw. A large map of the estate especially aided him, for it was not only a careful tracing of all the farms, but gave the names of the farms, their boundaries, the acreage of the fields, as well as the names of the tenants at the time it was made. After half an hour's study he had committed the whole thing to memory; what was traced on the canvas was also written on his memory. He found that the squire had been a very methodical man, and had by no means left the complete management of the estate to Binns. Indeed, Endellion discovered a book which the squire had kept, independently of his steward, in which he had set down under different headings details in connection with every cottage and farm in his possession. Thus Endellion was able to see when each farmer entered upon his tenancy, what rent he had paid, what repairs had been done, also various differences which had arisen between landlord and tenant. By this means he learnt not only the history of nearly every inhabi-

tant in the parish during the past seven or eight years, but also details of events ever since the squire's only son had been born.

"The greater part of this book must be committed to memory," thought Endellion. "Of course, I'm not expected to know anything of what has happened during the last eight years, but before that I must know everything."

A great gong sounded through the house, and Endellion looked at his watch.

"Seven o'clock," he said. "I suppose that's the dinner bell. How the time has flown."

Mrs. Dixon entered the room. "You remember your father always demanded half an hour to dress, Mr. Robert," she said, as if apologising for the sound of the gong. "We didn't settle on a room before you went out, but I've had a fire lit in the one just above this. You remember it was called the 'old guest room.' I thought first of all I'd prepare your own little room; but it seemed so small that I got the other ready. Of course, to-morrow you'll make your own choice."

"Thank you, Mrs. Dixon," he said; and he started to find the apartment in question, but feeling utterly uncertain of his whereabouts returned to the library.

"Ah, Peters," he said to the old servant who answered his summons, "you have taken my luggage to my room?"

"Yes, Mr. Robert. Mrs. Dixon selected the 'old guest room,' sir. I thought you might like your own old room for one night, sir, but she thought 'twas too small."

"Have you taken out my dress clothes, Peters?"

"No, sir. You didn't give me the keys of your luggage, and you seemed so much engaged that I

didn't like to ask you for them. I knocked at the door and looked in once, Mr. Robert, but you didn't seem to hear me. You were busy looking over a map, sir."

"Ah, yes, of course. Here are the keys, Peters; and you may as well come with me, and lay out what things I want."

"Yes, Mr. Robert," replied the old servant, little thinking that this was a ruse for him to be shown the way to the bedroom.

At the top of the stairs he paused. The dimly-lit landing and the wide corridor seemed to possess the ghosts of centuries.

"It's not much changed, Master Bob."

"No, and yet everything is strange, Peters. You can't think what it is like to come back after so many years. I feel bewildered."

"I daresay, sir; but of course you remember your father's room. He would always sleep in this great room over the drawing-room, right at the top of the stairs. He always made it a point to come up last, no matter who was in the house."

"Yes, I remember," said Endellion.

He followed Peters along the corridor, and presently entered a large, well-appointed room.

"I don't seem to remember this furniture, Peters," he said.

"What a memory you have, Mr. Robert!" cried Peters. "No, your father had new furniture for this room about five years ago; but I never thought you'd have noticed it. Which bag is your dress-clothes in, sir, if you please?"

A little later Endellion was in the dining-room again. He had dressed quickly, and then, before descending, had taken a candle and visited several of the rooms. He wanted to familiarise himself with the house. He

felt very strange during dinner. He might have been acting a part in a play. He could almost fancy at times that Peters winked at him, as if to assure him that he must keep up the farce. What wonder? He was standing in another man's shoes; he was playing at being squire. Sometimes it seemed as though he were dreaming, and he would not have been surprised if Peters, who waited on him so eagerly, and with such evident gladness, had melted into thin air. And yet everything was real enough. The glad smile on the servants' faces, the solid, heavy furniture, the long, dark, oak-lined room, the well-served meal—all told him that he was regarded as Dulverton's new squire.

In spite of everything, too, he was calm and contented. No fears haunted his mind; no pangs of conscience robbed him of his appetite. Although he was playing a part, he felt he had a right to be there. There was nothing incongruous in Peters standing behind his chair and anticipating his every want, even although there was a sense of unreality about it all.

"Thank you, Peters," he said at length. "I've made an excellent dinner."

"And yet you've not touched a drop of wine, Mr. Robert."

"And I was very fond of it in the old days, eh, Peters?"

"Well, sir——"

"Yes, I know; but, as I told you, I am a changed man. Besides, it's always wise to avoid an old enemy. You may bring my coffee into the library, Peters. I shall spend the evening there."

"Yes, sir. You remember the cupboard where your father kept his cigars, sir? There's several

hundred there, sir. He bought a large quantity before he was taken ill, sir."

"Get some out, Peters—half a dozen boxes. I want to see what kind they are. I'm rather particular about my cigars."

And Peters, not knowing what was in the young man's mind, found his way to the cupboard in question, glad to obey his young master's slightest wish, never noticing that his actions were watched by quick, observant eyes.

The room was very quiet. Through the slightly opened window he heard the ripple of the distant river, while now and then the wind sighed softly through the branches of the great trees which surrounded the house, but beyond this no sound reached him. The fire burnt cheerfully in the grate, and yet he thought the air seemed cold and clammy. Why was it? Was it simply that the spring night had turned cold, or was it that there was some change in the atmosphere?

He did not touch the book he had been studying before dinner, but pulled the huge armchair in which he sat close to the fire, and lit a cigar. The tobacco was choice, and in excellent condition, but somehow he did not enjoy it.

He gave a start. It was only Peters, who had come for his empty coffee cup, and yet his nerves were disturbed.

"Excuse me for saying so, Mr. Robert, but I've served your family many years, and it does do me good to see you sitting in your father's old chair, smoking just as I've seen him smoke hundreds of times."

Endellion started to his feet.

"Ah, yes, I forgot," he said. "I did not realise that this was my father's chair."

He turned to the book he had been reading, and tried to fasten his attention upon the pages his father had written, but in vain. The items which had been so clear to him before dinner had no meaning now. Still he struggled on, endeavouring to fasten upon his mind the events which had taken place during the years when he was supposed to be in his father's confidence. All in vain, however—his mind refused to work.

"I need a good night's rest," he reflected. "I wonder, now, if I shall be able to sleep in that great chamber. I must try, for I shall need to have my brains clear."

Peters entered the room again.

"The vicar has called, sir."

"The vicar; oh, yes, of course."

"Will you see him, Mr. Robert, or shall I tell him that——"

"Oh, I'll see him. Is there a fire in one of the other rooms?"

"In the drawing-room, Mr. Robert. Mrs. Dixon felt sure people would be calling."

"That's right. Show him in there."

CHAPTER XII

THE VICAR BECOMES DOUBTFUL

BUT Ralph Endellion did not leave the library at once. He walked for more than a minute around the room. He was trying to pull himself together. Once he stopped before the mirror which was hung over the fireplace, and looked at himself curiously. Then he held out his hand, and noted that it was firm and steady.

"This day has had more effect than I thought," he reflected at length. "Months seem to have passed since I left Plymouth Station this morning. I have had a trying time, and my brain seems to fail me. My mind will not fasten upon the things which ought to be clear to me. I felt quite master of myself when I met my uncle and cousin this morning, but now everything is vague. Anyhow, here goes."

He left the library with a firm tread, and found his way into the large room which had evidently been furnished for state occasions. It was not brilliantly lit, however, although three large lamps threw a soft light around, while the fire burnt brightly. Endellion had only casually glanced at this great salon before, and everything was strange to him.

At first he saw no one. It seemed to him as though he had entered an empty room. But this was only for

a second. No sooner had he entered than a man rose from an easy-chair and faced him.

"I—I suppose it—it is Bob?"

To Endellion there was doubt, if not antagonism, in the voice, and the effect was just what he needed. His mind, which had seemed relaxed, grew tense again. He felt master of the situation, and he met the clergyman with a steady gaze.

"What do you doubt it, Mr. Borlase?"

Some words, and yet they had a peculiar effect upon the vicar. This man had been thinking of the circumstances under which Robert Dulverton had left his home, he remembered his career at Eton and at Oxford. He had also thought of that disgraceful orgy which had wellnigh broken the old squire's heart, and had driven the young man from the parish. He had known him as a wild, harum-scarum fellow, easily led to do wrong things, and with distinctly vicious tendencies. The vicar had never liked Robert Dulverton, who, as a boy, and as a young man, had been a thorn in his side. More than once he had held him, the vicar, up to ridicule, he had mocked his admonitions, which had seemed to drive him to evil rather than keep him from it. He had a bad influence in the parish, too. He had made acquaintance with youths of a low type, and the vicar had no small share in persuading the old squire to rid himself of the son who brought him only sorrow and disgrace. Bearing these things in mind, he was not at all glad when "Bob Dulverton" had returned. It is true that nearly eight years' absence had somewhat softened his feelings towards him, but he paid little heed to the story, evidently emanating from Peters, that "Mr. Robert hadn't taken any wine with his lunch."

"Bob Dulverton isn't the kind of fellow who reforms,"

he reflected. "He always was a bad lot, and although he may be on his best behaviour during the first few hours after his return, he'll make no end of trouble. He will fill the old Manor House with undesirables, he will be an evil influence in the parish, and he'll be for ever a thorn in my side."

He would have much preferred that the story Lawyer Dulverton had circulated should have been true, and that the other branch of the family should have owned the estates. Then he would have had a squire who would have supported the church, and aided him in his work.

Still, he felt he must call. News had reached him that the young squire had come back, and although he regarded that news as anything but good, he could not, as vicar of the parish, do anything else than give some sort of welcome to the son of his old friend.

It was therefore in a very doubtful spirit that he had come to the "great house." He expected to find the young squire flushed with wine or spirits, bearing on his face the marks of long years of dissipation, and full of plans for the future which would be bitterness and gall to the spiritual adviser of the parish. As a consequence he had paid little heed to the glad look on the face of Peters. The old man had always been eager to hide his young master's faults, and would doubtless rather have him home than be under the rule of Lawyer Dulverton.

It was therefore with antagonism in his heart that he had risen to his feet on the approach of the newcomer, and given expression to the words we have recorded. For a moment he did not reply to Endellion's response. He recognised an atmosphere which he had never associated with his friend's son. This was no vicious, ne'er-do-well who stood before him, but a

man far removed from the thoughts he had been harbouring.

And yet he recognised him. The face had undoubtedly altered somewhat; but that was natural. Nearly eight years had passed since Bob Dulverton left home. Still, he recognised the Dulverton features. No one could mistake the contour of the nose, the clean-cut lips, the large grey eyes. Yes, it was Bob Dulverton—but another Bob Dulverton. This was no weak, vacillating, vicious fellow, but a strong, clear-thinking, purposeful man. The voice, too, suggested the voice he remembered, but it was deeper, more resonant. Evidently those long years had had a greater effect than he had ever anticipated.

“No,” said the vicar, “I don’t doubt it, but let me see you in the light, Bob. Of course, it is a joy to see you home, and I give a hearty welcome to my old friend’s son; but come to the light, Bob, come to the light.”

He knew he was not meeting the new squire as he ought to be met, and yet something drew words from him which he had no intention of speaking.

“Yes, come to the light, Mr. Borlase. I want to see you too, I want to see if you have altered.”

Like a man in a dream the vicar went to a lamp, where the light fell not only on his own features, but on those of the young man whose coming would, he was sure, make a great difference in the parish.

Again there was something wrong. He felt himself to be the inspected, rather than the inspector. It seemed to him as though young Robert Dulverton was estimating his character, and reading him as though he were an open book.

“Not a day older,” cried the young man in hearty tones, “not a day older. A good conscience, eh, Mr.

Borlase, and freedom from the worst scamp in the parish? Is that the secret of your youth?"

"I've had good health," said the clergyman, "very good health. Of course, I felt your father's loss very keenly."

"Of course you did. But it was kind of you to come over. Naturally I feel a little strange; who wouldn't under the circumstances? And so—to see you in this way, especially as I am afraid you hadn't much reason to be glad at my coming, is—well, just as I would have it. Do you know, I should have called at the vicarage to-morrow if you hadn't come."

All this was utterly different from what the vicar had expected. It is true the newcomer had made an opening for a homily, and he had determined, as he had walked over to the Manor House, that he would speak plainly on the squire's duties and responsibilities; but no words of exhortation would come to him. The address which he had so carefully prepared against the evils of drink and bad companions seemed to be out of place.

"But—but you've changed, Bob," he said. "Forgive me calling you by your old name; but, then, I knew you as a boy."

"Forgive you! Don't talk nonsense. Of course I suppose there must be a change in public; but in private I'm the boy you scolded and threatened, the boy who played all sorts of tricks on you, and whom you were glad to get out of the parish. Eh, Mr. Borlase, but you were a bit disappointed when you heard I'd turned up like the traditional bad penny, weren't you?"

The vicar felt more than ever uncomfortable. He ought to have found it very easy to deliver his homily, but he could not. There was no suggestion of hard drinking or of vice in the face before him. The young

squire's eyes burned with a clear, steady light, the face was strong and purposeful. It would have been just as easy to give a homily on drunkenness and vice to his bishop as to the young man who seemed to be weighing him in the balances.

And yet the antagonism remained. He no more liked the new Bob than the old Bob. Perhaps it was because he felt slightly afraid of him—for he did feel afraid. The man who stood watching his every movement so keenly might not disgrace the parish by drunkenness and revelry, but might he not set his desires at naught in other ways?

"You—you are changed, Bob," he repeated at length. It was the only thing he could think of.

"In what way?" asked Endellion. "Yes, look at me closely, feature by feature, and tell me. I am asking out of curiosity. I have been wondering how I strike a close observer, like yourself, after nearly eight years' absence."

The vicar was silent. Nothing that seemed appropriate came to his mind.

"Have my features altered?" asked Endellion.

"No, not your features—no, it's not that. Of course you've grown from a boy to a man, and there's a suggestion of—well, suffering in your face. But the Dulverton features have not altered—no, not a bit: the same mouth, the same nose, a little larger perhaps, but still the same, the same forehead; no, it's different, it's broader, and there's a development where, as a phrenologist once told me, the mathematical part of the brain lies. No, I think it is the eyes that have changed."

"Why, are they of a different colour?"

"No, it's the Dulverton eyes, but they are not Bob's eyes. Excuse me, they—well, I used to think you had

a shifty, sullen look in the eye, Bob. Besides, you used to have the appearance of one easily led—that is, to undesirable ways. But now, you don't look as though you'd let any one lead you."

The vicar was talking rather to himself than to Endellion. He was indulging in a reverie, rather than engaging in a conversation. He was excited too. The newcomer was exercising an influence over him which he could not understand.

Endellion had a purpose in asking the vicar to examine him closely. He reflected that no one in the parish would know Bob Dulverton better than one of his father's closest friends. Of course he had been closely scrutinised by Lawyer Dulverton and his son, but he reflected that the late squire's brother had not been a frequent visitor at the Manor House, while since their early boyhood Robert and Arthur Dulverton did not see much of each other. Besides, the meeting in the morning had been characterised by much excitement. But Mr. Borlase had been almost a daily visitor, and would be in a better position to judge than almost any one else. It is true Peters might know the young squire more intimately, but Peters was only a servant; neither had he the trained powers of observation which the vicar possessed. If, therefore, he could undergo a severe scrutiny from this quarter, he would feel more confident when Miriam Donnithorne came to see him, for he was sure she would come. He had heard her say that she should bring her father to see him on the following day, and for reasons which were unaccountable to him, he knew that danger, if any danger existed, would lie in this direction.

"I have had time for reflection—since—since I left England, Mr. Borlase; and it is said that reflection alters one's appearance. Besides, I've lived a strange

life, and it would be little wonder if you had difficulty in recognising me."

"Oh, it's not in that way. I should know you anywhere. The Dulverton features are not common—and—no, no, it's not that. But you are changed, sir."

The word "sir" had escaped the vicar unconsciously. Both had noticed it the moment it was uttered, although neither made mention of it; and yet it suggested what was at the back of Mr. Borlase's brain. He would never have used it to Bob Dulverton, and he did not know why he used it now. He only knew that it seemed natural, in spite of its apparent incongruity.

"That's all right," said Endellion. He was greatly relieved in spite of himself. He began to feel that his armour was impenetrable. Miriam Donnithorne might come now; he was ready to meet her. He relit his cigar, which had gone out, and his hand did not tremble in the slightest degree.

"By the way," he added, "you'll have a cigar, vicar?"

"Thank you," replied Mr. Borlase; "but—but—your father had very old-fashioned ideas about the drawing-room; you remember, Bob—he never smoked here."

"No, I know, and—and I'd forgotten, but eight years of rough and tumble life make one forget the conventions. The cigars are in the library. I'll fetch them."

"I can't make him out," reflected the vicar, when he was alone. "He's no more like the Bob Dulverton of eight years ago than—I am. And yet it is he. What has happened to him all these years? He is a new man. That sullen look which distressed me so has entirely departed. He speaks differently too. There's

a decided ring in his voice, as though he expected his will to be done, instead of obeying the will of others."

Endellion came back bearing some boxes of cigars.

"I'm afraid I've forgotten your taste in cigars, vicar," he said with a laugh, "but I've nearly all the strengths here, from a Claro to—to the blackest thing in tobacco."

The vicar selected his favourite colour, and began to smoke thoughtfully, glancing furtively from time to time at his host. No, it was impossible for him to admonish him; and all that he had meant to say about the suffering he had brought on his father died on his lips.

"Do you find things changed, Robert?" he asked at length.

"In a sense, yes," replied Endellion, "but that is natural; as a matter of fact, I expect the change is in me, rather than in the things I see. I don't mean in my personal appearance, but in my thoughts and my general outlook. It's an awful platitude, I know, but a man is what he thinks, isn't he? Of course everything looks beautiful, more beautiful than I imagined it could look. Besides, it's a tremendous change. Australia is not a beautiful country, vicar."

"No?"

"Of course, some parts are, but not where I lived. There was a sense of desolation everywhere. If one wants to know what loneliness means, let him go out into the Australian bush. Besides, everything lacks graciousness, and—music."

"As I remember you, you cared nothing for music."

"Ah, but a man changes. Do you know what hunger is, vicar, real heart-hunger?"

Again the vicar gave him a keen, searching glance.

"I suppose every man does at some time of his life," he said presently.

"I think there is no Englishman who goes to the Australian wilds who does not. Why, England is heaven. Do you know, I haven't heard the birds really sing for years, until to-day."

"Yes, I suppose Australia is not remarkable for its singing birds." Mr. Borlase did not realise what he was saying. He was reflecting on the question the other had asked him about "heart-hunger." This was not like Bob Dulverton. He could never associate such words with the lad who years before had been satisfied to sit in an ale house with his inferiors. "But it has changed you, Robert," he reiterated, as though the fact mystified him—"changed you vitally, vitally."

Endellion felt uncomfortable. This repetition seemed to imply doubt, and he saw that the clergyman's eyes rarely left his face.

"Yes. Australia knocks the stuffing out of a man," said the young man at length. "Old beliefs go by the board out there. You find it very difficult to believe in the creeds of your childhood."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Mr. Borlase. "I hope you've not turned atheistical. Whatever you—you did in the old days, you—you never doubted the Christian faith. I hope you do not refer to that." There was asperity as well as eagerness in his voice.

"Why not?" asked Endellion. "Let a man live among a lot of fellows who are not particular about—about anything; well, it means putting everything in the melting-pot—everything."

"But you still hold fast to the Christian faith?" cried the vicar.

"Do I?" laughed Endellion. "I've seen a good many faiths tested during the last eight years. I've

knocked about various parts of the world. I've—I've gone through a good deal. 'Sounded the depths and shoals' of things, as Shakespeare puts it, and—well, pretty nearly everything goes by the board. In my boyhood I was, in spite of everything, pretty orthodox in my belief, and now it's gone, gone!"

Endellion did not realise what he was saying—did not realise the kind of man he was addressing. If he did he would have been careful. The vicar was a man who, much as he deplored an irregular life, was more disturbed at irregularity of belief. The late Squire Dulverton's father, for example, had not been a pattern of virtue, but he had never doubted the Christian doctrines, and he had received the sacraments of the Church.

"But—but tell me," cried the clergyman. "You—you were a sore trouble to me in the old days, but you don't mean to say that you've come back disbelieving in the faith of your fathers?"

"Let a man go through what I have gone through," replied Endellion, "and——"

He rose to his feet as he spoke, and there was a look of passion in his eyes. He was thinking of Ralph Endellion's past, rather than that of Robert Dulverton.

"But let us change the subject," he added presently. "I don't wish to hurt your feelings."

"But I do not wish to change the subject; everything else is as nothing compared with this." He belonged to the narrowest of schools, and the thought of having a squire with loose notions about religion seemed terrible beyond words.

Endellion saw that he had made a mistake, and he did not quite see how to get out of the difficulty in which he had landed himself. Besides, the doubt and

seemingly defiance in the vicar's voice had aroused a great deal of the old bitterness in his heart.

"I do not speak without thought," he went on. "I have brooded over these things day after day, and night after night. What is right in one country is wrong in another. The word God means different things in various parts of the world. Each religion has its Messiah, its Christ, its prophet, and—and—— But forgive me, vicar, I'm not going to say a word more about these questions. I expect every man is an agnostic in some fashion, but I'm not going to argue about it. I've come back to be a good squire, and that's all you expect of me, isn't it?"

Endellion had made his first mistake since his return. He had raised vague doubts in the vicar's mind. It was true Bob Dulverton stood before him, but it was not Bob Dulverton who spoke. Bob Dulverton had never brooded over theological problems; he had never given any thought to the question of comparative religions. No amount of travel or of strange scenes could make Bob Dulverton talk like this.

"There's something wrong about this," he thought. "There's something mysterious too. I must find out the meaning of it."

CHAPTER XIII

THE SQUIRE'S WELCOME, AND MIRIAM'S

"By the way," said Endellion, "how is my little friend Mirry Donnithorne?"

He knew he was on safe ground now. He had heard the vicar call her "Mirry" that very afternoon, and he felt himself justified in following his example.

But Mr. Borlase did not speak. Instead his mind swept back over their conversation, and he tried to account not only for the intellectual atmosphere created by Endellion, but he reflected on certain sentences which had fallen from his lips. He had known Bob Dulverton thoroughly. He had prepared him for "Responsions" at Oxford, and remembered the difficulty he had in getting him to grasp the most elementary forms of thought. In fact, Bob had done miserably even in this simple examination, and it was only by the merest fluke that he had been admitted into the University. It was true Endellion had not said very much, but he had suggested that he had lived in a world to which Bob Dulverton was a stranger. Only two years before the vicar had met a man who had seen Dulverton in Australia, and this man had spoken of him as a sot, as a low-lived fellow, the friend of the vilest scum. How could such a change be brought about? Even yet he did not

definitely raise the question of the identity of the man before him, but in a vague way doubts existed. He had almost confessed himself to be an atheist, and he had suggested that he lived in a world unknown to the son of his old friend. Of course, there might be sufficient reasons for this ; nevertheless he felt utterly antagonistic to the young man before him.

On the other hand, however, he could not help seeing that it was Bob Dulverton who stood before him. He possessed Bob Dulverton's features, he had Bob Dulverton's physique, and there was a suggestion of Bob Dulverton's voice. Besides, he had been received as Bob Dulverton by all the servants, by Mr. Binns, the steward, by Mr. Dolgeth, the lawyer, and even by Lawyer Dulverton and his son.

Yes, of course all his vague doubts were groundless ; all the same, he would think over the whole question. He would keep his own counsel, and watch.

"Mirry and I were—well, sweethearts years ago," went on Endellion. "Of course she was only a child, years younger than I ; but, as you will remember, my father had hopes about us."

"What's that ? Oh yes, Mirry," said the vicar, awaking out of his reverie. "Of course she's a young woman now."

"She promised to be a beautiful woman, too—or at least I thought so," went on Endellion.

"She's a good girl," replied the vicar, "a wonderfully good girl—a great help to Bodillick, a very great help indeed. I wish her father were a parishioner of mine. I've no one like her—no one."

"Has she changed much ?" asked Endellion.

"I hardly know," replied the vicar. "As I said, she does not belong to my parish ; but I've known her

from a baby, and—but yes, I suppose she has changed. I saw her this afternoon.”

“I’ve often wondered whether she were married,” said Endellion.

“No, she’s not married. Of course she might have been. She’s a very attractive girl; she’ll be an heiress, too. The Donnithorne estates are very valuable, and the squire has never lived up to his income.”

“Arthur and I used to fight about her,” remarked Endellion. He did not feel quite comfortable in saying this, but he wanted to learn all he could about her.

“Yes, I remember. And of course Arthur would be a very suitable match for her—very. He’s always been fond of her, and I think she likes him. They are often together.”

Endellion knew nothing of Miriam Donnithorn: but a feeling for which he could not account came into his heart. He was not jealous; at least, so he told himself, and yet he knew that his dislike for Arthur Dulverton increased by what the vicar said.

“Personally, I should be very glad if a match came of it,” went on Mr. Borlase. “Arthur is a splendid young fellow. He’s a model son, and he has a most helpful influence in Graystone. He’s a churchwarden, and the vicar’s right-hand man. No man could be more suitable than Arthur as a husband for Mirry.”

“And is she of the religious order, too?” asked Endellion. “She used to be a bit of a hoyden as a girl.”

“Miriam is sound at heart,” replied the vicar. “It is true, Bodillick tells me, she holds some peculiar views, but she’s a good girl. There’s not a more lovable girl in Devonshire. She’s the soul of honour, too, and despises deceit and fraud of any sort.”

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A feeling came into Endellion's heart like pain, and he had a kind of fear at the thought of meeting her.

"Bodillick tells me that she possesses a sort of instinct for discovering anything in the shape of deceit in any form. When he is in doubt about the truthfulness of the stories which are brought to him, he asks Mirry to help him, and he says he has never known her to be deceived."

"A sort of female detective," laughed Endellion uneasily.

"No, not that. But, as I told you, she has a sort of instinct which enables her to feel when people are telling truth or lies. It's a kind of gift which God has placed in her heart. Being the soul of purity and honour herself, she has a revulsion against fraud or dishonour."

"Is—is she one of these peering, prying women then?" asked Endellion. "She must have mightily changed if she is."

"Anything but that. No, she does not ask questions; she simply looks at people, and she knows whether they are true or false."

Endellion was silent. He had never thought of Miriam Donnithorne in this way. Dulverton had spoken of her as a hoydenish, harum-scarum, but generous girl, and he had looked forward to seeing her with a certain amount of eagerness.

"Then I suppose she's great at church bazaars, mothers' meetings, and that sort of thing."

"No, that's where she and Bodillick disagree. She does any amount of good, only it is in unconventional ways. She joins none of the societies of the parish, because she hates rules. Personally, I think she's too fond of sport, and of—pleasure generally."

"I begin to fear my old playmate," laughed

Endellion. "I had intended if she did not come here to-morrow to ride over and call on her."

The words had barely passed his lips when Peters entered.

"Squire Donnithorne and Miss Miriam have called, Mr. Robert," he said.

Shouts of laughter and merriment came from the servants' hall. Evidently they were taking advantage of the orders given, and were hugely enjoying themselves. But Endellion did not hear them. The message of Peters had made him feel a kind of dread. He knew little or nothing of Squire Donnithorne, and he had only caught one glimpse of Miriam. Possibly they would ask him questions about things of which he was entirely ignorant, and he would have to speak about people of whose existence he was unaware. Might he not make mistakes? Besides, if what Mr. Borlase had said was true, she would immediately know that he was not Bob Dulverton at all, but an impostor, who, because of an accidental likeness, was, for the sake of gain, standing in another's shoes.

"Shall I show them in, sir?"

For a second he was undecided as to what to do. He seemed like a man standing on the brink of a pit, while the ground beneath his feet was crumbling under him. He turned and saw that the vicar was watching him intently; saw, too, the antagonism, if not dislike, in his eyes. He reflected that during their conversation no real word of welcome had been spoken. Mr. Borlase had expressed no doubt, and yet to Endellion the spirit of doubt was in the air. He thought he had passed through his severest ordeal when he stood before his uncle and cousin that morning. Now he knew he had not. He was sure the clergyman did not like him, and was sorry to see him take up residence at the

Manor House. Added to this, his description of Miriam Donnithorne showed him that the future was fraught with danger.

In a moment, however, he was master of himself. Again he felt a kind of joy in battle. All the old desire for contest was aroused. He would conquer this country parson's evident dislike; he would defy this girl who was spoken of as possessing a kind of moral second sight.

"Show them in by all means, Peters," he cried heartily, and he went towards the door as he spoke. Before he had reached it, however, a hale, bluff man of perhaps fifty-five years of age had entered the room.

"Hulloa, Bob, my boy!" he cried; "you see I couldn't wait long before coming to see you. Mirry came back from the vicarage this afternoon and told me you'd come, so directly I had had a bit of dinner I drove over. Welcome home, my boy, welcome home! I'm glad to see you—right down glad!"

"It's awfully good of you, squire," cried Endellion. "I did not dare to think you'd come to-night, but if the morning hadn't brought you I should have ridden over. But it is kind of you to come. I didn't expect it, and don't deserve it."

"But you've come, Bob—and—well, by-gones must be by-gones. I always liked you, as you know, although you were a wild young dog, and I'm glad to see you back."

All this time the squire had held both his hands, and was shaking them heartily. Evidently he was utterly oblivious of the presence of the vicar, and forgetful of his daughter, who stood close behind him.

"It's good to see a true Dulverton in the old place," he went on. "Ah! Bob, it was an awful blow for me when your father died—it was indeed. I've hardly

been here since ; the place seemed like a vault. And I should have been as miserable as a whipped spaniel if your uncle and Arthur had—— But there ! we'll not think of that. Thank God you've come home, my boy. And, by gad ! you've improved ; you have indeed. I had fears, my boy. I had, upon my word, after hearing that—but there, people are such liars. Of course I'd have known you anywhere. Ah ! don't tell me. I haven't bred cattle for nothing. Stock is stock, whatever the tomfools may say, and the Dulverton stock can't be beaten. There's not better blood in Devonshire, no, nor in England, than the Dulvertons', unless it's—— But, I say, Mirry hasn't spoken to you. What do you think of him, my girl ? Turned out all right, eh ? But of course he has. He's got the right stuff in him."

Thus the old squire went on, working at Endellion's right hand as though it had been a pump handle.

All the time her father had been talking Miriam Donnithorne had not spoken a word. She had stood behind her father, and had looked wonderingly at Endellion's face. There was a look of gladness in her eyes, and yet she was evidently puzzled. It was true Bob Dulverton stood before her, but it was not the old Bob Dulverton, and although she could not tell why, she did not like the new Bob as well as she had liked the old. Of course she was a girl when Bob left home, while now she was a woman. Still, she remembered the old Bob perfectly. He was untidy in person, uncouth in many of his ways, and strange stories were told about him. But she had always liked Bob. He had fished with her in the river ; they had played at marbles and cricket together, and she had looked upon him as a kind of elder brother. She was terribly grieved when he left England, and wondered at the

awful things that were said about him. And now he had come back, and her heart was glad because of it. But it was not the same Bob. This young man in immaculate evening dress was different. He didn't look like her old playmate, although he had the same features. He was more circumspect than Bob, and there was a kind of dignity in his presence to which the friend of her childhood was a stranger.

Still she greeted him heartily, and told him how glad she was to see him.

"But oh! Bob, you *have* changed!" she cried presently.

"Changed, Mirry! How?"

"Oh, I don't know. I expected—no, I don't know what I expected; but you are not like the Bob who used to ride with me, and tease me, and quarrel with me."

"Nonsense, Mirry! he's just the same—just the same, only he's improved; by gad! he's improved. Any one might have thought you'd been a kind of society man during these last few years, instead of roughing it in the backwoods. In that respect Mirry is right. But then, of course, you've grown older and wiser. That's as it ought to be, eh, Borlase?"

"Yes," said the clergyman. "All the same, I didn't think that even eight years of a roving life could have made a man so different. Not in appearance—I don't mean that—but in—in—other things."

Again there seemed not only doubt, but a kind of defiance in the vicar's words. Endellion knew that if doubts were raised it would be fatal to his claims, and again he felt the long strain upon his nerves.

"Evidently the vicar does not believe in reformation," he said, somewhat testily, and again he felt he

had touched a wrong chord. The words were correct enough, but he felt that Bob Dulverton would not have spoken them.

As for Miriam Donnithorne, a feeling of anger came into her heart. It seemed to her as though a stranger were speaking disparagingly of her old friend. And yet she had no shadow of doubt about the identity of the man before her. It was Bob Dulverton; but it was not the Bob Dulverton who, in spite of the reports which had come to her ears, she had loved almost like a brother.

"You see," went on Endellion, "I was always—well, a bit ashamed of myself. I know I was a disgrace to my name, and the memory of my school and college days is not pleasant. But years teach wisdom. When the news of my father's death came to me, I was—well, bowled over. So I vowed I'd turn over a new leaf, and begin again. I mean it, too."

Again there was nothing wrong in his words, but to Miriam Donnithorne they did not seem like the words of Bob Dulverton. There was something in his way of saying them which suggested a prig.

"I was very ill, too," went on Endellion, "and that kind of thing makes a fellow think."

"Of course, of course," cried the squire. "All the same, I hope you're not going to be a milksop, Bob. You know I could never stand a snivelling, goody-goody sort of chap. And that reminds me. What are you doing here in the drawing-room? I never saw you here before—never in my whole life. Besides, I want something to drink, my boy; and as for Borlase, he has been wondering why not a drop of whisky is in sight. As you know, the vicar and your father always had whisky toddy when they played chess

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together. And I want to drink in honour of your home-coming, Bob."

"Of course," cried Endellion. "You must forgive me, squire. It's a long time since I touched alcohol, and when one is not in the habit of taking it himself, he forgets other people."

He felt uncomfortable as he spoke, and although he gave the necessary order to Peters, he again drew Miriam Donnithorne's eyes upon him.

"It's not Bob a bit," she reflected, and had Arthur Dulverton known it, his chances were never so good as they were at that moment.

Still there was a great deal of gaiety and mirth. The squire was in the best of spirits, even although Endellion refused to partake of the whisky which he urged him to drink.

"Don't tell me you are going to be a teetotaller, Bob," cried the squire. "Of course, I'm glad you—you've turned over a new leaf. But a teetotaller! Good Lord, never before was a Dulverton a teetotaller."

Still he was very hearty in his demeanour, and listened eagerly to Endellion's stories about life in Australia. Moreover, as the time passed on, the young man became more at his ease. He felt he was destroying all possibility of doubt, and also pleasing the vicar by taking an interest in his work.

"You must come over soon, Bob, my boy," said the squire as he left. "I'll get a lot of your old friends to meet you."

"Thanks awfully, squire," was his reply; but as he turned to Miriam, he felt that she did not warmly second the invitation.

"I have all my work cut out," he reflected presently, when he found himself alone. "That girl does not like me. She does not doubt me, but she's antago-

nistic to me. She would rather have the real Bob Dulverton, although he was a sot, than the reformed Bob Dulverton as represented by me. Yes, there's danger in that quarter. I can manage the vicar all right. He's a pedantic, ultra orthodox old ecclesiastic, and I have only to smooth him the right way, and rearrange his ruffled feathers. But the girl is different. She's as sharp as a needle, and unless I set her mind at rest, things won't go right. And I must set to work at once. She's half in love with my respected cousin, too, and naturally she will get talking with him. She used to like Bob Dulverton, and she's weaved all sorts of fancies about him ; but she doesn't like me, and in a way she doubts me. I'm not sure either that I like her. But she's a danger to me, and I must play my cards carefully ; yes, and I must play them at once."

And Endellion thought long and carefully concerning this new phase in his affairs.

CHAPTER XIV

ARTHUR DULVERTON AND SQUIRE DONNITHORNE

"WELL, this is a curious business, eh, vicar? Who'd a-thought this morning that at night we should be talking with Bob Dulverton?"

It was Squire Donnithorne who spoke. He had insisted on giving the vicar a lift as far as the vicarage gates, and had driven a mile out of his way in so doing. For some time after leaving the Manor House there was an awkward silence. Miriam had sat in a corner of the brougham as if in deep thought, the vicar sitting opposite her, and looking out of the window as if he were trying to discover objects in the darkness. Even the squire had been silent, he knew not why.

"Of course, we're all jolly glad to see him, eh, Borlase?" he continued.

"Of course," said the vicar, absently. Neither could see the other, but each felt uncomfortable.

"Come now, Borlase," went on the squire presently, "you must confess that all your predictions have been falsified. You always said that if Bob ever came home he'd be a disgrace to the parish, while I always maintained that he was not bad at heart. Why, there's not a suggestion of a rake about him. Even you must admit that. For that matter, he's gone too far the other way for me. If you'd got a curate fresh

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from the hands of his bishop he couldn't be more circumspect."

"I had a chat with him before you came," said the vicar.

"Yes, well?"

"He's—a sort of atheist."

"Come now, I don't believe that. There was never a Dulverton who was an atheist. Many of them have been wild, but, dash it, sir, there's never been an atheist."

"He talked like one, anyhow."

The squire was silent for a few seconds, then he burst out with a laugh.

"He was at his old tricks. You know he always did tease you. He's laughed with me about it many a time. But an atheist! I tell you a Dulverton couldn't so far forget himself."

Again the vicar was silent; why he knew not, except that something seemed to seal his lips.

"Ah, here we are," cried the squire presently. "Well, good-night. We shall have to give Bob a reception, eh? Kill the fatted calf and all that sort of thing. We can't allow the new squire of the parish to come home without giving him a public reception."

"I suppose not," said the vicar gloomily. He was getting out of the carriage as he spoke.

"And you seem as miserable as an owl about it," said the squire, laughing. "I tell you, Berlase, you never were fair to Bob, and you don't like him now."

"I can't understand him," said the vicar.

"Oh, you'll understand him in a day or two. As far as I can see, he'll be a modelsquire. Why, he's had no time to settle down yet. Of course, he went away under a sort of cloud, but every one has forgotten that, and we must give him a royal welcome. I feel proud

of him, and I'm sure our old friend would rejoice if he were alive to see him. I must see you in a day or two about getting up a great jollification. Good-night, Borlase."

"Good-night, Donnithorne. Good-night, Mirry; you seem very thoughtful."

"I'm only following your example," replied the girl.

The carriage drove away, and the squire leaned back among the cushions, and lit a fresh cigar. For a long time there was silence. Evidently the vicar's reticence had affected him, and as his daughter did not seem inclined for speech he pulled at his cigar meditatively.

"I don't like him a bit."

It was Miriam Donnithorne who spoke, and the words escaped her as if without any intention on her part.

"What? Don't like who?" asked the squire.

"I'm awfully disappointed, dad—awfully. He's not a bit like what I hoped he'd be."

"You mean Bob?"

"Yes. I can't help it. I went to see him, expecting I'd like him just as I used to. But I don't. He's not the same, dad."

"Of course he's not the same—and—I am—glad he isn't. If he were, I should be troubled, very much troubled. But he's improved—improved in every way. He's developed into a wonderfully fine man, and he seems to have given up all—the—the things that pained his father."

"Oh, yes, he's quite handsome, I'll admit so much; and, of course, his behaviour was very proper and all that. Yes, I know I'm unreasonable. I suppose he was awfully wild years ago. You tried to keep these things from me, and I never understood them. People

say he had low, depraved tastes, and I suppose he had, although he was always very nice to me. But now he doesn't seem to be Bob at all."

"All fancy, Mirry, my dear."

"Oh, yes, I know that, and, for that matter, his face has not altered as much as I expected; neither has his voice, although it is deeper, and he has what is, I suppose, the Australian accent. But it seems to me as though he has done something which has changed him. As you know, he was not a bit clever; he was what you called 'thick-headed.' Now he's as sharp as a needle. I watched him while you were talking, and I could see the difference."

"Of course, Mirry, my dear, but that's natural. He was only just turned twenty when he left. Now he must be nearly thirty. Besides, see what he's gone through. As he told us, he'd been everywhere and met with all sorts of people. Then the shock of his father's death must have told on him. You know he said that it sort of—well, turned him inside out."

"I suppose you are right," said the girl, after a few seconds' silence. "In fact, you must be; but there are things I can't understand. I can't put it into words; but I felt all the evening as though he were playing a part—as—as though he were—keeping something back from us. Didn't you feel it?"

"Not a bit," replied the squire. "Of course, he's changed. Who wouldn't be? Besides, even if you are right, is it any wonder? He went away in disgrace. There was an awful scene between him and his father. I took Bob's side; but Borlase—well, you know what Borlase is. As for Arthur Dulverton—I don't mean young Arthur, but his father—he did everything in his power to poison the father's mind against the son. In fact, I've never felt the same towards the lawyer since.

Well, think of it all. Young Bob goes away, and has to rough it. He's suffered too. Any one who watches his face can see that. He's lived years of loneliness, sometimes of want. Naturally he thinks of the suffering he's brought on his father. Then came the news of Dulverton's death a long time after the poor chap had been laid in his grave. Is it any wonder he should be knocked about? Then he comes back to his old home. Of course, he remembers everything. He's as nervous as a kitten; he has to meet his uncle and cousin. The vicar, who has never liked him, is as cold as an icicle towards him, while his old playmate Mirry just sits and watches him. Is it any wonder that he's—well, not as you expected to find him? Mind, I don't agree with you at all. I find him the old Bob, except that he's improved so, turned teetotal, and all that kind of nonsense. Of course, there's nothing to wonder at in this, but there you are," and the squire relit his cigar, which had gone out during his long speech.

"I suppose you're right," replied the girl, "and I'm unreasonable. Of course, too, he's improved. As you told him, he might have been 'dining out' every night instead of roughing it. He's cleverer, too, and—and—but there—I'm awfully glad he's come back."

"I'm more pleased than if any one had written me a cheque for a thousand pounds; I am, indeed. He'll be riding over to see me, and I shall be going to see him, and—and things will be different."

There was a silence for a few minutes, and then the squire broke out suddenly:

"Do you know, Mirry, that I—I used to hope you and Bob—would——"

"Don't, dad, please."

"Of course," stammered the squire, "it—it was—"

only a sort of fancy, and—but you don't like any one else, do you, Mirry?"

The girl was silent.

"Young Arthur Dulverton has been at the house a great deal lately," went on the squire. "Of course, I've said nothing, only—I—I thought he was not the sort of fellow you liked. You used to like Bob best."

Still she did not speak, and the squire pressed the subject no further. Still he sighed rather sadly after his daughter had gone to bed that night, and sat a long time before the fire thinking.

"Mirry's a good girl," he reflected presently, "but I don't think I ever understood her. I'm not that kind of man, I suppose. She's clever, too. She got it from her mother. Ah, if she'd only lived! That's what Mirry wants—a mother. As for me, I've never been the same man since, never. I thought I should have gone mad when Hawk told me she was gone. Ah, dear!" and the squire heaved a deep sigh.

"But I am glad Bob's come back," he went on musing presently. "It'll be pleasant to ride over of an evening to see him, and it'll be a treat for me to see him drop in here of an evening. I wonder why Mirry doesn't like him? She was always a chum of his years ago, and I hoped that—but there, it's no use thinking of that. All the same, I don't like Arthur Dulverton coming here so often. Directly after poor Dulverton's death he seemed to regard himself as heir to the manor, and therefore as Mirry's natural suitor. I wonder why I never liked Arthur? He's regarded as a most worthy young man. He has no vices, he's very religious—vicar's warder, and all that, but I could never cotton to him. Why is it, I wonder? But there, I'll go to bed."

A servant entered as he spoke.

"Anything more you want, sir?"

"No, thank you, Seccomb."

"I beg pardon, sir, but I forgot to tell you something when you came in."

"Yes, what was that?"

"Mr. Arthur Dulverton called just after you had gone, and asked to see either you or Miss Miriam."

He was an old servant, who had known Miriam from a child, and he had never been asked to call her "Miss Donnithorne."

"Did he leave any message?"

"No, sir. That is, nothing of importance. I told him you'd gone to Dulverton Manor to see the—the new squire, and that I didn't know what time you'd be back. Then he said he'd most likely call to-morrow, but he didn't say what time, sir."

"Ah, that's all right. Good-night, Seccomb."

"Good-night, sir."

The squire went upstairs in a very thoughtful frame of mind, and did not seem to remember that a half-burnt cigar was in his mouth.

He had not long finished breakfast the following morning when young Arthur Dulverton was announced.

"Ah, Arthur," he said, for he had always treated him in a very familiar fashion, "you must have got up early for a change."

"No change, I can assure you, squire. Besides, the ride has done me good. I called last night."

"So Seccomb told me. Sorry you had your journey for nothing," and the squire turned rather uneasily to the *Times*, which he had been reading.

"Seccomb told me you had gone over to Dulverton Manor."

"Yes, I wanted to give Bob a welcome. As you

know, his father was my oldest friend, and—I could do no other.”

“I suppose not,” said Arthur Dulverton reflectively, and yet had any one watched his eyes he would have seen a vindictive gleam. “Well, how did he strike you, sir?”

“Greatly improved,” replied the squire heartily. “A kind of new Bob in many respects. He’s dropped all—that is, those things which made his friends anxious, and will become a credit to the county.”

“Of course, I’m very glad he’s come back,” said Arthur, “very glad, too, that he’s so improved. As you remember, he was very racketsy for two or three years before—he was sent away, so much so that I saw very little of him. By my father’s wish, in fact. Not that we were ever very great friends. He—he never liked me.”

“No, there was never much love lost between you,” admitted the squire.

“I’ve always had my way to make,” said Arthur. “As the son of the younger brother of the family, I’ve had to work hard. Father has taken me into partnership, but it will not lessen my work. Rather it will increase it.”

“Taken you into partnership, has he? I’ve never heard anything about it.”

“No, I rode over to tell you. Nothing was settled until yesterday.”

Squire Donnithorne was never regarded as a very clever man, nevertheless he possessed far more shrewd common sense than the world credited him with. He was well aware that both Lawyer Dulverton and his son fully hoped to own the Dulverton Estates, and that young Bob’s return must have destroyed their hopes. He had heard of the interview which had

taken place only the previous day, and there had been a sense of satisfaction in his heart when he thought of their chagrin. But it had evidently led to a partnership between father and son. This, in the squire's opinion, ought to have been arranged years before, for it was not fair that the lawyer's only son should be merely a paid servant of his father, especially as according to report the son was a better lawyer than the father, and did the bulk of the work. But why was the partnership arranged immediately after the news of Bob Dulverton's return? He formed his conclusions concerning this, although he said not a word.

"Of course, it is a fine old county practice," went on Arthur quietly, "and my father thinks of retiring in a year or two."

"He's always been a saving, careful man," remarked the squire.

"Yes," said Arthur, "and the practice is a good one. As you know, squire, we've done the legal work of practically all the landowners for miles around."

"But not for the Dulverton Estates," said the squire drily.

"No, not the Dulverton Estates," was Arthur's quiet rejoinder. "I suppose my uncle and my father quarrelled years ago, and so the business went to Mr. Dolgeth. Still, I thought you—you'd like to know about this, especially as——" and Arthur hesitated.

The squire again looked at the *Times*, never moving a muscle of his face. The truth was he was a little angry, although there seemed no reason why he should be. He spoke no word, however, but waited for Arthur Dulverton to proceed.

"I mean," said the young man presently, "that I shall now be in receipt of what people in this part of the

world call a good income. In fact, I suppose my father could, if he liked, buy up many of the people who employ him."

"I daresay," said the squire. "I've often said that lawyers get as much out of land as the owners do."

There was a touch of asperity in his voice, because he was angered at what seemed to him Arthur's boastfulness.

The young lawyer noted the tone of the squire's voice, as well as what his words implied. Still, he kept his temper admirably, and went on speaking with unruffled temper.

"Of course, my father has never touched anything in the shape of risky speculation, and no one can suggest that any shadow of unfair dealing rests upon his name. As you may remember, only a few weeks ago one of the legal papers spoke of him as a man who had upheld the highest traditions of the legal profession. As a consequence, I shall come into not only a good income, but I shall be a partner of a firm which by universal consent is associated with all that is best in English law."

"Well, well, what are you driving at, Arthur?" said the squire testily. "As you know, you've done all my work, and I've no intention of taking it away. So if it's that you've come about you may rest contented."

"No, it's not that, sir," replied Arthur, "and I've only said what I have said to show you that I am not a needy adventurer."

"Who in the world ever thought you were?" snapped the squire. "Why, I stood godfather to you when you were christened, and have known you all my life."

"Yes, sir, you have, and have always been a good

friend to me. But you've always known me, too, as one who has been dependent on my father for every penny I've had. Well, things will be different in the future."

"I'm very glad, and, of course, I congratulate you." Here the squire looked at his watch. "I'm expecting my bailiff every minute," he said. "You'll have to excuse me, Arthur. I must get ready to go with him."

"Just a minute, sir. I've told you—what I have told you, because—you must surely know it. I've loved Miriam all my life, and—and will you let me have her for my wife?"

CHAPTER XV

ARTHUR AND MIRIAM

THE squire never lifted his eyes from his paper. He had been half expecting this; nevertheless, it gave him a shock. He knew nothing against Arthur Dulverton, and yet he never liked him. There was something in the demeanour of the well-behaved young man that made him uncomfortable—almost angry. More than once he had been angry with himself for what he felt was unjust. He had always behaved to him in a friendly way, but he had never taken him to his heart.

He tried to think of something to say in answer to Arthur's proposal, but he could not. He wanted to forbid him ever thinking of such a thing, although he could give no reason why. It is true a country lawyer's son might not be considered a suitable match for the only daughter of Squire Donnithorne, but then Dulverton was no ordinary country attorney. He bore one of the oldest names in the county, and was received into all the county society. His practice was of the highest respectability, and, as Arthur had said, he was probably far more wealthy than many of the land-owners in the district. And yet Squire Donnithorne was angry that Arthur should come and ask for Miriam's hand in marriage. Had Bob Dulverton come to him

even in the days when he was in disgrace, he would have felt more kindly towards him than he felt towards Arthur. Perhaps it was because, almost as soon as Miriam was born, he had dreams of the son of his old friend being the husband of his daughter.

He sat for a long time staring at the *Times*, never reading a line, and never speaking a word.

"I'm afraid you weren't prepared for this," said Arthur; "I ought not to have spoken so suddenly."

"No, I was not prepared," he replied—"no, I was not prepared."

"You have nothing against me, have you?" asked Arthur.

"Nothing against you, Arthur, nothing, and yet I've everything against you."

"I don't understand," said the young man. "As far as I know, my reputation is stainless."

"Yes, yes, of course it is. It's not that. I meant that I've everything against you, because—well, you are not the kind of man I ever thought would—would—make my Mirry happy."

"But surely, sir—and I speak with all respect—Mirry is the best judge of that."

For the first time the squire raised his head, and looked straight into Arthur Dulverton's face. Then he seemed like a man who was aroused from sleep. Hitherto he had been like one dazed; now every sense was awake, all his faculties were on the alert.

"Have you spoken to Miriam?" he asked, and his voice was firm and decided.

"No, sir, not definitely. I think, nay, I am sure, she knows what my feelings towards her are, but I have never spoken. I've not felt that I had the right."

It was very properly and correctly spoken, and Arthur saw the squire's face clear as if by magic. He

felt he had made a good impression by this remark, and he determined to strengthen it.

"Up to yesterday I have, almost ever since my uncle's death, looked upon myself as the natural heir to his estates. I think I had the right. Less than two years ago that man Hampton, who, you will remember, came home from Australia, said he had seen my cousin Bob in a drinking saloon in Australia. He told us that he was only the wreck of a man, and that he was rapidly killing himself."

"I didn't pay any attention to the fellow," said the squire.

"I know," replied Arthur, "but, as you know, it was in accord with what we previously heard of him. He told us that he was the companion of the worst scum in Australia, and that he was a physical wreck. Later on came the news that he was dead. We had no definite proof of it, but I am sure it shortened his father's days."

"And you accepted this news?"

"Wasn't it natural, sir?"

"But you took no trouble to find out the truth or falsity of it?"

"His own father didn't, sir."

The squire sighed.

"No, he didn't," he admitted; "all the same, the report was denied afterwards."

"Yes, it was, and then it was confirmed again. Anyhow, when week after week and month after month passed, and still no further news was heard of Bob, we naturally concluded that he had killed himself by—by—drink, and—other things, and so I——"

"Thought you would step into his shoes," snapped the squire.

"At any rate, sir," said Arthur, "I felt I could not speak until the matter was settled."

To this the squire made no reply, while Arthur, wishing he had left well alone, hesitated before proceeding.

"Yesterday he came home," he said at length.

"Yes, and knocked all the gossips have said about him on the head. He isn't a physical wreck, but is as strong and hale as my old friend's boy should be. By gad, Arthur, but he gave you a shaking. He's not the bleary-eyed, whisky-sodden sot that you have talked about, but a credit to the Dulverton name, a credit, yes, a credit!"

He said this triumphantly, jubilantly, as though he greatly rejoiced.

"He has doubtless reformed his ways," admitted the young lawyer, "for which, of course—that is, all of us are glad. I do not deny that his coming materially altered my plans and prospects. But it made me glad I had not asked for Miriam on the strength of my—my expectations. It did not, however, alter my hope of winning her. How could it when I have loved her ever since she was a child? So I spoke to my father about it, and the deeds of partnership are being arranged."

"You'd got the matter all cut and dried, it seems," said the squire.

"No, sir, I only had hopes, strong hopes. All the same, I could not come to you as an honourable man should without having my future assured. While, of course, sir, I should never think of speaking to Miriam without first coming to you."

This was a sop to the squire's vanity, and Arthur thought it told. There was, he felt sure, a kindlier look in his face after he had given expression to his last remark.

"Well, come to the point," said the squire at

length. "As I told you, I have an engagement. I suppose you want my permission to speak to Mirry?"

"And your goodwill, your blessing," replied Arthur. The squire rose to his feet.

"Look here, Arthur," he said, "you have asked a very great thing, and I am going to speak plainly. I believe you to be a very estimable young man, but I don't believe you can make Miriam happy. However, I never could understand women, and I'm not going to dogmatise. You've come to me in a very honourable way, and I appreciate it. I don't forbid your speaking to my little maid, but—but—I shan't be disappointed if she says no. Not because I've anything against you, but because, if Miriam is the girl I think she is, whatever may be her feelings now, you won't make her happy throughout life."

"Then I have your consent to speak?" cried Arthur.

"I've said my say," replied the squire bluntly, "and now I must go. Good-morning."

A cold feeling came into Arthur's heart. The interview had been different from what he expected. Still, he had gained the squire's consent, grudging and ungracious as it was. Meanwhile he was in the morning-room of Donnithorne Hall, the accepted suitor for Miriam Donnithorne's hand.

"I wonder where she is," he reflected at length. "I must see her before I go, and I must settle the matter at once. I can see that the squire is in love with Bob again. It was always the same in the old days. I always had to take a back place when he was around. Possibly, too, she was favourably impressed with him last night, and I must gain her promise before he strengthens that impression."

He went to the window and looked out over the broad parklands, and the rich, undulating country of

perhaps the fairest county in England. He seemed to take a special pleasure in noting the broad acres before him. Only the night before he had stayed late at his office in order to examine documents relating to the very lands on which he was gazing.

"There isn't a finer estate in Devonshire," he reflected. "Dulverton is small compared with it."

He rang the bell as he spoke.

"Will you tell Miss Donnithorne I would like to speak to her?" he said to the servant who entered.

"Yes, sir."

Arthur Dulverton had been at the house so much that the servant took his order quite naturally. A minute later Miriam entered the room.

"I've just come from the kitchen, Arthur," she said. "I've been interviewing the cook. I've told dad I won't have a housekeeper here, and so I'm a busy person."

She spoke pleasantly and frankly, but Arthur found it very difficult to say what was in his heart.

"You've been talking with dad," she went on; "business, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Arthur. "I came to tell him that I have become my father's partner. You see," he added, as if in explanation, "your father is one of our principal clients."

"That was very nice and proper of you," she laughed. "Are you taking a holiday, Arthur? If so, I can give you a game of golf. I've just had a most satisfactory interview with the cook, and I imagine she'll be glad to dispense with my further interference."

It seemed as though she had made it easy for him to speak, and yet he felt it more difficult every second. The shadow of the new owner of Dulverton Manor

rested upon him, and the fact that Miriam had accompanied her father to see him only the previous night raised a barrier.

"I'm afraid I'm not very keen on golf this morning, Mirry," he said; "besides, you always beat me, even when you play from the men's tees."

"Coward!" she laughed. "I'll give you strokes, if you like."

"Fancy a man taking strokes from a woman," he said, as if entering into her spirit. "No, I would much rather have a talk with you. There are some things I want to say to you very much."

"Well, don't look so solemn about them, anyhow," replied the girl gaily. "The birds are singing, and summer is coming, so let's be happy."

"You seem in wonderfully good spirits this morning," he said, feeling that he was making anything but a good beginning. The truth was he was thinking of the young Squire of Dulverton Manor, whose coming had driven him out of the house which he had looked upon as his future home. "I hear you were up at Dulverton last night," he went on.

"Yes," replied Miriam; "directly father heard that Bob had come home he insisted on taking me over. Of course, you saw him earlier in the day?"

"Oh, you heard about that, did you? I find that every one is talking about him."

"And what are people saying?"

"Oh, the prodigal is forgiven," replied Arthur. "Every one seems ready to forget the past, even although he—he sent his father to an early grave. I suppose he's the 'pattern young man' now. I am not sure that some of the servants haven't seen a halo around his head."

"Are you sure that's kind?" said Miriam.

"Miriam, it's no use pretending. I never liked him when we were boys together, and I don't like him now. I don't profess any great joy that the prodigal has returned. Besides, there's something wrong about him."

"Wrong? What do you mean?"

"I don't know. The old Bob I knew. We never got on well together. He used to call me a pious prig, and all that sort of thing, but I knew him. He was sent down from Oxford, he made friends with all sorts of riff-raff, and as a consequence he got entangled in a disgraceful affair for which his father hustled him out of the country. Oh, yes, I know I'm his cousin, but what I've said is the truth. He was a disgrace to the parish, and a byword among decent people. All the same, I'd rather trust him as he was then than as he pretends to be now. At any rate, he was not a hypocrite. He might be brutal, and have all sorts of low tastes, but he didn't profess to be anything but what he was. Now he's a sort of Pecksniff. I wouldn't give two pence for his so-called reformation. Indeed, for a moment I didn't believe it was he at all."

"Didn't believe it was he?"

"No. I couldn't feel it was Bob. Of course I was mistaken. I took him to the window so as to have a closer look at him. Oh, it was he all right, I had to admit that. But there's something more wrong about him now than there was years ago. He's done something which he's hiding. I'm sure he has. He's wearing a mask of some sort. It's not like Bob to come back as he has come. He never would have become a pattern young man unless he had some deep-laid scheme. Why, he adopted the superior tone with us. He acted a sort of dignified part. That was never Bob's way in the old days. I could have understood

his flying into a passion, and swearing and blustering, but I cannot understand him cool and sarcastic. Bob never dealt in innuendoes in the old days, and he wouldn't now if he were not desperately anxious to hide something."

Arthur had forgotten his love-making, forgotten all the things he had meant to say to the girl whom he was determined to marry. The truth was, although he would not have confessed it to himself, he was madly jealous of the man he believed to be his cousin. He had a feeling that this reformed rake had made a good impression on Miriam, and he wanted to poison her mind against him before he had a chance of reviving the girlish liking for him which he knew she had years before.

As for Miriam, she didn't speak a word. She tried to be angry with Arthur for saying unkind things about his cousin, but she could not. She knew he was saying what she had felt herself. She had no doubt that the young man at the Manor House was her old playmate, and yet she felt they were strangers. It was true her father had told her that nearly eight years of a wandering and a suffering life would make a great change, and she supposed it was natural, and yet she felt as Arthur felt. He had not changed physically nearly as much as she had expected; it was a deeper change she had recognised, a change of personality, a change which had made him a different man.

"Don't you feel this, Mirry?" went on Arthur.

"Yes—that is, I don't know."

The words escaped her before she was aware, and while she was angry at herself for uttering them, she did not try to explain them in any way. Naturally, Arthur noted this, and the sky of his hopes was brighter in a second.

"Let's go out into the sunlight, Mirry," he said. "It's a lovely morning, and it seems a shame to stay indoors," and without a word she followed him out on to the lawn.

"I know it's mean of me to talk like this about Bob," Arthur Dulverton went on. "I am quite aware that I ought to have expressed great joy at his coming home, and professed to have been very glad because he had so improved. But I can't do it, Mirry. Of course, people are talking about my hopes of inheriting the old place being destroyed, and, to be perfectly frank, it's a blow to me. But it hasn't been the Dulverton Estates I've been thinking about all night, Mirry. They are nothing, just nothing compared with something else."

Miriam Donnithorne did not speak, but she knew that her face flushed at his words.

"It was you I was thinking about, Mirry. I was afraid he'd come between us, as he did in the old days. For I love you, Miriam—I have loved you ever since I knew what the word meant. I've never given a thought to another girl. You know that; it's always been you. Of course you know it, for I've taken no pains to hide it, but I've never dared to speak. For one thing, I hadn't a position to offer you, and, for another, I always had an idea that you were thinking of Bob, and it put a sort of barrier between us. But I couldn't wait any longer, I couldn't really, and so I urged my father to take me into partnership, and directly it was arranged I rode over. I came last night; didn't you know it?"

She shook her head.

"I did. I was told you had gone over to Dulverton Manor, and I haven't slept for the night. I just—that is, spent the night at the office. This morning I came again, and I've spoken to your father."

The girl turned towards him with almost a frightened look in her eyes.

"He didn't receive me very graciously, but he didn't raise any objection to my speaking to you," said the young man. "In fact, he gave his consent if—if I could gain yours. Say yes, will you, Mirry?"

Miriam did not speak. She didn't know why, but Arthur Dulverton never appealed to her so strongly as on that morning. She had felt sure for a long time that he loved her, but, as he had feared, the thought of Bob Dulverton had always been in her mind. She had idealised him, and had hoped that he would come home, not under a cloud of disgrace, but a sort of glorified Bob, though still the old Bob she had always liked. Perhaps that was why she had never given Arthur any encouragement. But now Bob Dulverton had come back, improved almost beyond recognition; but he was not the old Bob, and she did not like him. In her heart of hearts she felt that Arthur had no longer a rival.

"You don't care about Bob—that is, not—not—in the way I mean; do you, Mirry?"

"No," she replied.

"Then you will promise me, won't you? Say you will, Mirry. You know how much and how long I have loved you."

His voice trembled, and there was seemingly a ring of sincerity in it.

Miriam was strangely moved, and it is possible, in spite of many misgivings, that she might have given him the promise he asked for, but at that moment they heard the sound of horse's hoofs on the drive.

Both turned and saw who the horseman was, and Arthur Dulverton muttered words which sounded like a curse.

CHAPTER XVI

ENDELLION AT DONNITHORNE HALL

As we have said, Ralph Endellion was not slow to see that he had not favourably impressed Miriam Donnithorne. He could not help feeling that she suspected something wrong. He saw the look of disappointment, of questioning, almost of distrust in her eyes. Nay, there was something stronger than that: he saw antagonism, almost dislike. He remembered the vicar's words, and a feeling almost like fear came into his heart. He knew instinctively that she was no slow-witted country girl, who accepted everything and every one on trust. She was one who thought for herself, judged for herself. He reflected on the conversation which had taken place, and asked himself if he had in any way committed himself. He could think of nothing that might arouse suspicion, and yet while she might not suspect him, there was a barrier between them. She had called him "Bob," yet he was quite sure that she would have spoken to the real Bob differently. There was no link of sympathy between them; she seemed to regard him coldly. If that were so, she would be for ever on the watch; she might arouse suspicion, and if suspicion were aroused, all his plans would be like a castle of cards. He did not fear the antagonism of Lawyer Dulverton

or his son. He felt sure he could match his wits against theirs, and beat them. Neither did he trouble much about Mr. Borlase. With careful handling he would become as clay in his hands. But this girl was different. She possessed a quick, searching mind, and a judgment which was masculine in its nature. And more than that, she had that fine intuition which is quicker and surer than any processes of the mind, and which had caused her to be distrustful of him. That was why he felt that here lay his danger, if danger there were, and it was for him, at all hazards, to allay it.

When he rose on the morning following the squire's visit his mind was clear, and every faculty was on the alert. He saw at a glance that no suggestion of suspicion was in the mind of any one in the house. Peters was simply overjoyed when he came down to breakfast. Mrs. Dixon declared that she hadn't felt so happy for years, the maid servants curtsied with a glad smile when they came into the room. He could see that one and all welcomed the "young master," and rejoiced because of his coming. He felt sure, too, that this would be the feeling in the neighbourhood. He had been accepted as Bob Dulverton by every one without question. Old Squire Donnithorne's welcome had been cordial in the extreme, and when he had left the house, he had told him that he must make haste to pay him a visit. No, the danger lay with Miriam, and he must make it his first business to set her mind at rest.

He felt sure that before the morning was over the house would be full of callers. People would come from all around the neighbourhood, to bid him welcome. Possibly both Binns and Dolgeth would come to deal with business matters, and he wanted, if possible, to avoid them.

Before he had finished breakfast his mind was made

up. He could find a thousand excuses for riding over to Donnithorne Hall early ; indeed, every one would think of it as a natural thing for him to do. By this means he would escape callers, and also gain time to learn something about them before they came.

"I suppose there are horses in the stables, Peters—riding horses, I mean ? I am afraid I was too excited yesterday to note what there really was."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Robert ; none of the horses have been sold. They didn't dare to go as far as that. Your father did not ride much during the last two years of his life, but, as you know, he always loved horses."

"That's right. Will you kindly send word that I shall want one just after breakfast ?"

"Yes, Mr. Robert. You'll be back to lunch, I hope, sir ?"

"I expect so. I'm only going over to Donnithorne Hall."

Peters' eyes brightened. When it was known in the kitchen that Squire Donnithorne and his daughter had called the previous night, there was much discussion on the matter, and the hope was freely expressed that "Arthur's nose might be put out, and that Mr. Bob might bring Miss Miriam to Dulverton as its mistress." When, therefore, Endellion remarked that he was going to Donnithorne Hall, Peters accepted it as a good augury.

"Thank you, sir. I'll let Buzza know at once."

When Endellion arrived at the stables he found a dappled grey mare saddled for him. She was a beautiful creature, standing sixteen hands high, and going five.

"Muster Bob allus loved a good hoss," remarked Buzza to the stable boy. "He went off in his ridin' a

bit just before 'ee went away, but I 'ope he've a kipt it up, so to spaik."

Both Buzza and the stable boy, therefore, watched eagerly while the young man came into the yard. Endellion had always loved horses, and during his sojourn in Australia had done some rough riding. He was not at all alarmed, therefore, when he saw the look in the mare's eye.

"She's a bit skittish, sur," remarked Buzza, "and p'r'aps she's ruther vull of wuts (oats), but she's the best we've got, Muster Robert, and you allus liked to veel somethin' lively under 'ee."

"That's all right, Buzza," said the young man. "I dare say she'll not break my neck."

"You'll 'ave to be careful, sur. She d' look a bit ugly. I was goin' to bring 'er round to the front door, sur, but you be ready afore I thought."

"That's all right; bring her out."

Evidently the mare was restive, and perhaps a horse fancier would have said she'd be difficult to manage. Moreover, she did not seem to take kindly to the young man. She snorted angrily, and showed other signs of temper.

"P'r'aps, after all, I'd better git out the roan," remarked Buzza. "'Ee's allus as quiet as a lamb."

"I'd rather ride this mare," replied Endellion.

"Then I'll 'ould 'er 'ead, sur, while you do mount."

"No, let her go."

A moment later he had caught the bridle and leapt on her back.

"Be careful, Mr. Bob; be careful, sur!" cried Buzza excitedly.

But the mare quickly discovered that she'd found her master, and after a few wild leaps she became submissive to the firm hand upon the rein.

"Better rider than ever he was," remarked Buzza delightedly. "I was unaisy in my mind when I saddled Bess, fearin' he might a' gone off in his ridin', but I remembered what he used to be, and wuddent have nothin' but the wildest hoss in the stables. Gor Jay, it ded du me good to see un thraw his leg over her back. Ah, he may have been a wild chap, but he's stiddied down, and I c'n zee 'ee ed'n goin' to stand no nonsents. Roughin' it abroad 'ave made a man ov un."

By the time Endellion had reached the parish road, the mare was perfectly docile. Perhaps there is no animal which realises when it has found a master more quickly than a horse, and had not Endellion been a horseman of a first-rate order his ride that morning would have done much to arouse suspicion, for Bob Dulverton had been known to be the best rider in the district. Even as a boy, when he hunted, he was always in at the death, and it was said that there was no horse in Devonshire which he could not master. If, therefore, Bess had thrown him, or had run away with him, the people, remembering Dulverton's prowess in this direction, would have greatly wondered. But Bess knew immediately that she must obey her new master. Indeed, when on reaching the parish road Endellion had to dismount in order to tighten her girths, the mare rubbed her nose against him in a friendly way. As for the young man, he patted her gently, and began to talk with her. "Bess, my girl," he said, "you and I are going to be friends. But you must remember that I'm your master, too, my girl," and then he leapt on her back again, and together they dashed along the country lane.

We have said that Endellion was a good-looking fellow, and certainly he looked well that morning. He had bought a riding suit in Melbourne, and although

it might not quite accord with the ideas of an English tailor, it set off the young man's athletic proportions to perfection. No one looking at him for the first time would think of him as other than a striking-looking man. His cheeks were bronzed by years of open-air life, his frame was well knit and muscular, and he possessed that innate strength which is known only to the elect few. The fresh air, moreover, and the sensations caused by riding, gave him a sense of confidence. What had he to fear? The past should be blotted out, and the future was all his own. Donnithorne Hall had been pointed out to him the day before, so he had no difficulty in finding the way. The squire had welcomed him joyfully, and although Miriam had received him coldly, he must make her alter her attitude towards him. Indeed, there was pleasure in the thought of mastering this girl. For he determined to master her. He had noted her quiet determination, and her strong personality. There was also a suggestion of masterfulness about her, and the fact gave piquancy to his visit. He was not sure whether he liked her or not; but he admired her.

He had not gone far beyond the Donnithorne Lodge gates when he heard the sound of voices. He could hear no word that was said, but he thought he recognised something familiar in the tones. A few seconds later he saw Arthur Dulverton and Miriam Donnithorne standing together.

Instinctively he felt that the interview between the two was serious. There was no mistaking the earnestness which characterised them both, and Endellion was not slow to interpret the fact. He remembered what Dulverton had told him about the old rivalry which existed between him and his cousin. He called to mind, too, what he had heard only the day before.

"Perhaps I am only just in time," he reflected. "Evidently my respected cousin does not intend to lose any time."

He saw by their faces that he was recognised, and noticed the gleam of anger which shot from Arthur Dulverton's eyes.

"Good!" said Endellion to himself, "I fancy I have disturbed a serious declaration."

He rode up to them gaily, and sprung lightly from his horse.

"Good morning, Mirry," he cried. "I hope you got back safely last night. Not that I had any doubt about it," he added. "All the same, I could not help yielding to the temptation this morning to come over and see. Somehow, I don't know why, but we never got a chance of speaking to each other last night, and I am afraid I didn't seem like your old playmate."

"No, you didn't a bit, Bob," she replied, "but it's good of you to come over. Dad will be delighted. He'll be back to lunch, and of course you'll stay."

"'Fraid I mustn't, Mirry. Mrs. Dixon expects me back. In fact, she almost made me promise to come. You've no idea how glad the old lady is to have me back. I gave her an awful time, too, in the old days; but then, she's a distant relation, and blood is said to be thicker than water. Ah, Arthur, old chap, how are you?" and Endellion held out his hand.

Arthur Dulverton hesitated a second. He was very angry at Endellion's appearance, and he realised more than ever that Dulverton Manor was lost to him.

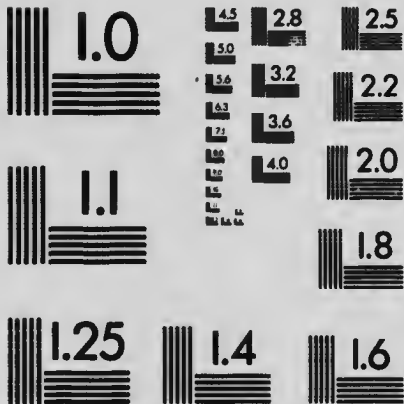
"What's the use of pretending, Bob?" he said, and there was sullenness in his voice. "You and I never got on well years ago, and I don't suppose we shall get on better now, even though you have—reformed."

He felt angry at himself for speaking in this way,



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but he was terribly disappointed, and all his old feeling of dislike for his cousin was aroused.

"Still, you'll shake hands, old fellow? When all is said and done, you know we *are* cousins. Of course, as Miriam knows, we didn't always hit it, but we needn't live at daggers drawn. If I ever did anything to deserve the enmity of all these years, I apologise. There now! I hope years of knocking about has taught me some sense, so let bygones be bygones."

"Oh, very well," said Arthur, still sulkily, "of course I'll shake hands. And I hope that—that your promise to lead a decent life will be kept," and he allowed Endellion to grasp his hand.

"But you doubt it, eh? For that matter, I don't know that I promised, and, as you know, the place that shall be nameless is paved with good resolutions. Still, I expect I have the old family pride, even though I made a fool of myself in my callow days."

Miriam could not help comparing the two as they stood together. They were nearly the same age, although Arthur might be a year younger. They also both possessed the Dulverton features, although Arthur was far less like the old squire had been than Endellion. But there the resemblance ceased to exist. Arthur was at least four inches shorter than the other, and cast in a smaller mould. He also had a slight stoop, while Endellion was as straight as an arrow. But more than that, he seemed a littler man, not physically merely, but in a deeper and more vital sense. In fact, he seemed petty and small beside the young stranger who had just come home from Australia. There was nothing large-minded about the young lawyer, and the way he had kept back his hand from the other affected Miriam unpleasantly.

Not that she liked Endellion, but she saw that his

was a larger nature, that whatever his faults in the past had been, he seemed to be more healthy-minded than the man who had asked her to be his wife.

Perhaps this was because the man she believed to be Bob Dulverton had for years been living an open-air life, while Arthur had been cooped up in an office. She had not felt this so much in the old days. Indeed, while she had liked Bob best, she had admired Arthur most. She had always looked upon Bob as slow-witted and somewhat clownish; he had been a failure at school and at the 'Varsity, and had disappointed his father terribly. Arthur, on the other hand, had always been clever. He had taken a good degree, and was regarded as a very astute lawyer. Now, however, all was changed. It seemed to her that Bob was not only physically superior, but intellectually the master of his cousin. Moreover, there was something in his eyes that fascinated her. Not only did they fail to suggest a dullard, but they made her regard him as a man of more than ordinarily fine intellectual calibre. Standing side by side as they did, she could not help feeling that Arthur was dwarfed, and made insignificant. As for what she had been taught to believe about Bob, it seemed altogether absurd. There was not a sign of dissipation or of low tastes. Indeed, standing there on the drive on that spring morning, with the sun shining on his sunburnt, healthy face, he seemed the very embodiment of health and strength. As for clownish sullenness, his every movement and word denied it. And, truth to tell, Miriam Donnithorne admired strong men. Every one, and especially every woman, is a hero worshipper. And Miriam had her heroes. She loved to read about such men as Richelieu and Napoleon and Cromwell. They undoubtedly had faults, they were cruel, and two of them, at any rate,

were over-weeningly ambitious. But they were strong, and because they were strong they were leaders. This was why, as if by magic, Arthur Dulverton seemed overshadowed by the newcomer.

Arthur Dulverton did not reply to Endellion. At a distance it seemed easy to think how he could place his cousin at a disadvantage, but he felt it impossible now.

"Come now, Arthur," went on Endellion easily, "I can see that you are determined to keep up the feud of old days. But why should you? I know that I was a ne'er-do-well, while you always did the right thing, but don't you believe in the Dulverton blood? It seems an awful shame to talk about this before Miriam, but, as you know, she used to be like a sister to us both, and did her best to make up our quarrels. Well, we are men now, Arthur. You, I hear, have made quite a reputation as a clever lawyer, religious leader, and all that sort of thing. I, on the other hand, have never done anything—worth doing. And yet, Arthur, old boy, being kicked around, as I have been, has knocked the stuffing out of me. It has made me think, too. I tell you, man," and a far-away look came into his eyes, "when a fellow is out in the wilds of Australia, alone, with not a soul to pity him, to care for him, ay, not to heave a sigh of regret if he panned out, it throws him on his beam ends. Man, I've lived for weeks, months at a time without hardly another companion than my dog and my horse. As you know, I was never a reading chap in the old days, but I happened upon a few books out there. Do you remember those lines of Coleridge, Arthur?"

"'So lonely 'twas that God Himself
Scarce seemèd there to be.'

Well, I felt the loneliness, only in another way. There

was nothing but God, as it seemed to me. And so at length I found myself. Forgive me for talking like this, but surely it's not for us—cousins—full-grown men, to harbour the petty spite of our boyhood."

Endellion had a purpose that can be easily divined in making this long speech. It was an attempt to remove Miriam's antagonism, and to give some explanation of his changed personality.

"Of course, I'm delighted to hear you say all this, Bob," said Arthur, although he hated the other for the good impression he felt sure he was making. "And, by the way, you've become a sort of orator. You'll be standing for Parliament."

"Why not?" said Endellion. "And, Miriam, there are such a lot of things I want to talk with you about. In fact, I'm not sure I won't disappoint Mrs. Dixon and stay to lunch. Holloa, squire, you see I've been quick to accept your invitation."

"Good, Bob!" cried the squire heartily, who, seeing him, had hurried to his side. "You can't come too soon or too often for me, my boy, and you'll stay to lunch, of course. No, I shan't accept any refusal. Hang Mrs. Dixon, and Binns, and Dolgeth, and the whole boiling of 'em. Why, you've only just come home after all these years, and I'm your oldest friend. Let business wait till you've settled down a bit."

He led Endellion away as he spoke, while Miriam and Arthur Dulverton remained together.

For a few seconds there was a silence between them, for Arthur felt that Endellion's coming had somehow changed the atmosphere, and made it difficult for him to renew his plea. Still, he reflected that he could not go away with the question unsettled.

"I must be going now, Mirry," he said at length, "but you'll make me happy before I go, won't you?"

CHAPTER XVII

ENDELLION TRIES TO EXPLAIN

BUT Miriam Donnithorne felt that a change had come over her feelings. Not that she cared for Arthur Dulverton the less; it was not that. Nevertheless, there was an indefinable something in her heart that disinclined her to make any promise. The man whom she believed to be Bob Dulverton was not more her old playmate than he had been the previous night. Of course he was Bob, and she was very glad to see him come back, but he was a stranger to her. Had they met as strangers, he would have appealed to her as a very interesting and striking-looking man, one whose acquaintance she would have been glad to make—only that, and nothing more. All the same, she felt she could not say to Arthur Dulverton what she would possibly have said had not their conversation been interrupted. Arthur was still Arthur, of course, and she had known him all her life; but somehow he was smaller, and she was not sure that—that—no, she could not put it into words.

“You do care for me, don't you?” he continued to urge.

“Of course, I've always cared for you, Arthur.”

“Yes, but you know how I mean. Tell me that.” And Miriam tried to say yes. Half an hour before

she felt that she did care for him in the way he desired ; but now she was not sure. She did not associate this fact in any way with Endellion's coming, but she knew there was a subtle difference in her thoughts concerning him. Her heart shrank from giving herself to Arthur Dulverton as his wife.

"His coming hasn't made any difference, has it?" said Arthur.

"Oh no, of course not."

"And you don't care for him—in that way? Tell me that," urged Arthur.

"I've told you that," replied the girl.

"And there is no one else?"

The girl shook her head.

"Then say yes. I'll give my life to make you happy, I will indeed."

"I'm afraid I can't," she replied.

"Tell me why," he continued to urge. "What is your reason for saying what you have just said?"

"I do not know, Arthur, only I can't. Perhaps another day I shall be able to tell you, but not now."

Arthur Dulverton looked at her steadily; then he turned towards the house. Squire Donnithorne had placed his hand upon the shoulder of the man he believed to be his cousin, and the two were laughing heartily; they were not looking towards him, and yet he knew that the Lew Squire of Dulverton had changed everything. The very air he breathed seemed different. Miriam was different. Before their conversation had been interrupted he felt sure she had been on the point of promising to be his wife; but directly the new-comer appeared everything seemed to be impossible.

"It is Bob," he said aloud. "You do care for him,

Mirry. I am nobody when he is around. You would promise me but for him."

He spoke bitterly, angry with himself for speaking, for he knew he was harming his cause.

"It's not that, Arthur, I assure you it is not that," she replied.

"But you changed towards me immediately he appeared on the scene," urged Arthur.

Miriam Donnithorre had become pale, and she felt strangely wrought upon. Almost for the first time in her life she was unable to control her thoughts, for she was not of the morbid, introspective, hysterical order of women. She was a child of the free, open country, and did not know what ill-health meant, and yet she felt ill at ease, nervous, foreboding.

"It has always been the same," went on Arthur petulantly. "He has always been my enemy, his coming anywhere has always been to my disadvantage. It has always been Bob, even when he disgraced our name, and was the by-word of the county. He has come back playing the part of the virtuous young man now, and every one is ready to sing his praises. People can't see he's playing a part to hide something more disgraceful than anything we've known of in the past; but he is. I am sure he is, and I'll find it out."

He knew he was speaking like a disappointed, sulky boy; knew that his words must appear petulant and childish to the girl whom for years he had been planning to win as his wife, and yet he could not help himself. Miriam's changed demeanour had chilled his heart.

"It's not Bob Dulverton," said Miriam. "Years ago, when I was a child, I used to like him, although people said he was bad, but I don't now."

"Don't like him?" cried Arthur; "you mean that, Mirry?"

"Yes, I mean it. I don't like him. He doesn't seem like the Bob I knew. Both last night and this morning I have felt as though he were playing a part."

"You think I am right, Mirry? You think this virtuous trick is only seeming?"

He spoke eagerly, almost joyfully. That Miriam should dislike the man he had been fearing as a rival brightened his hopes again.

"Of course I'm wrong," she went on, as if unheeding Arthur's words; "dad is simply delighted with . . . I suppose every one at Dulverton is wild . . . night. But I cannot help it. I used to like I . . . I do not like him now."

"Then it's not that?"

"No, it's not that. But I cannot say what you want me to say."

"I shall not give up hope then. There is no one you like better than you like me, is there?"

She shook her head.

"Then it'll be all right," cried Arthur joyfully. "I shall speak of this again another time, and then——"

"But not soon, Arthur; there is no hurry about anything."

Soon after Arthur Dulverton left Donnithorne Hall without speaking again either to the squire or to Endellion. After all, his visit had not been in vain. He had gained the squire's consent, and he no longer feared that his cousin's home-coming would harm his prospects.

As for Miriam, she did not immediately return to the house, even although the laws of hospitality demanded that she should. She wanted to be alone, so that she might try to understand herself. She had no idea that a proposal of marriage by Arthur Dulverton would so affect her. She had known for years

that he wanted her, so his proposal had not come to her as a surprise. And yet she was nervous and almost irritable. Why was it that she could not say what he wanted? Of course, she had always liked Bob Dulverton. It was natural she should; they had been playmates as children, and she had always looked upon him as a sort of big brother. But his home-coming had made no difference. Yes it had, though. In her heart of hearts she knew there was a subtle change in her feelings towards Arthur directly Bob Dulverton had come that morning. He made Arthur seem small, petty. She no longer admired him, she did not feel that she could look up to him. Yes, Bob Dulverton's home-coming *had* made a difference, and she felt angry because of it. For she was perfectly sincere in telling Arthur that she did not like the new Bob. She did not feel at ease in his presence, and she did not trust him. Perhaps she would not have admitted this in so many words, but it was true.

Presently she found her way back to the steps outside the front door of the house where the squire and Endellion had stood talking.

"I say, Mirry," said the squire laughingly, although Endellion saw an anxious look in his eyes, "what have you and Arthur been talking so earnestly about?"

"Our conversation was like women's conversation generally," replied the girl, "it led to nothing."

It was not a bit what she meant to say, but she had an idea that her father had probably been hinting to their visitor the reason for which Arthur had paid them a visit, and she was anxious for them to know that she had promised nothing.

Endellion seemed in the best of spirits. He laughed heartily at the squire's jokes, and listened eagerly whilst local gossip was retailed. Stories concerning

people whom he was supposed to know had a great attraction for him. Unknown to the squire, he was picking up useful scraps of information. But neither by word nor action did he betray himself, or suggest that he was utterly ignorant of those whom they were discussing. Even Miriam never suspected anything. It was true, as she had told Arthur Dulverton, that she disliked him, but she saw no flaw in his armour. When he ventured a remark on any incident which took place before Bob Dulverton left England, he was invariably correct in every detail, and although there was a sense of unreality about everything, she never thought of attributing it to the true cause.

During lunch Endellion exerted himself to be agreeable. Having lived to a large extent the same kind of life that Bob Dulverton had lived, he was able to speak with confidence about scenes in Australian life. He had had but few opportunities of studying the character of the man he was personating, but he possessed a quick mind and his estimate of him was not far from correct. Thus he was able to speak of events much as Dulverton would have spoken. He used the schoolboy phrases which were common in Dulverton's time, so that in this respect he was able to play his part well.

But this was not all. He remembered that he had appeared as a new Bob Dulverton, as one who was ashamed of the things which had blackened the old squire's life, and who was anxious to atone. He did not overdo this; that would, of course, have done harm to the purpose he had at heart. He never drew attention to his new ideals and purposes, but in a quiet, unostentatious way impressed upon his listeners the fact that even during his boyhood there was a substratum of seriousness in his nature, and that in his

heart. In hearts he was ashamed of the things which had grieved his friends.

Squire Donnithorne was enchanted. He had always liked Bob Dulverton as a boy, even although he had been grieved at his behaviour. Therefore, when he heard Endellion putting into words the very dreams he had had about the son of his old friend, he felt as happy as a schoolboy who had been able to knock the bowling all over the field.

"Oh, Bob, my boy," he cried, "I wish your father could have lived to have seen you. I always said you had the makings of a man in you, and told him so a hundred times. If you had come back a year ago I believe my old friend would have been living yet."

"A year ago," replied Endellion, like one musing, "a year ago I did not dare to come home."

"Why?" asked Squire Donnithorne. "Ah, you were thinking of what your father said when you left England. But, my boy, he was longing for you all the time. As you know, he was a very proud man, and would never ask you, but he would have given anything to have had you back."

"I was not thinking of that," said Endellion quietly.

"No?" said the squire questioningly.

"No," replied Endellion; "you see, perhaps I was a bit proud too."

He saw that the squire looked puzzled, and went on.

"It takes time, squire, for a fellow to find himself. It takes years. He may be disgusted with himself, and yet—well, perhaps I had more than my share of the bad blood of the family. The Dulvertons haven't all gone to bed sober every night."

"By Jove, no!" laughed the squire. "Why, I knew your grandfather, and—well—he was not quite the one to be a curate."

"Just so," said Endellion, "and perhaps the laws of heredity were rather heavy on me. It's always a bit of a struggle to break with the past, squire—to some it's like tearing out their heart-strings. When I came across that newspaper, though, it brought things to a head."

"But you were never bad, Bob," urged the squire; "just a bit wild, I know, but never bad. No, no, I knew you better than your own father. You were headstrong and a sort of dare-devil chap, but that was nothing mean about you. You would never play a low-down trick, you were too much of a sportsman. I never knew you tell or act a lie in your life."

Endellion felt that not only were Squire Donnithorne's eyes upon him, but Miriam's as well, and he wished himself out of the room. Still, he showed no signs of discomposure. He knew that he was playing a difficult but necessary part. Almost in spite of himself, as it seemed to him, he had been led to play a risky game, and he was determined to play it pluckily, and with as much skill as he possessed.

"No," he replied quietly, "I was never what may be called a bad fellow. All the same"—he reflected a minute, and then went on—"squire, do you think we allow enough for circumstances? It's all very well to say what a fellow ought to do, but we don't always realise what a fight he may have made, even although he fails. When you put a weak batsman at the wicket, he doesn't stand much chance against a strong bowler. He may do his best, but his middle stump goes down before he's made a run. And the devil's a strong bowler, squire."

"By heaven he is, Bob; no man knows it better than I. But you've got your second innings now, my boy, and we must let the first be forgotten. You are

framing well, you've learnt by past mistakes. And when I come to think of it, it doesn't seem as though—" and the squire hesitated as if he were unable to work out the figure he had been using.

"I am afraid I fouled the pitch a bit, squire."

"Yes, but the pitch is all right now," urged the squire heartily. "You've come home well and strong. You've fought the devil and beaten him; besides——"

"Yes, what?" asked Endellion, as the other hesitated.

"There's one thing I can't understand," he urged.

"As a boy, Bob, you were never clever. In fact I, who always wanted to see the best in you, could never say you had any brains. But now—well, you beat me, Bob, you do really."

"I'm afraid I'm a dull sort of fellow, still," replied Endellion, "but when a fellow is thrown on his beam ends, as I was, squire, it sharpens what wits he has."

Miriam scarcely spoke a word during this conversation, but she listened attentively. Bob Dulverton had never interested her as he interested her now. On recalling the conversation she could not recollect that he had said anything clever, or in the slightest degree out of the ordinary; all the same, she felt as the vicar had felt. He created an intellectual atmosphere, and she was sorry when presently he said he must ride back to Dulverton.

"Don't go yet, Bob," urged the squire; "you don't know what a treat it is to Mirry and me to have you. You don't indeed."

"But I shall have to make my peace with Mrs. Dixon as it is," laughed Endellion. "Besides, I expect Binns and Dolgeth will be waiting for me. If I'm to be a good squire I must realise my duties."

"Bob, you are just a marvel," cried the older man.

"You are indeed. You'll make me feel, presently, that it is a good thing for a fellow to sow his wild oats."

Endellion did not reply; somehow he felt uncomfortable.

"Miriam," he said presently, "you've scarcely spoken a word. Won't you walk as far as the lodge gates with me?"

"Yes, Mirry, do," cried her father. "And upon my word, you look a bit pale. You do indeed, and that's not like you."

A few minutes later Squire Donnithorne stood at his dining-room window, while Endellion and his daughter walked down the drive. On Endellion's right the dappled grey mare walked contentedly. All the temper she had shown earlier in the day had gone; her rein hung loosely on the young man's arm, while more than once she rubbed her nose against his sleeve. On his left Miriam walked, glad that she was there, yet feeling a dislike for her companion for which she could not account.

The squire sighed as he saw them. "I'm afraid Mirry likes Arthur," he said to himself. "I'm glad she's not promised anything, but she seems far too fond of him to please me. And she's turned against Bob, too. She's scarcely spoken a word to him all the morning. Why, I wonder? Bob is worth ten of Arthur, although he was a bit wild years ago. My word, but they do make a fine-looking couple. He's improved out of all recognition, and is a fine, straight, manly fellow. Ah, well, I never could understand women."

Meanwhile Endellion and Miriam walked slowly towards the lodge gates. For a little time neither spoke. Each was uncomfortable in the other's society, and each seemed to be trying to read what was in the

other's mind. From time to time Miriam cast side glances at her companion, and noted his stalwart figure, his quick, decided tread. There was a springiness in his walk which she had never noted in Bob Dulverton in the old days, and there was a strength of personality which she had never associated with her old playmate. In a sense she admired him, admired his self-control and the strong vitality with which he seemed to be charged. She had not a single doubt concerning his identity, and yet she was uneasy, nervous, distrustful. As for Endellion, he realised for the first time what a striking-looking girl Miriam was. When he had seen her with the vicar the previous afternoon, and when she had called later with her father, his mind was too much occupied with other things to pay much attention to her personal appearance. As we have said, he had realised the sense of antagonism that existed, but beyond determining to seek to destroy her evident dislike for him, he had not given her much thought. Now, however, the girl's beauty impressed him. He had never been a woman's man, and during the last few years he had never met, on equal footing, a lady of his own class. Thus his walk by Miriam's side was a revelation to him. It felt to him as though something strange were aroused in his nature. In a sense it seemed quite natural that he should be walking with Miriam Donnithorne, the one-time playmate of Bob Dulverton, in another it was strange, bewildering. What right had he, Ralph Endellion, the son of a loathsome scoundrel, to be walking with a girl who bore one of the best names in Devonshire? If she knew who he was, she would call her servants and have him thrust from her father's land; she would send for the police, and have him apprehended as a fraud, a lying usurper. He laughed

inwardly at the thought. Truly he was playing a dangerous game; but there was a sense of piquancy, of adventure in it all that appealed to him. His mind flashed back to the time when Bob Dulverton signed a paper giving everything he possessed to him, Ralph Endellion. It all seemed long ago, and very unreal. He had never intended to make any claim at the time, and yet, step by step, he had been led to do what he had done. And everything had gone without a hitch. He had no doubt whatever that he had been accepted without question as the man he was personating, and yet he knew that danger walked by his side. But the danger was beautiful, attractive.

He allowed his eyes to rest upon her, and he saw the colour mount to her cheeks. He saw her eyes flash, too, as though she resented his presence, even though she had willingly come with him.

All around him the birds carolled among the branches, while everywhere the resurrection of spring was manifest. It was a glorious day, a day such as that which Browning pictured when he cried,

“Oh, to be in England, now that April's there!”

Ralph Endellion stopped a moment, looked at the lovely landscape, and listened to the myriad feathered songsters pouring forth their jubilation.

“This is heaven!” he exclaimed.

Miriam instinctively stopped too, but she said nothing in response to his ejaculation.

“After living for years in hell,” he went on, “after being away from home and friends and civilisation, after being cursed with the curse of Cain for all that long, weary time, to come back to this!”

There was such intensity in his tones that the girl was impressed, but still she was silent.

"Of course Australia is, in a way, fine," he continued, "but it's nothing like this. Just think of the heavenly green on the bushes; look at the sky. See how the Almighty has been hanging His festoons of shining clouds. There's not a dark, lowering one among them. All are sunlit, shining—and summer is coming, coming! In a few weeks all that we see will be glorious with foliage. God was just extravagant when He thought of Devonshire."

He seemed for some time unconscious of the girl's presence, but stood looking at the landscape as though he would drink to his fill of nature's loveliness. Then he started, as if something pained him.

"Mirry," he said, "tell me why you dislike me."

CHAPTER XVIII

ENDELLION AND MIRIAM

THE girl was startled by his words. They were out of accord with all that he had been saying and doing. It seemed to her as though he had not premeditated the words, but that some unpleasant thought had dragged them from him. One second he had been apparently worshipping nature, almost as a poet might, and the next he had come back to a petty matter of personal dislike.

"Do you think you have any right to ask that question?" she asked, and her voice was not entirely free from asperity.

"Yes," he replied. "You are my old playmate. Years ago, but for the difference in our ages, we were like sweethearts. Anyhow, you liked me. You grieved at—at what happened. Now I have come back, and you, from whom I expected a warm welcome, are cold towards me. You look upon me with suspicion. You dislike me."

"I have never told you so," said the girl.

"Oh, yes, you have. You are telling me so now. You have been telling me so all the morning. During lunch you regarded me with cold, critical eyes. Why?"

"Do you really want to know?" she asked.

"Of course I do. Every one else, with the exception

of my uncle and Arthur, who never liked me, seem glad to see me. All the servants at the house, especially those who were there before—I went away, are overjoyed at my return. Your father likes me as well as ever. But you, Miriam—you—— What is it? Why is it?"

"You are not Bob," she said.

Endellion's heart stood still. Had the girl seen through his disguise, and had she consented to come with him in order to tell him that he was a living lie? He remembered the vicar's description of her, and felt sure that this must be the fact. But only for a moment. There was a meaning in her words other than that which appeared on the surface. In any case he must not yield without a struggle. He had come to Donnithorne Hall that morning primarily to avert any danger that had arisen because of her evident dislike, and it seemed to him that circumstances had favoured him.

"Not Bob?" he repeated.

"No, not the Bob I used to know. Of course I know you are Bob, but you have altered out of all recognition."

"Have I so changed, then?"

"Not in appearance so much; it's not that. It's something deeper."

"Yes," he replied, half to himself; "I hope it is something deeper. But what then, Mirry? Would you have me be as I was then?"

"No—yes; that is, I don't know," she stammered. "Of course, I've no business to be talking to you in this way, only you asked me; and years ago we were, as you say, almost like brother and sister."

"Yes," said Endellion, as she hesitated; "and what then?"

"I suppose you were very wild, very bad, years ago," she replied, "but you were never so to me. I could always read you like a book. You were as transparent as the day. But now I don't know you a bit—you are a stranger. And——"

"Yes," said Endellion, when he hesitated; "and what?"

"Bob, I don't like saying it. It's unkind; and of course I'm wrong, but I have a kind of feeling that you are always wearing a mask."

The girl's words stung him; they wounded him like a poisoned arrow. They made him feel that which he was afraid to put into words. Still, he kept a perfect mastery over himself, for he intuitively felt that he was passing through a severe ordeal.

"A mask, Mirry?"

"Yes; I can't think of a better word."

"Pull away the mask," he said, looking at her steadily. For a second their eyes met, and at that moment he would not have been surprised if she had divined his secret. If he had felt, the night before, that Miriam was his great danger, he felt it tenfold more now. There was something in the girl by his side which made him afraid.

"I can't, Bob," she said; "but that does not keep me from feeling it is there. The Bob whom I knew couldn't wear a mask. Bad as he might be, he scorned everything in the shape of deceit; his fault lay in the other direction. He flaunted his wildness in people's faces, he made them think he was worse than he really was. But you—oh, I don't know. Please forgive me. I never meant to speak like this—only I am—so disappointed. The brother whom I knew has not come back."

"You were a child eight years ago," replied Endellion,

"twelve or thirteen—fourteen at the outside. Of course, I'm sorry you don't like me; I had hoped, very much hoped, that it might have been otherwise. But there—thank you for being frank; it's best that I should know exactly how matters stand."

"Oh, forgive me," cried Miriam, really distressed; "I have not conveyed my feelings truly. Words are such poor things. Of course, you've very much improved, and—and I suppose you'll make people very proud of the new squire. But you are not Bob—do you see? You have Bob's face, and to an extent Bob's voice, but the real Bob has gone. You don't talk like yourself a bit. The Bob I knew could never talk about God 'hanging His festoons of clouds across the sky'—he never thought of such a thing."

"But nearly eight years of wandering over the face of the earth alters a man," said Endellion. "Have you ever tried to realise what I've had to go through? I left home in disgrace; I was practically driven from home and friends. I was thrown upon the world, a kind of pariah. And I suppose I was a vicious young cub. You could not understand these things years ago, but you are a woman now. Well, just fancy what was likely to happen. Of course I was embittered, and to an extent degraded, for there is nothing that will degrade a man quicker than to expect nothing from him. But do you think I didn't go through the fires of hell—a hell far worse than old Borry, as I used to call him, ever preached about. And I've had nearly eight years of it: eight years without a friend to care whether I was a beast or a man; eight years of haunting memories. Don't you see the struggle—the fight? Can't you realise how a fellow is turned inside out—altered out of all recognition?"

Again this was all right, but still it was not Bob Dulverton who spoke. Everything was like a scene in a play.

"Why," Endellion went on, "I have been weeks at a time without ever seeing a single soul. I've been away in the wilderness with no other companions than the cattle I cared for and the dogs who did my bidding. I have lain for hours, at night time, and looked up at the stars, and wondered, and struggled and cursed. My past was stained and blotted, my future a great haggard mystery. Well, at length I began to see a light. I saw there might be a future for me. Robert Louis Stevenson writes somewhere about 'the little brother we have all lost.' I tried to find that little brother, Miriam; tried to be the man I could be. Then the news of my father's death reached me, and I came home. And I have not come a drunkard or a sot. I have come home a new man, with new hopes and new ideals; I have come with visions of a happy and honoured career. Only my old playmate, Miriam Donnithorne, turns her back upon me. She dislikes me, she distrusts me, she accuses me of wearing a mask."

Endellion spoke with passion. A part of the time, at all events, he was not playing a part; he was living over again the months when he had been ready to "curse God and die." As a consequence, there was a ring of sincerity in his voice which Miriam was not slow to recognise. She began to doubt her own feelings, her own judgment. Had she been fair to the new Bob? Had she understood the old Bob correctly? Because he was a dullard, and somewhat clownish in the old days, did it follow that his nobler nature might not be aroused, and that his mind might not awaken to new possibilities? In the old days Bob never opened

a book for his own pleasure ; as for reading Stevenson, he would never dream of such a thing. But were there not in every man divine possibilities ? Why, then, should she doubt the man at her side ?

Besides, Endellion had reproached her. He had touched the most sensitive part of her nature. She scorned injustice, and she had been unjust. She had disliked her old playmate because he had become more worthy.

"Forgive me, Bob," she cried. "I have been very unfair ; I know I have. I had conjured up all sorts of ideas as to what you would be like. I had thought of you as the boy I used to like—improved, of course, but the same Bob still."

"But am I not ?" asked the young man. "Look at me, Mirry, look at me closely. No one knew me better in the old days than you. If I had a good side to my nature, I showed it to you. Well, now, am I not the same Bob, only a Bob with new purposes, a Bob with his vices forgotten ?"

"No."

She said it unthinkingly, involuntarily. In a sense he had conquered her, but only in a sense. Down deep in her heart was the feeling that the man at her side was playing a part.

Endellion was silent. For the moment he was not acting. The battle had become a real one. He wanted to convince this girl against her feelings. A sort of personal pride came into the question. I suppose in the strong man's heart is ever the desire to conquer the woman who is also strong and antagonistic. Thus there came into his heart the delight of battle, and with it was the determination to use all the artifices known to the skilful fighter.

"Very well," he said. "I suppose I have lost my

old playmate. She believes I am a fraud, that I am playing a part, that I am wearing a mask!"

"Oh, Bob, you don't understand me!" she cried. "For that matter, I don't understand myself. Of course you are a hundred times cleverer than you were, and—and I expect you'll be admired everywhere. All the same——" And she stopped, not knowing how to finish the sentence.

"I think I understand," replied Endellion. "Whatever is the reason, you are prejudiced against me. You don't believe in me. You would have preferred to see me as I was rather than as I am. Very well, I must resign myself to it, for I can't again be the fellow you knew. I think of the Bob Dulverton I once knew in Australia, and I can no more be what he was than I can be a Maori savage. But you are not just, Mirry. I remember, as a girl, you used to be fond of reading Tennyson, while I despised everything he wrote. But once I had to spend a night in a settler's hut, a settler who loved reading. He had quite a library, and amongst his books was a copy of Tennyson. I sat up a long time reading by candlelight, and I can remember two lines distinctly. It was in a poem called 'Maud,' I think.

'And ah that a man would arise in
That the man I am might cease to

It was a poet's vision, I suppose, but you don't believe in it. My reformation has cost me my old friend."

There was so much feeling in his voice that Miriam was again led to look at him. Yes, she admired him; he had not convinced her, but she admired him. Her old playfellow had become a striking-looking man. He was instinct with life and energy; it was no use denying it. He was infinitely superior to his cousin

Arthur, who that very morning had asked her to marry him. Arthur was small and petty when compared with him. But Arthur was Arthur, and her old playmate had become a—play-actor. Why? She must find out. She must think over the whole situation quietly.

“Good morning, Bob.”

“Still no word of welcome, Mirry? Aren't you a bit glad to see me?”

“Bob, take no notice of me,” she said. “I shall soon see how foolish I am, no doubt. Of course I wish everything good for you. I hope that your life in your old home will be very happy.”

“And you'll be glad for me to ride over and see you, if only for old time's sake, won't you?”

Miriam Donnithorne was painfully honest. She tried to find some polite commonplace, but could not. It was opposed to all she held sacred to convey an impression of something she did not feel.

“I'm sure dad will be glad to see you whenever you can come,” she said.

“And you, Mirry?”

“Oh, I don't matter, do I?”

A minute later Ralph Endellion was galloping furiously towards Dulverton Manor in a black rage. He had set out to conquer Miriam Donnithorne, and he had failed. Her innate honesty had refused to admit his claims. She did not doubt his identity, and yet she distrusted, disliked him. She was a greater danger now than ever. They had had their duel, and it was he, not she, who was worsted. He had never once pierced the armour of truth in which she was clothed, while she had stabbed him again and again. And he knew that she was right. He did not trouble about the fact that he was an impostor: in a sense he

did not look upon himself in that light. Had not the dying man bequeathed all he had to him? Did he not deserve all he possessed, for being treated so unfairly in the past? The sting lay in the fact that she disliked him, suspected him, and believed that his good behaviour was merely a cloak to cover up the great lie of his life.

He was not only angry with Miriam Donnithorne, he disliked her, and with the dislike came a desire to humble her, to make her abjectly beg his pardon.

He scarcely realised the speed at which he was riding. The dappled grey mare, who had for hours been resting, rejoiced in having a free rein, rejoiced to feel her shoulders between the knees of a rider whom she felt to be her master. She tore madly along the country lane, regardless of what might be in the way, while Endellion thought only of his failure in conquering Miriam Donnithorne. As a consequence he took no heed of a farmer's cart that moved heavily along, nor of the man who walked by his horse's head. The consequence was that the mare's side grazed the driver's shoulder, and would have knocked him down but for the fact that he fell against his own horse.

"Holloa there, what be 'ee up to?"

The incident, and the man's voice, brought Endellion to a sense of the situation. Nothing serious had happened, but he had been guilty of carelessness. Perhaps, indeed, the man might be hurt.

He brought Bess to her haunches in a few seconds.

"I am awfully sorry," he said; "I did not realise what I was doing."

He scrutinised the man more closely as he spoke. Evidently he was a farmer who drove his own horse. Certainly he was not a labourer, neither did he appear to be of the yeoman order. Perhaps he was thirty or

thirty-five years of age. He was strongly built, and rather clumsy. The thick neck, however, and the deep chest could belong only to a man of great strength.

Endellion dismounted, and came to the farmer's side.

"I am so sorry," he said. "I was very careless, but I did not think. I hope you are not hurt."

The latter remark was drawn from him by the dazed, wondering look on the man's face.

"No, I'm not hurt." And still the farmer kept his eyes on him. "It's nothin'."

Endellion was interested. Why did the man stare at him so curiously?

"Ah, I see it's you!"

"What do you mean?" asked Endellion, wondering more than ever.

"You are young Dulverton," said the other. "At first I thought I might be mistaken, but I'm not. You are altered, but you are young Dulverton. You remember me?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"What, do you mean to say you've forgotten me? I can't believe that. People are saying you've changed, and all that sort of thing, but what and whoever else you may have forgotten, you can't have forgotten me."

There was suppressed anger in the man's voice, and his brown eyes burned almost red. He did not bluster, but it was easy to see that he was in a dangerous mood.

"You must be mistaken," said Endellion. He was trying to recall, from all he knew of Bob Dulverton's affairs, something that would help him.

"Mistaken!" said the farmer. "I am not that kind of chap. Besides, I never forget anything I've made up my mind to do. It's no good your trying to wriggle

out of it, or anything of that sort ; what I've said I'll do, I'll do. You can't hurt me. I've got a lease on my farm for ninety-nine years, and, anyhow, it don't belong to you. And I'm not to be bought over either."

"Whatever are you talking about?" cried Endellion.

"Oh, you are trying to come the innocent party, but it won't do. You know what I'm talking about. You was always a bit of a coward, and never would fight fair; but now you've got to."

Light was breaking on Endellion's mind. He thought he knew who the angry man was.

"People thought you were dead," went on the man. "There was a chap who comed back from Australia who said so, but I didn't believe it. I knew, too, why you didn't come home—you were afraid. You knew what I'd vowed to do, and you knew I'd keep my vow. When I heard you'd come back I said I'd bide my time. I didn't think it would come so soon. I should have turned religious before this but for you—I should have got converted at the Brianite Chapel; but I couldn't get converted while I had it in my heart to have it out with you. I didn't mind the stab so much—I got better of that. Besides, people say the knife business was an accident, and that you had nothing to do with it. But you robbed me of life when you robbed me of what I'd have given my soul to get."

"Ah," said Endellion, "you are Brewer, Nick Brewer."

"I thought you would know me. And I knew you'd come some time—I felt it in my bones. All the time I was getting well I knew it."

"But you married the girl?" said Endellion.

"Yes, I married her. I frightened her into having

me, but she never cared for me. It was you she wanted. She thought it was a fine thing to have the squire's son in love with her. She died last July twelve months, but she never cared for me to the last, and so I'm going to have it out with you, young Squire Dulverton."

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CHAPTER XIX

THE COMING OF THE CRISIS

OF course Endellion remembered everything Dulverton had told him about the Brewer episode. He had passed over the matter lightly, although it was the immediate cause of the young squire leaving home. Now, however, it had cropped up in a very ugly way. Evidently Nick Brewer was a sullen, revengeful sort of fellow, who had been nursing his wrongs for years. Endellion had scarcely given him a thought, but now he saw that he had a difficult man to deal with. Nick Brewer's idea of revenge was to inflict physical injury upon him. The man's instincts were primitive, half savage. He had no carefully-thought-out plans of a subtle vengeance—he could not understand such a thing. Bob Dulverton had got the best of him in a public-house brawl years before, and, more, he had robbed him of the love of the woman upon whom he had set his heart. It is true he had married her, but she had never loved him, and this had intensified his hatred, and the natural revenge of his class was to thrash the man he hated within an inch of his life. Consequences did not trouble him. In a vague way he imagined he might be sent to gaol, but that was nothing. He would have had his revenge, and "paid out" his enemy.

Endellion was not long in estimating Nick Brewer's character. In one sense his attack gave him confidence. Here was another who accepted him as Bob Dulverton without question. Still, Brewer was in an ugly humour, and he wanted to avoid a brawl with a tenant farmer. It would be the talk of the parish, and would form a topic for gossips for weeks.

"But surely you do not harbour a paltry spite like that for nearly eight years?" said Endellion.

"I shall harbour it till I have had it out with you," replied the other sullenly. It occurred to Endellion then that Nick had been drinking.

"But what would you do?" asked Endellion.

"Oh, I'm goin' to take no mean advantage over you," replied Brewer. "We are going to fight fair. I don't deny, too, but that I shall have a tougher job than I might have had years ago. You've put on muscle and weight since then, but I must take my chance of that. But fight you must."

"When?" asked Endellion, trying to see some way out of the difficulty.

"Here and now," replied the other; and almost before he had spoken the man rushed upon him.

Endellion had been sizing up Brewer during the conversation, and he knew that if it came to purely brute force Nick was the stronger of the two. On the other hand, however, the farmer's heavy limbs and clumsy movements showed him that to a skilful boxer he would not be a formidable opponent. He had little difficulty in avoiding Nick's rush, and then, by the aid of a clever trick which he had learned in Australia, he sent Nick sprawling on the hard road.

The farmer fell heavily, and his fall partially stunned him. He rose to his feet in a slow, uncertain way.

"Look here, Nick," said Endellion, "before this

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HARD ROAD."

matter goes further I want to say a few words to you. No, not another step!" for Nick was contemplating another attack. "I listened to all you had to say, and now you must listen to me."

And Nick, in spite of himself, had to listen.

"I am not afraid of you," went on Endellion. "You would stand no chance against me. Did you notice how easily I was able to master you just now? I could do it a dozen times. You can't hurt me, while I could half kill you."

Nick listened in a dazed sort of way, and a feeling of fear came into his heart. He realised that there were forces at work of which he knew nothing. The Bob Dulverton who spoke to him now was not the Bob Dulverton he knew years ago.

"You understand, don't you?" went on Endellion. "It would not be fair of me to fight you. I know a hundred tricks unknown to you, and you would be like a man running his head against a stone wall. Besides, I want to tell you this: you are mistaken."

"How mistaken?" asked Nick.

"In this way: I am afraid I was a good-for-nothing sort of fellow years ago, but you never knew me tell a lie, did you?"

"No," said Nick, "the Dulvertons' word could always be depended on, I'll say that for them."

"Very well then, I give you my word of honour that I never harmed the woman who became your wife. I never made love to her in any way."

"You'll swear to that?"

"I'll swear to it if needs be, although there is no need that I should. You can believe me or not, just as you will, but I tell you seriously, your suspicions are groundless."

"And the knife?" asked Nick. "Do you deny that?"

"I do deny it, absolutely. I know I was a fool to be mixed up in the affair at all, but of this you may rest assured: you have no reason to harbour any grudge against me."

Nick continued to look at him in a dull, half-comprehending sort of way. He had been more shaken than he knew by his fall, and he was unable to think clearly.

"And you didn't go away because you were afraid of me?" he said presently.

"I am afraid of no man," replied Endellion. "What have I to be afraid of? Do I look like a man who is afraid?"

The eyes of the two men met, and again the farmer realised that there were influences at work for which he could not account. Instead of the young squire being afraid of him, Nick felt cowed by the look the other gave him. He began to realise a strength more masterful and more unconquerable than mere physical prowess.

As we have said, Nick was not a subtle-minded man; his reasoning was of the most primitive order. He had been nursing vengeance for years, and now, when the hour for which he hoped had come, he was thwarted from the very first. He could not understand the change which had come over the man he knew as Bob Dulverton. Years ago he had almost seemed to belong to his own class, but now he was far removed from him. He could not imagine the man who confronted him being mixed up in a vulgar, public-house brawl; he almost felt like apologising for what he had done. Why it was he could not tell, but the fact remained.

"And now," continued Endellion, "I want to say something else. This must be the end of this business. I have come back to my old home, and I am not going to be annoyed by things that happened years ago. You understand, don't you? As far as I am concerned nothing will be said about this meeting. If any trouble comes of it, it will be your fault, not mine. But remember, I must never be molested in this way again. Let that be settled once for all."

Endellion spoke quietly, but every word carried weight. Brewer felt he had no answer to make. He was conquered, not by physical force, but by something which he could not explain.

"You understand?" repeated Endellion, after a pause.

Nick fought against the influence created by Endellion's presence, but he felt himself yielding. It was a question of the supremacy of mind over matter, of a strong personality subjugating a weak one.

"You swear that what you say is true?" said Nick weakly.

"I have told you it is true; that is enough," replied Endellion. "And now that matter is dealt with, let me say something else. You have thought of yourself as a wronged man, and as a consequence you have suffered. I am sorry for that. And so, although you have been mistaken, and have doubtless said all sorts of evil things about me, I want to tell you that if I can be of any service to you I shall be glad to render it."

"You mean that?" said Nick, in astonishment.

"I do mean it," said Endellion. "But remember this, I am no longer a man with whom you can take liberties. You realise that?"

"You're changed," admitted Nick.

"I've come home a new man, Brewer. Not only

have you found it out, but the whole parish will find it out. I am not the young Squire Dulverton whom you knew. The past is past. In the old days I often forgot myself, but I shall never forget myself again. A man learns wisdom with the years, Nick."

"Yes, sir."

The man had completely yielded at last. Although he could not have put the thought into words, he felt that the savage weapons he had been in the habit of using were powerless against those of his one-time antagonist. He realised instinctively that he had found his master.

"That will do then. If I can be of service to you call on me. But no more nonsense, Nick; remember that."

He held out his hand as he spoke, and Nick caught it almost eagerly.

"Good-day, Nick. I must be getting back. I have a great deal to do."

"Thank you, sir—and I'm glad you've come home, sir."

Endellion mounted his horse and rode away, while Nick walked quietly by his horse's head.

"I expect, after all, it's because he d' belong to the gentry," he mused, in his slow-thinking way. "Years ago, he just seemed to be the same as I am, but he's different now. As he said, he's a new man. Somehow I couldn't say the things I wanted to say—the words wouldn't come, and my heart just seemed to be like water."

As for Endellion, he was not displeased that the incident had taken place. He had another proof, if proof were needed, that he was a stronger, better man than the one whose name he had assumed. He had conquered the farmer by will-power, by the sheer

strength of personality, and the fact seemed to augur well for the future.

Then the remembrance of his failure with Miriam Donnithorne came back to him. He had conquered the hatred of the young farmer: he had left him, he believed, without a doubt in his mind, but Miriam remained unconquered. She had openly expressed her doubt of him, her dislike for him. She would not even admit that she would be glad to see him at Donnithorne Hall. This fact destroyed the feeling of satisfaction aroused by his victory over the young farmer.

"I am like a man walking on the edge of a sword while she is antagonistic to me," he reflected. "At present I do not think she has the slightest suspicion of the truth. But she is half in love with Arthur Dulverton, and they will be sure to discuss me. Up to the present I have done nothing to arouse suspicion, but at any moment I may make a mistake. This will lead to questioning, and with her against me I am as a man standing on a powder magazine. I feel like running away, and letting Arthur take possession."

By this time he had passed the lodge gates, and he could see the old Manor House nestling among the trees. It had seemed fair to him the day before, but now he had a kind of love for it. There was a stately dignity which appealed to him. It was not a showy, plate-glass windowed, vulgar mansion, such as some purse-proud parvenu might erect. It was the home of an English gentleman, which had stood there for centuries. It was associated with an old name, a name known and respected throughout the whole of the West of England. And he had come to it as its acknowledged possessor and master. Even the man who had regarded himself as its rightful heir had made

way for him, and had yielded to his claims almost without demur. The servants, the housekeeper, the steward, the lawyer had all welcomed him with joy.

He stopped in the middle of the carriage drive, and gazed steadily at the home of the Dulvertons. How could he give it up? It would mean going back to a living death. There could be no future for Ralph Endellion. The name was accursed. It was associated with everything vile and unholy. No man would open his doors to the son of the man whose name had been shuddered at for years. Trevor had made him realise this only a few weeks before, when they met on the vessel. But as Bob Dulverton every one would welcome him. Already the people thought lightly of his escapades, and remembered only his good qualities and he had been received as Bob Dulverton.

The moral aspect of the question did not trouble him. In a sense he felt he had a right to be there. Did not Bob Dulverton bequeath everything to him, and was not every servant pleased that he, rather than his uncle or his cousin, should be master? Indeed, he had felt angry that Lawyer Dulverton should so soon have assumed proprietorship.

He felt, therefore, that he could not give it up; he held his cards, and he would play them. Still, he could not help realising that Miriam Donnithorne's open dislike was a positive danger. She was no foolish, brainless girl. Her love of truth had caused her to close her heart against him. To her he was Bob Dulverton, but Bob Dulverton playing a part, and this fact was the weak place in his armour, a place through which he could be wounded to death. Unless he could win her confidence he saw himself exposed, driven out of the parish as a liar, an impostor, a dangerous usurper—nay, worse: he would be brought

within the clutches of the law. Then all the truth would come to light, and he, like his father, would become a loathsome thing in the eyes of the public. He saw articles about himself in the newspapers, which would describe him as the true son of his father.

"Yes," he cried, "I'll give it up before I've gone too far, and let gossips put what construction they like upon my action."

But he knew he would not. The possession of the place, with all that it meant, had become dear to him. Besides, the very sense of danger added charm to the part he had elected to play. He disliked Arthur Dulverton, and he hated Miriam Donnithorne. She had pierced his armour, although she did not know it, and he was angry. The Nick Brewer affair was nothing. Men of that class could be easily conquered. But Miriam was different. He had no weapons that could hurt her; he could think of nothing whereby he could bend her will to his.

"No," he said, through his set teeth, "I'll not give it up, I'll carry the thing through. I am accepted as Bob Dulverton, and I'll remain Bob Dulverton. I'll make a good squire, too, and I'll make every tenant on the estate bless the day when I came here. As for Miriam Donnithorne, I'll——"

He did not realise the fact, but the mare had for some time been going towards the house. He tightened the rein again, and she stood still.

"Yes," he cried, "that will do. I'll make Miriam fall in love with me. That is my only way out of the difficulty. At present she's half in love with my worthy cousin. But that's a small affair. She has promised him nothing, and I am sure I should have the squire on my side."

The plan was full of charm to him. It was true

that he had no love for Miriam—nay, he disliked her ; but there was something fascinating in the thought of conquering the proud, obstinate girl, and making her love him.

“Good !” he cried, as he touched the mare’s sides with his heels, and he galloped gaily towards the house, full of the scheme which had so suddenly been born in his mind.

“It will require thinking about,” he reflected presently. “I must remember that she’s not one who can be easily deceived, and that she dislikes me. Still, that will make it all the greater fun. It will add interest to everything. I was never a woman’s man, and I am afraid I shall be an indifferent wooer, but it must be done.”

He dismounted, and Peters appeared at the door.

“Has any one called, Peters ?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. Both Mr. Dolgeth and Mr. Binns are in the library. They came before lunch. I told them you’d be back. I hope I didn’t do wrong, Mr. Bob, but you told Mrs. Dixon you’d return before one.”

“It’s all right, Peters. I ought to have returned ; but you know what the squire is ?”

“Yes, sir ; but I was a bit anxious. Bess is a bit vicious, you know, sir, and—thank God you’re back all safe and sound.”

“You were afraid she’d run away with me, eh ? But she hasn’t, Peters. She’s as quiet as a lamb, although she was a bit frisky at first. You see I haven’t forgotten how to ride.”

A man came from the stables and took the mare, while Endellion entered the house. He did not go into the library at once ; he wanted to collect his thoughts before meeting his men of business.

Nothing of importance had apparently happened, and yet the atmosphere was tense with excitement, the slightest incident seemed of importance. It was perfectly natural that both Mr. Dolgeth and Mr. Binns should call to see him; all the same he felt almost afraid to go where they were. Again he felt as though it would be better to abandon the mad position he had taken up.

He looked out of the window, and noted the beauty of the scene. The trees in the park were taking on a tinge of green, the river coiled its way down the valley, shining in the light of the sun. The birds sang everywhere. It was beautiful beyond words now, but what must it be a couple of months later, when flowers bloomed everywhere, and when the whole countryside would be covered by its glory of summer foliage? And it was all his own. No one disputed his right to it, and to the old name which would rid him for ever of the name he had inherited. But there was something more powerful than all this. The landscape presently faded from his sight; the broad park lands and the shining river did not exist. He saw nothing but a young girl, with dark, curling tresses, a country girl with health on her cheeks and truth in her eyes. It was true she disliked him and distrusted him, but that fact did not detract from the beauty of the vision. He thought he disliked her, but he knew that the thought of being the possessor of Dulverton Manor was not the strongest force which kept him from abandoning the project by which he had hoped to escape from a cruel past.

For minutes he stood staring into vacancy, seeing nothing and hearing nothing of what was going on around him, and forgetting the men who awaited him.

Presently he gave a start. "I am forgetting

myself," he said; and he walked quickly into the library.

The two men rose as he entered; but while their greeting was both respectful and hearty, Endellion thought he noted an anxious look in their eyes.

CHAPTER XX

ENDELLION'S PROGRESS

BUT Endellion was a keen. Neither Mr. Dolgeth nor Mr. Binns had anything serious to say. The one had waited on him because he regarded the young man as his future master, to whom he would have to account for his stewardship; the other because he was his most important client, who would naturally want to talk over matters appertaining to the estate.

And Endellion was equal to the occasion. He made one or two unimportant slips, but no notice was taken of them. In any case they were quite natural. Even when Bob Dulverton was in England his father had never taken him into confidence concerning the working of the estate. This was known by both the lawyer and the steward. Besides, had it been otherwise, neither would have wondered if, during a space of several years, the young man had forgotten.

Indeed, Mr. Dolgeth congratulated him on his grasp of business.

"Remembering how you used to hate such dry details as we have been discussing to-day, I think the way you've picked up the threads is wonderful," said the lawyer.

"Simply wonderful!" echoed Mr. Binns. "But there, after all, it's natural. Your father was a keen business man, Mr. Robert. Excuse me for calling you

by your old name, but it seems to slip out before I am aware."

"Then you think I understand the whole situation?" said Endellion.

"Perfectly!"

"I'm glad of that," replied the young man quietly. "You see, I want everything to go on just as my father would wish if he were alive, and I mean to do my very best with the estate. Years ago I didn't care, but now—well, perhaps you understand?"

"Oh, certainly," both assented.

"Perhaps, however," went on Endellion, "I may presently make big demands on your faith and patience."

The steward looked alarmed, while the lawyer's eyes narrowed somewhat.

"Of course," the latter said, "the estate has been carefully managed, but it is not as large as some, Mr. Dulverton. It won't stand, shall I say, extravagant expenditure. Your father was always a liberal, generous man, but never extravagant. He always allowed a wide margin for emergencies, and it's a wise plan, Mr. Dulverton, a wise plan."

"Oh, you need not fear," said Endellion, with a laugh. "I do not propose being extravagant. My thoughts are in the other direction."

"I hope you are not going to propose what your uncle intended to do," said the lawyer.

"What, raise the rents all round? No, I shall not do that, but I have been looking over my father's notes, and I find that some of the places are badly farmed. Then, again, I find that there are about a thousand acres of land not under cultivation."

"Splendid shooting," remarked the lawyer.

"But not bringing in a penny. I haven't had time

to go into the matter yet, but I shall make it a point of visiting every tenant on the estate, and seeing how every farm is worked, and how every acre of land may be improved. Yes, I see you did not expect this kind of thing from me ; but, as you've noticed more than once, I'm a changed man, Mr. Dolgeth. In the past I was a wastrel and a fool, but as I've come back to my old home, I'm going to take up my responsibilities."

Presently, when the lawyer and steward left the house, they were in a subdued mood.

"We hardly expected this, eh, Binns ?" said Mr. Dolgeth. "He isn't much like the harum-scarum, go-as-you-will fellow of years ago."

"No," said the steward reflectively, "neither did he say anything about ready money for himself. It was you who mentioned that, as you know. It's not the old Bob Dulverton at all, Dolgeth."

"No, not at all. He means to be master in more than name."

"Yes, and he will, too. Still, that's like all the Dulvertons. But he's had a terrible shaking up. There never would have been such a change in him, else."

"I expect you are right," said the lawyer. "And he means to keep his uncle and cousin in their places, too. Well, I'm glad of it."

But Mr. Binns did not reply to this. Perhaps he was not altogether of the lawyer's opinion. Indeed, that very evening he had a long interview with Lawyer Dulverton, during which opinions not altogether favourable to the new squire were passed.

The next few weeks saw Endellion fairly established as the Squire of Dulverton Manor. The neighbouring families called on him, and expressed great joy at his return. He also received many invitations to various

houses, nearly all of which he accepted. Indeed, people vied with each other in doing him honour, and his life became a round of merry-making. On every hand, too, he made a favourable impression. Not the slightest doubt existed that he was the real Bob Dulverton, and as the days went by, and he became more and more accustomed to his new surroundings, he was able to play his part with assurance and ease. Of course he was a new Bob Dulverton. At first many expressed the opinion that the young fellow whom they had known would never continue to be such a model of propriety as the young squire had become, while more than one wondered that he who had been so dull and unlettered should have become so clever, and have developed such a taste for literary subjects. But no suspicion of the truth was aroused; his intellectual improvement was accepted with his moral reformation. Even the vicar grew friendly towards him. Endellion attended church regularly, and took an active interest in the moral well-being of the parish. It is true he was not such a favourite with Mr. Borlase as Arthur Dulverton would have been. He was not sufficiently orthodox in his theological views, neither did he appear to pay much heed to his sacerdotal claims. In fact he was too robust, and looked on matters too much from the standpoint of a Christian pagan to please a man of Mr. Borlase's cast of mind. But then this was what might have been expected from a reformed Bob Dulverton, and while the vicar sighed over the new squire's worldly views he could not help admitting that he was guilty of no moral misdemeanours. He did not drink, and he had no low companions. In fact the way he treated his one-time acquaintances was not only the wonder, but the admiration of every one.

He was exceedingly affable and pleasant with them, but none dared to venture on any familiarity with him.

Added to all this, Endellion did much to win Mr. Borlase's admiration by showing an interest in the classics. He said he deeply regretted the time he had wasted at school and Oxford, and asked the vicar to spend an hour with him now and then in rubbing up his Greek and Latin. Moreover, the young man showed such aptitude that the old man forgot his former dislike of him.

"You are simply wonderful, Bob," he said. "Do you remember the time when I prepared you for Responsions?"

"As if I could ever forget!" said Endellion.

"Even then I knew that nine-tenths of your dulness was laziness," went on the other, "but I never dreamed you would take to the old authors like this. Why, my dear boy, you have the makings of a scholar."

"You are going too far, vicar; but even in the old days, although I was such a slacker, I had a sort of admiration for these old Johnnies, as I used to call them. Besides, after years of hardship and loneliness, I was led to see what a fool I'd been. Something in me seemed to wake up, and then—well, it's difficult to explain, but you can see what I mean."

Squire Donnithorne grew fonder of Endellion every day. He had opened his heart to him on the night of his first visit, and was never happier than when he was visiting Dulverton, or when Endellion came to Donnithorne Hall. He insisted, too, on carrying out his idea of giving him a public reception, and the event passed off with wonderful enthusiasm.

Endellion looked forward to this with a kind of dread; but perhaps nothing tended to establish his position more firmly than this. Practically the whole

neighbourhood was invited, and as the day was gloriously fine, every one seemed in the gayest spirits. The speech which Endellion made is talked of to this day. No one had ever looked on Bob Dulverton as a possible orator, although, as they said, he had so changed and improved that nothing would surprise them. Speeches of welcome had been given by Mr. Borlase, Squire Donnithorne, and two neighbouring farmers, and when the new squire was called on he received a tremendous ovation.

At first he was very nervous. He stammered a good deal, and he seemed to be able to find no words to express himself. But this passed off presently, and as he obtained a mastery of the situation he, as the people said, fairly electrified them. Indeed, but for one thing I am inclined to think he would have aroused suspicions by that speech. But he had taken the precaution to refer to several incidents which had taken place during Bob Dulverton's boyhood. He spoke of various tricks he had played on certain of the village people, and of episodes that many had forgotten, but which they remembered when he mentioned them. This he did in a happy, rollicking way, which won the hearts of the listeners; indeed, there were roars of laughter when he described a certain wrestling match between himself and a well-known rustic character. Village people are easy to move, either to laughter or tears, when their memory of the past is aroused; and this Endellion was able to achieve through the information he had received. Indeed had any doubt existed concerning his identity that speech would have removed it. As they would have said, no one but Bob Dulverton could have known of these things. This fact enabled him to deal with other matters without suspicion. For when Endellion came

to speak of serious questions he struck a high note and became almost eloquent. He referred to old Squire Dulverton's ideas of the duties of a landlord to his tenants, and this opened up not only larger questions of social and political life, but led him to speak of his own hopes and ideals. The vicar listened with open-mouthed astonishment, while Squire Donnithorne was fairly swept off his feet.

"Give him three more cheers," shouted the squire, when the young man had finished; and when they were given he insisted on giving a second speech. "Lots of you were afraid he wouldn't turn out right," he cried, "but what about him now? Oh, I knew; and I'll tell you why. I've bred cattle, and as a consequence I'm a great believer in stock. And young Squire Dulverton comes of a good stock. The Dulvertons have always been fine fellows, although some of them have been a bit gay, and therefore I knew that the boy whom we all knew would turn out right. Why, he couldn't help it! I wish his father had been alive to-day. He'd be proud of his son. Why, that was the grandest speech I ever heard! I'm proud of him, we're all proud of him. Yes, and the whole county will be proud of him."

"He must go to Parliament, squire," shouted some one.

At this there was tremendous cheering, and Endellion would have been called on for a second speech but for the fact that just then supper was announced.

Arthur Dulverton had been standing on the Dulverton Manor tennis lawn during the delivery of Endellion's speech, for both the lawyer and his son had thought it wise to come. By his side was Miriam Donnithorne, and both of them had been careful listeners to what had been said.

"He's broken out in a new place," said Arthur, with a sneer.

But Miriam did not answer. She, with the rest, had been greatly moved by Endellion's speech. She was well acquainted with some of the incidents to which he had referred, and this made her feel more friendly towards him than ever before since the night she had first seen him. But, more than this, she shared the views Endellion had expressed concerning social and political matters. He had put into words what she had long felt, but had not been able to express. Moreover, she could not help admiring him, and she felt more than ever his superiority over the man she had been trying to think of as her husband. She never felt so painfully as now how small Arthur was. He was not only little of stature, but he lacked power to take a broad outlook on life. He was a lover of details rather than of principles, and seemed to be more moved by petty trifles than by great generous motives.

His sneer, too, appealed to her unpleasantly. However much he might dislike Endellion there was no reason why he should not have rendered his due meed of admiration for the masterly address which the young squire had given. For she felt that it was masterly. There was the suggestion, not only of the statesman, but of the poet in his words, and it seemed mean of Arthur to try to sneer at an effort which he was incapable of making.

"I see nothing for it but for Bob to go into Parliament," he went on. "As for you, I suppose you'll canvass for him, eh, Mirry?"

"And, of course, you'll take the chair at his meetings?" she retorted.

"No," replied Arthur; "I'm not enough of an

actor; and I'm not one who can swallow principles for the sake of a vote."

"Come," she said, without endeavouring to answer him. "Father is calling me to supper. Won't you join us?"

"No," replied Arthur, "I can't stand any more of this. There'll be more lies, more belauding the fellow to the skies. As if I don't know what Bob Dulverton really is, and that all this is a cloak to cover up something else! Surely you've had enough of it too, Mirry. You can see the hollowness of it all."

For answer the girl moved towards the supper tent, while Arthur sulkily walked by her side. Much as he desired to get away from his *soi disant* cousin, the temptation to stay by Miriam's side was too strong for him.

"Ah, Arthur," said a ringing, happy voice, "this is kind of you. I was afraid something might have kept you away."

Arthur Dulverton turned and saw Endellion, and immediately his anger became greater. It seemed to him unfair that this man, who a few years before had been driven out of the district in disgrace, should now be the subject of so much adulation.

"I naturally wanted to join in the chorus of praise to my virtuous cousin," he said, and both Miriam and Endellion felt that his words were steeped in acid.

"Now that's good of you," replied Endellion, with a laugh. "It shows your cousinly sentiments, and your large, generous nature. By the way, Arthur, you'll come over to the house presently, when all these people are gone? Just a few personal friends are staying, and I naturally desire you, as one of my very limited number of relations, to be among us. Squire Donnithorne has promised for himself and Miriam."

The words were spoken pleasantly and heartily, but Arthur heard them interpreted by his own feelings.

"No, I must be going immediately," he said. "Besides, I am sure I should not add to the night's merriment."

"But the wisdom, Arthur; think of that."

"No, thank you," replied Arthur, his temper getting the better of him; "my wisdom would not be appreciated. In these days only clap-trap and false sentiment seem to be welcomed."

"Then stay," said Endellion quietly. "You see," he went on, as if he had not noticed the influence of his own words, "people will think it strange if my nearest blood relation is absent; and I'm sure Mirry will find the evening more pleasant if you remain."

"No," retorted Arthur; "as you know, I am not a professed admirer of returned prodigals. I've been in practice as a lawyer for some years now, and I've seen a good deal of them."

He said the words with a kind of snarl, and his face was pale with anger. The two men were standing side by side, and Miriam Donnithorne could not refrain from comparison. Yes, she could not deny it, the young lawyer did not appear to advantage. She felt that Endellion was looking down on him, not only physically, but in other and more important ways.

"I'm sorry you won't stay, Arthur," replied Endellion, not appearing to notice the other's words. "But you, Miriam, you are staying? As you have seen, I've been awfully busy; but I shall look forward to a good long chat presently."

"Will you tolerate him, Mirry?" said Arthur, when he had gone. "Surely you can see the hollowness, the unreality of all this? Sometimes, in spite of the evidence of my own senses, I can't believe he is

Bob Dulverton at all. I tell you, the Ethiopian can't change his skin or the leopard his spots so easily. Come, let us go for a walk; there is an awful crowd here, and we shan't be missed."

"No, Arthur, my father will be anxious if I do. Besides, don't you think you are a little unfair?"

"Do you think all this is real?" retorted the young man. "Admit that he is cleverer than any of us thought; can you think that the real Bob Dulverton could talk as he talked a few minutes ago?"

"Perhaps we are neither of us fair," replied the girl.

"Ah! I see he has thrown dust in your eyes too," said the young man bitterly. "You've altered your opinion since that day—the day after his return—when he broke in upon our conversation."

"No," replied the girl. "I dislike him more than ever, and yet I feel I am unfair to him. Perhaps I never really knew him in the old days."

A little later Arthur Dulverton rode away, feeling happier than he had felt for weeks. He had never felt so sure of Miriam's dislike for the newcomer, and never so certain that she would soon promise to be his wife.

It was not until late in the evening that Endellion again found himself by Miriam's side, and then the girl thought he looked pale and anxious.

"I've tried a dozen times to get near you," he said, "but something always seems to be happening to keep me away from you. The fates have been against me."

"But you've overcome the fates at last, it seems," she said.

"I always mean to if they are against me," he replied, "especially if they try to keep me away from you."

There was a note in his voice that she had never

heard before, and his face showed a kind of grim determination which gave point to his words.

"Miriam," he continued, "it is a glorious night ; come out into the grounds for a few minutes, will you ?"

Something, she could not tell what it was, made her desire to fall in with his wishes, and a little later she found herself by his side beneath the broad trees in the park.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DUEL

"AUDACITY, audacity, and again audacity," said Endellion to himself, as he left the house with Miriam. He recollected that it was Danton, the French revolutionist, who was reported to having first given expression to this sentiment. And for a time the Frenchman had carried everything before him.

Several weeks had now passed since he had first taken possession of Dulverton, but he had to confess that he had made no progress with Miriam Donnithorne. He had always been somewhat uneasy in her presence; truth to tell, he had been somewhat afraid of her. She had repelled him at every turn, and while he knew that every one else had been singing his praises, she had been silent. Do what he would he could not break down the wall of reserve, and more than reserve, that stood between them. At times he thought she admired him, but she had never shown him a suggestion of that friendship which he knew had existed between her and Bob Dulverton long years before. But, more than all, he was haunted by the thought that Miriam suspected the truth. He could not understand the way she looked at him when he happened to be in her company, and it made him uneasy. In spite of all the adulation of others, he knew that if this clear-sighted girl doubted him he might as well leave the old home,

which grew dearer to him every day, never to return to it.

That was why he determined to play a bold game, and for high stakes. Perhaps the experiences of the day had made him bold, even to recklessness; moreover, there was something fascinating in the thought of breaking down the barrier of reserve which stood between him and her. Besides, he was strangely interested in her. He had never, in the past, been a woman's man, and more than ever he had told himself that he disliked the girl by his side. Nevertheless, he constantly found himself thinking of her, and the chagrin which her attitude towards him had caused him was not altogether because he regarded her as dangerous to his future.

"Mirry," he said, "do you think you are fair to me?"

"In what respect have I been unfair?" she asked.

"In your whole attitude. You conceived a dislike for me on the day of my return, and you have maintained it ever since. What have I done to deserve it?"

"Have you asked me to come out here to give me a lecture?" she asked.

"No, but to try to come to an understanding with you. Your coldness has been the one dark cloud in my sky."

"How happy you ought to be, then!" she retorted. "Fancy a life so free from care that there is only one dark cloud in your sky!"

"But that cloud is everything to me," said Endellion. "For the dislike of others I do not care a straw—it is nothing to me. Arthur, for instance, hates me like poison, but it does not trouble me one jot. But your dislike is a different matter, Miriam. It blackens the whole heavens. It blots out the sun."

"Don't talk nonsense," she said nervously.

"It is not nonsense, it is the serious, sober truth. Do I look like a man talking nonsense?"

In spite of herself, she lifted her eyes to his face. It was a clear, summer night, and the moon was at its full. She saw his every feature clearly, saw that he looked in deadly earnest. Moreover, she felt instinctively that she was not speaking to a weak, purposeless man, but to one who was strong and determined. In a way she could not understand his strength seemed to master her. Her thoughts did not come easily, her mental power seemed dulled, and she almost felt afraid.

"Years ago," he went on, "I looked upon you as a younger sister, and in a boyish way I loved you more than youths usually love their sisters. Of course, you know why I went away. Of what I suffered I am not going to speak; doubtless I deserved it all. But do you know what was the thought that gladdened me more than any other when at length I determined to come home? It was the thought of you, Miriam."

There was a silence between them for a few seconds, and the girl tried to still the wild beatings of her heart. Why his words affected her so she could not tell, but she felt that the atmosphere was tense with feeling, and that Endellion's presence had a kind of magnetic power.

"Of course," he said presently, "you could never think of marrying Arthur?"

His words angered her. She resented the air of masterfulness which he had assumed.

"What right have you to say that?" she asked. It was not what she meant to say in the least, but the words had escaped her almost unknowingly.

"What right?" and he laughed as he spoke. "Surely you need not ask that."

"But I do ask it. Tell me."

Again she spoke unwittingly, but she had become strangely excited. It seemed to her that she was fighting against some invisible enemy.

"Because such a girl as you could never think of allowing such a man as Arthur to become your husband."

"What do you know against Arthur?"

"I? Oh, nothing. As far as I know he is a paragon of excellence. But I know you, Miriam."

"I can assure you you are mistaken."

"Oh, no! I know you thoroughly—you are a girl with visions and ideals. You could never be happy with a man who was not your master, who had not a stronger personality than you. You would despise a husband whom you could dominate. In time you would come to hate a man whom you could mould at your will. That is why you could never take Arthur Dulverton as your husband."

"To show you that you are mistaken," she answered, carried away by her anger, "I will tell you what I have no right to tell you, and you have no right to know. I have practically decided to marry Arthur Dulverton."

"Oh no, you have not," replied Endellion; "you may think you have, but you have not. What! you, Miriam Donnithorne, marry Arthur Dulverton! Impossible! Oh, I know what you would say—you have known him all your life; and I have no doubt that he has asked you to marry him, but you could not do it. You to take as your husband a correct, dapper, petty fellow as he is! Why, your whole soul cries out against it! A little man, Miriam, one who thinks in little ways, whose love is paltry, whose hatred is paltry! Of course, I know nothing against him. He

would be afraid to do anything unconventional, he is cast in too small a mould."

The girl was white with passion. Endellion had enraged her, not only by his cool assumption, but because, in her heart of hearts, she felt his words to be true. Still, she fought against him. She determined to write to Arthur Dulverton that very night, and promise to be his wife.

"Mr. Dulverton," she cried, "in insulting the man I have decided to accept as my husband you have insulted me."

"You have not decided to accept him," cried Endellion; "and if you had, you would not marry him."

"And why, pray?"

"Because I should not allow you."

"Because—you—would—not allow me!"

She repeated every word distinctly, and her anger made her voice hoarse and unnatural.

"Exactly. I would not allow you."

She stood confronting him, her eyes ablaze. It was a new Miriam Donnithorne that Endellion saw, a Miriam Donnithorne with all the pride of race in her eyes—a girl who felt herself insulted, and who longed to avenge the insult. Moreover, to Endellion her anger enhanced her beauty. If he had admired her before that admiration was increased tenfold now. Nay, more! although he could not have told why, he felt he would fight like grim death to keep her from being Arthur Dulverton's wife. To be the possessor of the Dulverton name and the Dulverton estates seemed as nothing compared with a smile from the girl who stood before him. What had been a means to an end now became a passion; words which an hour or two ago would have been a part of a carefully-

thought-out scheme were now urged by mad longings of which he had thought himself incapable.

"Yes, look angrily at me if you will," he cried, "but what I say is true—I would not allow you. I would, if necessary, choke back the words that would make you his wife, even if you were speaking them at the marriage altar."

His voice was tense with passion, for he was no longer playing a part. What had begun as a plan of safety had become the greatest and most absorbing thing in his life. The knowledge of the truth had come to him suddenly; out of a great lie had come the greatest truth of life. He knew now that he loved Miriam Donnithorne with all the strength of his being, and that to win her love everything else became as nothing. He had never calculated on this, never dreamed that all his hopes and desires would become centred in an overmastering love for a woman. Even now he could not understand it; he only knew it was so. At that moment the Dulverton name and the Dulverton estates, with all that they meant to him, had shifted into the far background of his life, while the girl whom he thought he disliked, and who seemed to be a constant menace to him, filled the whole of his horizon.

As for Miriam, she felt more than ever angered. His cool assumption had hurt her pride. He had calmly stated that he would not allow her to marry another because he wanted her himself. She was a kind of chattel to be disposed of according to his will.

"Thank you," she replied; "but as it happens we do not live in Turkey. Possibly in your wanderings you have become enamoured of Oriental ideas, and think you can enforce them here. Your opinion of me is very flattering, only it happens that I have

rather strong ideas about such matters. When I marry it will not be at your dictation."

He knew that in making her angry he was thwarting his own purposes, but he was not in the humour to be guided by ordinary laws. He was not wooing this girl, he was fighting her. He was determined to crush her prejudices and her dislikes. He would not plead for the thing he desired, he would wrest it from her by sheer strength. He had not determined on this course of action, rather he acted upon impulse. Perhaps the knowledge of his position led him to do this; perhaps it was his innate knowledge of Miriam's character.

"Mirry," he said quietly, "your marriage will be at my dictation. You cannot help yourself."

She became more and more incensed, and yet she did not leave him without another word, as she was tempted to do. In a sense he made her more than ever determined to accept Arthur Dulverton; nevertheless there was a kind of fascination in his audacity.

"I cannot help myself! Why, pray?"

"Because you are Miriam Donnithorne."

"Still, of course, I am very dense, but I cannot see what that has to do with it. You have no control over me, you never will have."

"Excuse me, but I shall."

The girl laughed. In a way she was beginning to enjoy the duel. Her old playmate, Bob Dulverton, was indeed breaking out in a new place.

"You are very refreshing," she replied, "only, unfortunately, there is a touch of mountebankism in all this."

"There again you are mistaken. I am not given to that sort of thing. I am very serious, and what I say is true."

"That you will have control over me?"

"That I shall have control over you."

"And who is to give you that right?"

"You."

"I assure you you are absolutely mistaken."

"No, I am not mistaken. I know what you are thinking. You are angry with me, because you think I am insulting you, but you are wrong. No man insults a woman when he tells her that she is everything to him, and that he will meet and overcome every difficulty in order to make her his wife."

"Your wife?"

"Yes, my wife. My cousin, Arthur Dulverton, is not your true mate; he never can be. Even now you despise him. On the other hand, you and I were made for each other, and you know it."

"I assure you, you credit me with knowledge which I do not possess."

"No, I do not. I know you are fighting against it, but in your heart of hearts you know that I am right. You think, perhaps, that you would like a sort of plaything for a husband—a petty little country attorney, who would fetch and carry at your bidding. In a way the idea appeals to you; but such a husband would drive you mad. The plaything, the docile puppy dog, would become an irritation, a burden, a thing to loathe. Oh, I know you better than you know yourself. And I could never become your plaything, or your puppy dog, who would fetch and carry at your bidding; but I am your true mate."

His very audacity influenced her, even while she was angry with him. Nay, more, she felt that the poles were between him and Arthur Dulverton. She called to mind Arthur's wooing, she remembered the words he had spoken to her that very night, and

although there was a sense in which the young lawyer pleased her more, she knew his words did not move her as she was moved now. It did not seem to her as though she were talking with her old playmate at all; not that her mind registered the fact in any way, but she talked to him as though he were a stranger, as though she had never seen him until a few weeks ago.

"This is very amusing," she said presently, "but would you mind telling me, since you know so much, what are the qualities my husband should possess?"

"Arthur Dulverton has been wanting you for years," said Endellion, as though he took no notice of her words. "Why have you not accepted him? Why have you given him no encouragement? You have known all along that a hint, a suggestion, would bring him to your feet. Instead you have kept him at arms' length, even although he may have been one of your oldest friends. It has been because you knew that he fulfilled not one of the conditions which you have conceived in your heart, for you are no ordinary woman. You have a brain that is almost masculine. You are a hero worshipper, and your hero has always been a strong man, a fighter, one who never stoops to conquer; one who, although you hate to be dependent, can be your guide, your support."

"It seems that in trying to flatter me you paint a picture of yourself that no one would recognise."

"I have not flattered you, and although you suggest that I am a kind of boastful mountebank, I have not flattered myself. I am as the great God made me. Yes, I know of what you are thinking. You remember the Bob Dulverton of years ago, the fellow who disgraced himself both at Eton and Oxford, the fellow who loafed around public-houses, and who forgot what was due to his name and position and manhood.

But do you not think he has suffered ? I tell you, I have gone through the fires of hell. Have I not been an outcast, a pariah, a thing pointed at with scorn ? But the Almighty uses strange means to arouse men, to make them realise their manhood. Well, my chance came at last, and I have taken it. After all, the stars in their course were fighting for me, and I have come back to claim you as my own true wife."

The intense passion in his tones moved the girl in spite of herself. Even the rough wooing possessed a kind of charm. Her antagonism was not lessened, and her anger was but little abated, and yet she had a feeling that there was truth in his words.

"What do you expect me to say to all this ?" she said presently.

"Nothing."

"That is very considerate of you."

"I expect no answer from you—that is, not yet. But the answer will come. You will give it me in good time. To-day, perhaps to-morrow, and the next day you will be angry with me, but my day will come. Shall we go in now ?"

"No," cried the girl, "not yet. You say I should hate a plaything, a chattel, for a husband, but you have treated me as though I were a plaything, a chattel. You, who on your own confession have been a vagabond and an outcast, have dared to tell me what I shall and shall not do. Why, I should despise myself, as even you would despise me if I were the poor——"

"Stop!" cried Endellion. "I despise you ! I worship the ground you walk on. You are the queen of my life. I would tramp across the world to serve you ; I would shed my last drop of blood to save you from suffering ; I would fight to the very death to give you happiness. Despise you ! Why, you are every-

thing in the world to me ; without you everything I hold dear would be as worthless as autumn leaves. It is because of this that I could not be silent, it is because my whole heaven would otherwise be black that I have told you that you must not marry my cousin Arthur, and that one day you will marry me."

Again his vehemence silenced her. She still had no thought of yielding to him, but his words seemed to put a seal on her lips.

"And now we will go in," said Endellion. "I am neglecting my duty to my guests, and your father will become anxious about you."

Like one in a dream she walked back to the house by his side. She tried to think of some answer that should silence him for ever, but her mind was too bewildered, her faculties seemed numbed.

They stood on the doorstep together. "Look, Miriam," said Endellion. "See how the river gleams in the light of the moon, and the great trees in the park seem like huge sentinels guarding our home. It's a wonderful night, isn't it?"

But the girl did not answer, and when presently they found themselves among the guests, more than one wondered at the strange gleam in Miriam Donni-thorne's eyes.

"Good night, Miriam," said Endellion, as later he helped her into the carriage. "I hope you have had a pleasant evening. I shall ride over to see you tomorrow."

"Good, Bob," cried the squire, "see that you do." But Miriam did not answer a word.

As for Endellion, he sat alone until far into the morning, thinking over what had taken place, and of what the future would be.

CHAPTER XXII

MIRIAM'S BIRTHDAY

WHEN Miriam Donnithorne reached her home that night she went straight to her room, and tried to write a letter to Arthur Dulverton. She had scarcely spoken to her father during their journey home, and the squire had been wondering what had happened to anger her.

"I haven't been able to understand Mirry lately," he reflected.

But Miriam did not find it easy to write her letter to Arthur. It seemed easy while she was talking with Endellion, but when she tried to think of suitable words they would not come.

How should she begin? "Dear Arthur?" It was too cold, too formal. No one accepting a man as her future husband would write in such a way. But then her heart prompted nothing more affectionate. Well, she need not begin by any endearing terms at all. She could say, "I think I can tell you what you want to hear if you care to come to-morrow;" but she was afraid to commit herself so far. Besides, there was really no need for her to write. She would never have thought of it had not Endellion made her so angry. The tones of his voice were still ringing in her ears, and every word he had spoken was engraven on her

memory. How dare any man speak to her as he had spoken? He had told her he was coming to see her on the morrow, and she wanted to punish him by telling him that she had promised herself to Arthur. Yes, she would write the letter before she went to sleep; and again she endeavoured to compose a suitable missive. At length she thought she had written something that would do. It was very vague, but if Arthur were not blind it would bring him to her feet in a few hours. How should she finish it? "With love, Yours always, Miriam."

She looked at the words she had written; were they true? "With love." Yes, of course she loved Arthur. She had known him all her life, and—well, yes, of course she loved him; how could it be otherwise? "Yours always." Could she say that truthfully? Could she give herself to Arthur Dulverton as his wife?

A few seconds later she had torn the letter into a thousand pieces. No, she could not be his wife, at least she could not tell him so—yet. And why should she tell him? Why should the fellow's assumption anger her so? He was nothing to her—ever could be. She would treat his declaration with the contempt it deserved. She would take no notice of it, and when he paid his next visit to the Hall he should speedily discover how much he had been mistaken.

So no letter to Arthur Dulverton was sent, and Miriam spent most of the night in thinking over the events of the evening, and wondering what she ought to have said. When morning came she was as angry as ever with Endellion, but she did not make another attempt to write to Arthur.

"I hope Bob will come early," said the squire, as he sat down to breakfast.

"Probably he'll not come at all," replied Miriam, carelessly.

"Oh, but he will. Don't you remember what he said? He'll be here, right enough; I shouldn't be surprised to hear his horse on the drive at this very moment."

"You seem to be very much taken with him."

"I am. Why, the fellow is a continual marvel to me! Just think of that speech he gave. Who'd 'a' thought, ten years ago, that he was capable of such a thing? But the young beggar has been hiding his cleverness up his sleeve all these years. He's so jolly, too. He always makes me feel ten years younger when I talk with him. He's full of life, and grit, and go, not a bit like——"

But the squire did not finish his sentence. He reflected that it would not please his daughter.

"He'll want to talk about yesterday's business," he went on; "he says it was all owing to me. In a sense I suppose it was; but what then? How could one help getting up a jollification for a boy like that? I couldn't be fonder of him if he were my own son. Ah, here he is!" and the squire rushed to the door himself.

"No, don't say you've had breakfast," he cried, as he gripped Endellion's hand. "Miriam and I have only just sat down to ours. Nonsense, man, sit down! What are two breakfasts to a fellow like you? Besides, you've had a long ride. Here, Mirry, order another cup for Bob; and, I say, young fellow, there are plenty of eatables on the sideboard; go and choose for yourself."

Endellion greeted Miriam very cordially, and did not seem to notice the cold, restrained way in which she spoke; neither did he appear to heed the fact that

she left the room soon after he entered. He was in very high spirits ; he thanked the squire for all he had said and done on the previous day, and spoke to him freely concerning his hopes and plans for the future.

"Squire," he cried, "I ought to be the happiest man in England. Every one has forgiven the past, while the future is bright with hope. There's only one thing that troubles me."

"I know, I know, my boy. You are thinking about your father. Ah, I wish he'd been alive to see the kind of fellow you've turned out to be. But perhaps he knows ; perhaps he was at the old place yesterday. If he was, everything must have made him very happy."

Endellion was silent at this. He and the squire were not thinking of the same thing at all, and the young man felt a strange, unaccountable pain at his heart. There seemed something awesome in the thought of the old Squire Dulverton visiting his earthly scenes, and witnessing all that had taken place.

The two men sat talking for some time, but Miriam did not appear again until just before he started for Dulverton. Even then he only had a minute alone with her.

"Miriam," he said, "have you forgiven me ?"

"No," she replied.

"But you must—you will. I am sorry you are angry ; but I cannot unsay one word. I would not if I could."

She did not reply, and she was angry with herself for not being more angry with him.

"I spoke the truth," he continued. "I have been thinking of it during the whole night, and every word is true."

"You have a wonderful gift of imagination," she said.

"Have I? Perhaps I have; but I rode over really to tell you that I do not withdraw a single word I said, not a single word."

"How kind of you! Personally I do not remember anything worth thinking about; it was all too absurd, too much like a fourth-rate melodrama; but, as far as I can remember, neither do I withdraw a single word I said."

"But you will," he replied, as he sprang lightly into the saddle, "you will. And all I have said will come true. Good morning."

She was standing on the lawn, and she watched him as he cantered down the drive. Yes, she could not deny that her father was right when he said that he was the finest-looking fellow in the parish; nevertheless she could not think of him as her old playmate, Bob Dulverton. Why was it, and why did he make her so angry?

During the next few weeks they met several times, but Endellion made no reference whatever to their conversation, neither did he in any way mention Arthur Dulverton's name. Truth to tell, Miriam was rather disappointed at this; he had taken her by surprise, she told herself, and therefore she was not able to give him the answer he deserved. If he spoke again, however, she would be ready for him, and she thought of the things she would say. Not that she had been led to make up her mind about Arthur. Indeed, as the days went by, she found it more difficult to imagine herself giving him the answer he wanted to hear. She would not confess it to herself, but Endellion's words were influencing her. Arthur was not a man after her own heart. Miriam was a self-willed girl, who hated anything like masterfulness on the part of others where she was concerned. And yet she had the

consciousness that the man who won her must conquer her. He must have a stronger personality than she; he must be one on whom she could lean in times of difficulty. And Arthur did not appeal to her in this way. Endellion was right. Arthur was a little man, with small ambitions and a narrow outlook. She tried to fancy herself living with him year after year until they grew old together. No, the thought was horrible. Arthur would have to lean on her, instead of she on him. Try as she might, she could not think of him as her superior, her master.

She felt this strongly, when some few weeks after Endellion had angered her so much, Arthur spoke to her again.

"The deed of partnership is all signed and sealed, Mirry," he said. "You are glad for that, ain't you? You see, I am now a fairly rich man, and while I have new responsibilities I have many advantages. I have been instrumental in getting a big thing too, which, while it will mean an enormous amount of work, will also mean a lot of money."

"What will you do with it all?" she asked laughingly.

"You know what I would like to do with it, Mirry. I would like to buy a dear little house which is in the market, and furnish it after your desires. Then, of course, I would give it to you."

"I am not sure that I like small houses," she said,

"The larger one would come presently," he said.

"Oh, Miriam, I should have such an incentive to work if you would only promise me to— But you know what is in my heart. Can't you give it, Mirry?"

She shook her head.

"Why?" he pleaded. "I'd give my life to make you happy. If I could have my way, not a cloud of

sorrow should come near you. I would just be your slave. I would protect you from all harm and all trouble."

"Are you sure you could?" she asked.

"Try me," he urged. "Of course it seems mean of me to say it, but you have no one but your father to care for you now. What would become of you if anything were to happen to him? And I long for the right to protect you, and to safeguard you from every harm."

She looked at him as he spoke, and tried to think of him as he desired. But as she did so Endellion's words came back to her. Yes, she *was* a hero worshipper. She *did* admire strong, masterful personalities, and Arthur appealed to her sense of pity, rather than gave her confidence. He was scarcely taller than she; he was, as Endellion had said, a little man.

"I can promise you nothing yet," she said.

"But when, Mirry? You know the old adage about hope deferred. Be kind to me, for every hope I have in life is centred in you. I simply can't go on for ever without a word of hope. Look here, will you tell me on your birthday?"

"That's only three weeks off," she said.

"But it isn't as though you haven't known all about me for years. That's it, I'll come over on the fifteenth of July."

And Miriam, scarcely realising what she was saying, promised that she'd give him her answer on the day he had mentioned.

"You are not going to have a party, or anything of that sort, are you?" asked Arthur, not understanding the look in her eyes.

"No, there'll be no party," she replied. "I always like to spend my birthdays quietly. The thought of

having a host of people around one at such a time is simply horrible."

"But I shall come early, Mirry--you may depend on that--and I shall never have a moment's real happiness until--"

"Arthur, I'm promising nothing; mind, nothing except that I'll give you a definite answer."

"No, no. I know; all the same, I should lose my reason if--if I thought you-- But I won't think of it."

During the three weeks that elapsed before her birthday Miriam never once saw Endellion. It might seem as though he wanted to give Arthur Dulverton every opportunity of gaining his heart's desire. In a way Miriam was disappointed. It is true his presence angered her, and yet she looked forward to his coming. But, as we have said, Endellion did not once ride over to Donnithorne Hall, neither did they meet.

The morning of her birthday was cloudless. The countryside was now in the full glory of its summer foliage. Here and there an early cornfield was beginning to be tinged with gold, and the farmers began to prepare for harvest. It was a morning to drive away dull care, and to make the heart of the most despondent light and gay. But the girl did not feel happy. She knew the day for her decision had come, and yet she had not decided. In a vague sort of way she supposed she would have to give Arthur the answer he desired; nevertheless she hoped that something would happen to relieve her of the necessity of deciding.

Still she met her father with a glad laugh, and returned with warmth the affectionate greeting he gave her.

"See what the postman has brought you," laughed the squire. "The poor fellow was simply staggering with the weight of it all."

She turned eagerly to the pile of letters and parcels, and scanned the writing on each.

"What has Bob sent you, Mirry?"

"Nothing."

"What! not a word or message of some sort?"

"No, nothing."

"Then he'll be over himself presently. He knows it is your birthday. He spoke about it two or three weeks ago."

"I daresay he's forgotten," said Miriam. "You see he's not been near the house for nearly a month. Besides, it doesn't matter."

"But it does matter. Fancy Bob forgetting your first birthday since he has come home! I tell you he'll be over presently. All the same, I can't think why he's stayed away so long. I shall ask him."

"Please, father, do nothing of the kind. But what is this?"

She turned to a small basket, and on opening it saw a tiny Pekingese spaniel.

"What a little dear!" cried the girl. "Who can have sent it?"

"I expect it's Arthur," said the squire gloomily. "There's a note in his handwriting attached."

"To Miriam, with love from Arthur, trusting this will be the happiest birthday she has ever known."

Then her eyes caught sight of a postscript. "Am delayed, but shall surely be over by eleven."

"There *must* be something from Bob," cried the squire testily, taking no notice of Arthur's gift.

"No, there's nothing. But isn't this a lovely little creature?"

"What's the use of it?" grumbled the squire.

"He must have given a pile of money for it, because its breed is so good. But fancy sending a dog like

that! Perhaps, though, it was his idea of a protector;" and then he went out of the house with an angry look in his eyes.

About ten o'clock Miriam went out into the grounds. Although she would not admit it, she was disappointed, almost angry that Endellion had sent nothing. After what he had said to her it was discourteous, almost rude. It is true she had said some angry things to him, but—but—he ought at least to have sent her a birthday greeting.

She wandered around the grounds for some time, and still Endellion did not come. At eleven o'clock Arthur would be there, and then—— But even yet she dared not think of her answer.

Presently she found her way to the lake, which was near the house. It was a beautiful piece of water, some acres in extent, and rather deep. On one side was woodland, trees, and shrubs growing close to the water's edge; in the main, however, the lake was situated in the open park, although somewhat hidden from the house by the giant trees which stood on its banks.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, she took the little spaniel under her arm and stepped into the boat, which lay close to the bank, and having unfastened it she rowed out into the middle of the lake. It was now close to the time when Arthur had promised to come, and while the boat lay almost motionless upon the water she tried to solve the problem which had been haunting her for days. A few weeks before she thought she had made up her mind, but now she seemed further away from a decision than ever. In spite of herself, Endellion's words haunted her. She liked Arthur, but she did not admire him. She had dreamed of a husband of whom she could be proud; but could she be proud of Arthur? Still, was she

not foolish? Arthur loved her, and she liked him very much. He was not a hero of romance; but then such heroes did not really exist. Arthur was respected by every one, and she thought she might be happy with him. Besides, she would break his heart if she refused him. Yes, on the whole she thought she would promise to be his wife.

She was awakened from her reverie by a splash close beside her, followed by a piteous cry. The tiny creature which Arthur had sent that very morning had fallen into the water, and was struggling in vain to reach her. The boat in which she sat was a cockleshell sort of thing, scarcely wider than a canoe, and in her haste to aid the little creature she leant too far over the side. A second later she, to her dismay, found herself in the lake. Among her many accomplishments Miriam Donnithorne could not claim to be a good swimmer, and although she was but lightly clad she felt as though she were being dragged towards the bottom of the lake.

She was not far from the park, perhaps a hundred and fifty yards, but she knew she could not swim so far, and a great fear came into her heart.

"Help! help!" she cried, but no help seemed to be near. Presently she was able to grasp the side of the boat, and thus, while she was saved from immediate danger, the situation was anything but pleasant.

"Mirry!"

It was Arthur's voice, and joy came to her heart.

"Yes, Arthur, come and help me."

"Are you in danger, Mirry? How did you get there? Can you hold on a few minutes?"

"Yes, but be quick."

A few minutes later she heard the sound of confused, excited voices.

"Is the water deep out there?" she heard Arthur say.

"Yes, tes for zure. Oa, wot'll the squire zay?"

"Can't any of you swim?"

"No, Maaster Arthur, not one of us."

"And isn't there another boat?"

"No, ther edn."

"Be quick, Arthur!" cried Miriam.

But Arthur had lost his head completely. Miriam heard him shouting impossible orders and uttering frantic cries.

"Is there no one who can swim around here?" she heard him say.

"The squire can, but he's gone to Dolgooth, and wa'ant be back for two hours."

"But can't you see your mistress will drown unless help reaches her?"

"I allays thot you could swem," suggested one of the servants. "I've 'eerd 'ee zay you could."

"Yes, but I dare not go out as far as that. I should get drowned myself. Oh, can't one of you do something?"

"Ef only Maaster Bob Dulverton was here!"

"But he isn't, and meanwhile she'll drown!" and again he broke forth into frantic cries.

Meanwhile Miriam held on to the keel of the boat, while the little spaniel, which was only a puppy, continued to cry piteously. The sight of the little creature went to the girl's heart, and she loosened one of her hands in order to reach it. In so doing, however, her other hand slipped from the boat, and a second later both she and the dog sank in the deep water.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE TWO MEN

ARTHUR Dulverton saw what had happened, but still he did nothing to help.

"I daren't go, I daren't try," he cried piteously. "I swim so badly, and I couldn't reach her."

"Then I'll try and waddy out," cried one of the servants.

"But you can't reach her, and you say the water is deep."

"But I bean't goin' to leave Miss Miriam drown."

At that moment there was a shout from the other side of the lake, and looking, Arthur saw a riderless horse on the bank and a dark form in the water.

A little later Miriam, who had again grasped the side of the boat, felt herself caught by a strong arm and propelled to the shore.

"It's all right, Mirry," she heard a voice say, "there's not a bit of danger."

"Is that you, Bob?"

"Yes. I say, what a lark!"

Her heart was strangely light. A little while before, although she had no fear of being drowned, she felt anxious. She had heard the helpless cries of Arthur on the bank of the lake, and she did not know how she was to be rescued. There was no other boat, and no

one seemed able to swim. As for Arthur, he was utterly helpless. Then suddenly her troubles had fled, and in spite of herself her heart beat with a wild joy.

"Ah, I can touch the bottom, Mirry; that's all right. The lake's only deep towards the middle. Halloa, is that you, Arthur?"

"I was just coming for you, Mirry," said Arthur, who had waded out a few yards. "You are sure you are all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right, except that I am as wet as a drowned rat," cried the girl, with a laugh. "Oh, Bob, I don't know how to thank you; but you know what I feel."

"You'll feel better when you've put on some dry clothes," laughed Endellion. "Still, it's a delightful day for a bathe."

They were now standing on the bank, and Miriam laughed gaily. Somehow the incident, which had been so unpleasant a little while before, had become only a joke. Although she did not realise it, Endellion's presence had changed everything.

"I was just coming to you, Mirry," repeated Arthur. "I was, indeed. After all, the distance was nothing. But you must get in at once, and change. You'll get a cold if you don't."

"You look just like a mermaid, Miriam," laughed Endellion.

"And you, Bob; what do you look like, I wonder?"

"Oh, I look like a shipwrecked mariner. But it is a lark; and all the ship's crew have landed safely."

"Oh, I forgot!" cried the girl. "Where's the little dog you gave me, Arthur? It must be out there in the water now. The little thing must be saved; it's so tiny, it can do nothing for itself."

"Oh, don't let's bother about that," cried Arthur.

"I can easily get you another ; and really you must get in at once, Mirry." He spoke with an air of proprietorship.

"But you really won't let the little thing be drowned, will you, Arthur ?" cried the girl.

"And as you said the distance is nothing," said Endellion, with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"Oh, I—I'm not—— I say, Miriam, you really must go in ;" and Arthur caught the girl by the arm and led her towards the house.

As for Endellion, he plunged into the water again, and a few minutes later brought both the boat and the dog ashore.

"Take the little thing to its mistress," he said to one of the men who still waited ; "she seemed to be anxious about it."

"Yes, sir."

"And tell the squire when he returns that I shall come over again after lunch."

"Yes, sir," and the man looked at him admiringly. Then he added, "You be ter'ble wet, sir."

"Oh, it's nothing," replied Endellion, who by this time was standing in a pool of water. "It's a beautiful day, and my clothes will soon dry."

He made his way to his horse as fast as his water-soaked garments would allow him ; then, having put on his boots and his coat, he rode towards Dulverton.

"I d' call that a man, I do," said the man to himself, as he watched Endellion's retreating form. "What a difference there was in 'em, to be sure !"

He took the little animal in his arms, and found his way to the kitchen.

"How's Miss Miriam ?" he asked of one of the servants.

"Oh, she's all right. I passed by her room just

now, and heard her laughing. But, my word ! you men was wisht poor trade. Not one of 'ee was man enough to go and help her."

"I never larnt to swim," replied the man; "but come to that, what about Master Arthur? He can swim, and yet he didn' do nothin'; besides, from what we d' 'ear, 'ee do want to be her sweetheart."

"Men be wisht poor trade," repeated the girl.

"Anyhow, you caan't say that of young Squire Dulverton."

"No; now, he's what I call a *proper* man," replied the girl. "But where is he now?"

"Oh, he jumped on his horse, as though he had done nothin' 'toal, and told me to tell the squire he'd come back after lunch."

"Tha's jist like a proper man; as for the other, he must be feeling like the coward he is. But there! I'll go and tell the mistress about the little dog."

When the squire returned Miriam was still in her room, but Arthur gave him his version of what had taken place.

"But Mirry's all right?" said the squire anxiously.

"Oh yes, she's all right," said Arthur. "I brought her in after her dipping, and she was laughing about the whole affair."

"You say Bob Dulverton brought her in?"

"Yes; I was on the point of going to her, when I saw that Bob was half way to her. You see, he came up on the other side of the lake."

"H'm!" said the squire. "He went to her while you were making preparations?"

"Oh, no," replied Arthur; "but—but, you see, he's a better swimmer than I."

"Just so. But I say, Arthur, your clothes are not very wet."

"No; you see, when I saw Bob—I thought—that is——"

"Just so," said the squire, cutting him short. "But where is Bob now? Has any one seen him?"

"I really don't know. You see, I was so anxious about Mirry that——"

"Yes, yes, I see!" and Squire Dulverton rose hastily and left the room.

A few minutes later he found one of the men who had witnessed the whole affair, and he gave him a correct version of what had taken place.

"The little coward!" he muttered, between his set teeth. "Fancy him calling himself a man! It's given me an awful shock, but if—if it should open her eyes, I shall be glad it happened. As for Bob, I hope he's not caught cold, or anything of that sort. But of course he hasn't, he's not that sort of creature. Yes, he's a regular Dulverton. He may have been a bit wild, but he's a fine young fellow now. I hope the young rascal will come over early."

Miriam came down to lunch looking rather pale, but otherwise showing no signs of harm. She laughingly gave her father a description of the position she was in, and then changed the subject.

"You see, I was right," said the squire. "Bob hadn't forgotten your birthday. And by King Harry's bones, he remembered it in a very practical way. For that matter, Arthur's present would have been at the bottom of the lake but for him. Ah, I do like to see a *manly* man."

"And have you seen what he sent over, father?" she asked.

"No. What?" asked the squire eagerly.

"A young horse, which he's broken himself. I went out into the stable to see him. He's a regular beauty."

"Ah!" said the squire, with great satisfaction.
"And he broke it himself, you say?"

"Yes; the man who brought him over told me that Bilkins, the horse-breaker, failed, but Bob took him in hand, and now he's as quiet as a lamb."

"Good!" cried the squire. "Ah, but the young rascal is a regular trump."

During the conversation Arthur looked uncomfortable and angry. It seemed to him that his old rival was again coming between him and the woman he loved. It was still Bob Dulverton who was the hero, while he was in the background. He comforted himself, however, by the fact that Miriam had neither, by word or sign, showed any resentment at his not coming to her rescue. Indeed, he thought she had been more than ordinarily kind. More than once he had caught her looking at him, as he thought, with great tenderness, and he reflected that she had promised to give him an answer that very day.

Directly lunch was over the squire went out to look at the horse which Endellion had sent, leaving Arthur alone with Miriam.

"You are sure you are none the worse for your—your ducking?" he said. He tried to speak lightly, but at heart he was very anxious.

"Oh, no, I'm all right," she replied. "As for the little dog you sent me, he seems all right too," and she looked towards the little creature, who was lying on a rug.

"But you look rather pale, Mirry," said Arthur, "and you haven't eaten enough for a mouse."

"Oh, I'm perfectly well. After all, it was nothing," and there was a curious look in her eyes as she turned towards Arthur.

"No, no. Of course, you—you—were, that is,

there was no danger ; and—and I was just—that is, coming to you. But shan't we go outside, Mirry ? It is a glorious day."

The girl rose without a word, and walked by his side, along the lawn.

"There's a beautiful shady nook down by the big laburnum tree, Arthur," she said.

"Yes," he replied gladly, "and I see some chairs there too."

He led the way eagerly, for he felt his hour come. Oh, that he had been brave enough to have helped her a few hours before ! His plea would have been so much stronger. Still, she had not reproached him, and he thought she treated him with more than ordinary kindness.

"You are sure you are perfectly well, Mirry ?" he said, after they had been seated a few minutes.

"Oh, yes. After all, what is a dipping ?"

"Oh, nothing, of course ; only, Mirry, you know what is in my heart. But I won't exact the fulfilment of your promise, if—if you don't feel well enough."

The girl was silent, but Arthur thought he saw her lips quiver.

"You see," he went on, "I love you so that I would suffer anything rather than that you should have a minute's pain. Oh, Mirry, it would have killed me, if—if—— But I daren't talk about it."

"I haven't slept for nights," he went on, after a few seconds' silence. "All my life's happiness depends on what you will say to me to-day. I know I am not worthy of you, and I feel sometimes that I am not the kind of fellow that such a girl as you would choose. I—I am not an—an athlete, or that sort of thing. But, Mirry, every bit of my life is yours."

She could not help noticing the tremor in his voice,

and, in a way, his evident sincerity impressed her. It is true she had been terribly disappointed at his not coming to her aid, but she had never thought of him as a hero. But he was Arthur Dulverton, whom she had known all her life, and who for years had loved her.

"And there's no one else, is there, Mirry?"

She shook her head, and she was sincere in her action. She knew he was thinking of the man who he believed was his cousin, and she felt that, even in spite of what he had done, she still disliked him. She was still angry at what he had said weeks before, and she was angry that he, and not Arthur, had come to her aid. In spite of everything she distrusted him, doubted him. She felt the invisible barrier that ever stood between them, and desired to punish him for the words he had uttered.

"Then tell me, Mirry. Say yes. You shall never, never regret it."

Arthur had risen from his chair, and held out his hand to her. "Tell me, Mirry, tell me. Say yes, for you will kill me if you say no. Every hope I have is centred in you, and every joy of my life depends on you."

He spoke sincerely and earnestly. His lips trembled, his voice was hoarse with emotion, and for a moment she forgot everything else in the atmosphere he had created. It is true she did not love him, as she had dreamed she would love the man who was to be her husband, but then, after all, what were girlish dreams? Why should she not make him happy? Why should she not say the words which he longed to hear, and which she—yes, she wanted to say?

Then suddenly the atmosphere was changed, and a new influence surrounded her.

"Miriam!"

It was not Arthur who spoke. The voice was deeper, stronger, and somehow, she could not tell why, everything seemed different. Looking up, she saw Endellion standing by Arthur's side, and as she looked she knew she could never choose Arthur for a husband.

"It is your birthday, Miriam," went on Endellion. "May it be the happiest you have ever known, and may it be the promise of a lifetime of joy."

She looked into his eyes as he spoke, and wondered why she no longer felt angry with him.

"How good of you to come again, Bob," she said.

"Of course, I couldn't help it. Somehow I forgot all about your birthday when we parted a few hours ago. You were like a mermaid, and I was like a drowned rat," and he laughed gaily. "But I couldn't help coming again to tell you of my good wishes. You knew, didn't you?"

They were commonplace words, and yet she forgot all about Arthur as he spoke. Endellion filled her whole horizon. He had become everything, and Arthur nothing. Why was it? Was it because he had come to her rescue, while Arthur had done nothing but shout frantically?

"I also want to thank you for that beautiful colt," she said. "Your man told me he was untameable until you took him in hand."

"Do you like him?"

"He is a beauty—just a perfect beauty."

"Then you must come for a ride with me soon. He's as easy as a cradle, and fleet as the wind."

"I believe he's vicious," cried Arthur, who was well-nigh beside himself with anger because of the interruption in their conversation. "I am sure he's not fit for you to ride, Mirry."

Endellion looked at Arthur for the first time. He had seemed unconscious of his presence.

"Did you think I would give Miriam a horse until I was perfectly sure he was gentle?" he asked, and Arthur felt cowed by his words.

"But I remember him," he persisted sullenly. "He has a fiendish temper."

"He wanted a master," said Endellion, "and when he had found him, his temper was all right. Of course, Miriam knows I wouldn't let her mount him if there was a shadow of danger."

"But I tell you I won't let her ride him," he cried, losing all control over himself. "It is all very well for you, who have been accustomed to ride wild things in Australia, but Mirry is living in a civilised country, and I won't allow her to run into danger."

"That's kind of you, Arthur," said Endellion, "but I am inclined to think that Miriam has a mind of her own. Besides, she's not a child, and she is quite capable of judging whether I would give her a vicious horse. I think I care quite as much for her safety as you do."

A few hours before Miriam would have resented his words, but now they seemed natural and right. As for Arthur, while he determined to gain Miriam's promise before the day ended, he felt as though his cup of joy was snatched from him even while he held it to his lips.

Just at that moment the squire arrived on the scene, and immediately monopolised Endellion's company.

"My boy," he said, as he led him away, "God only knows what I owe you. On inquiring into that affair of this morning, I am convinced that Mirry was in great danger, while that idiot did nothing but scream like a madman. I shall never cease blessing you to my dying day. Thank God you came when you did,

for Arthur was as helpless as a baby. And do you know, Bob, he actually wants to marry her."

"Of course I guessed it," said Endellion. "And she, squire, does she favour him?"

"I—I don't know. I am afraid she does, and yet I can't believe it. How can a girl like Miriam ever think of a manikin like that? But there! there is no accounting for women."

Meanwhile Arthur Dulverton stood moodily by Miriam's side. He felt that there was a change in the atmosphere, but he wanted to renew the conversation which Endellion had interrupted.

"Forgive me for speaking as I did, Miriam, but I hate the fellow. I simply can't be civil to him."

The girl was silent, and yet she knew she wanted to defend the man whom she believed was Bob Dulverton.

"I know there's something wrong about him," went on Arthur; "I've known it all along. This morning I have received a letter which has confirmed my suspicion."

"About whom?"

"About—my cousin."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I sent a cable to a man I know in Australia—sent it several weeks ago. I told him to find out everything. Well, this morning I got a letter from him which showed that we have been right. He said he would write again shortly with full particulars. Oh, I'll crush him yet. The fellow's a hypocrite, and I'll spend my last penny to expose him."

Was it because Endellion had rendered her a great service that morning, or was it because she only desired to entertain kind thoughts on her birthday? Anyhow, Miriam Donnithorne's heart rose up in defence of the threatened man.

"But don't let's think any more of him," continued Arthur. "I want to talk of something nearer my heart. Miriam, you're ready to tell me what I'm longing to hear, aren't you?"

"No," replied Miriam Donnithorne.

"But, Mirry——"

"I'm so sorry to give you pain, Arthur, but I cannot."

"But you love me," he cried; "you have told me so."

"No, I do not love you."

"It's Bob again," he cried distractedly; "he has blinded you, as he has blinded every one else. He's made you believe his lies, and——"

"Stop!" said Miriam. "How dare you speak about him in such a way?"

CHAPTER XXIV

ENDELLION'S VICTORY

"How dare I?" cried Arthur. "What is he to you? Why have you changed so?"

His words caused Miriam to realise the purport of what she had said. In her excitement she had allowed words to fall from her lips which she had never intended.

"How could I allow you to speak unkindly of one who saved my life a few hours ago?" she said.

"But, Mirry, that was nothing, and—and I was just coming to you. I was indeed!"

The girl could not keep back the scorn that came to her heart, but she had gained her point; she had given a reason for the way she had spoken to him.

"Whether it was nothing or not," she replied, "he came to my aid and brought me safe ashore; and I should be very mean if I allowed you to speak unkindly of him after such a thing."

"But, Mirry, you—that is, you don't really mean what you said? You'll kill me."

"I'm very sorry, Arthur, but it's better you should know the truth. As you know, I never promised you anything except that I would tell you to-day. If I could have given you any other answer I would."

"But is there no hope for me at all?"

"No—none."

"But why? Tell me that."

"Because I do not love you—that is, not in the way I ought to love you if I gave you the answer you wanted."

Arthur Dulverton lost control over himself. All his hopes had been destroyed like a castle of cards. He loved Miriam as much as one of his nature was capable of loving, and all light had gone out of his sky.

"Then it is that fellow!" he cried wildly. "You have deceived me. You are always different the moment he appears on the scene. You have led me to believe you cared for me, while all the time— Yes, and you told me you disliked him."

"I have not deceived you."

"Then you dislike him, distrust him?"

"Yes," she said, in a strained, unnatural voice.

"Then, Mirry, give me some hope. I will wait six months, a year, two years—"

"It's no use, Arthur. I am very sorry, but it would be wrong of me to give you the hope you ask for. I—I do not care for you in the way—we are thinking of. I never shall."

"Then it's good-bye," he said bitterly. "I must go back and tell my father and mother that you've thrown me off like an old glove?"

"That is neither just nor true, Arthur," she replied. "As you know, I never promised you anything."

"I know it's Bob," he said petulantly; "it's always Bob. But I'll be even with him. I believe I know enough now to drive him out of the place, but I'll make sure."

"What do you know?" she asked, almost eagerly.

"Oh, you want to know, do you? Oh, I was sure I was right. But he'll rue the day that he ever crossed my path."

Miriam knew Arthur, and she believed his threats were like those of an angry child, and yet they made her anxious; why, she could not have told.

"Won't you stay for the evening, Arthur?" she said, in conciliatory tones. "It's my birthday, you know, and I should not like you to leave me in anger."

"Do you think I could stay after what you have told me?" he cried. "Do you imagine me to be without feeling? I should know all the time that I was a rejected lover, and I should have to see you smiling on that hypocrite. No, thank you, Miriam. But don't think he'll escape. He never shall. Good-bye."

He left her without another word, and Miriam was alone. She could not understand what had taken place, she could not explain her own actions. Up to half an hour before she had almost decided to accept Arthur, and then suddenly she felt it to be impossible. It was not, as he said, because she cared for Bob Dulverton. She distrusted him and disliked him as much as ever, in spite of what he had done; at least, she told herself so. Why, then, was she anxious about Arthur's threats, and why was she so glad that Bob was staying although Arthur had left?

A little later Squire Donnithorne and Endellion appeared again, and her heart beat strangely as she saw them coming. The squire was still holding Endellion's arm, and was talking with him affectionately, while the young man was looking up into the other's face, as though they were talking about something of great interest. His every movement suggested strength, decision, masterfulness. She compared his love-making with that of Arthur's. He did not whine and utter vague threats. Rather he was almost

brutal in his strength. She was angry then, but she was not angry now; no, she rejoiced in his masterfulness, and in his absolute confidence. Here was a man who at least was strong, and who rejoiced in his strength, one who, having determined on a thing, would never give up until he had gained what he desired.

Even then she realised that a part of what he had said had come true. She had been unable to accept Arthur Dulverton as her husband. Every fibre of her being had told her that had she persuaded herself to be his wife, she would have scorned both herself and him. Yes, she felt that the young lawyer was a little creature who would fetch and carry for her, rather than a strong man upon whom she could lean.

But the young man who was coming towards her was not Bob Dulverton at all. He was a comparative stranger to her, and although she could not tell why, there was a barrier, and, as it seemed to her, an insurmountable barrier, between them.

And yet she did not doubt that it was Bob Dulverton, even although she felt him to be a stranger. Something in her nature recoiled from him, and yet, of course, he was her old playmate.

"Hulloa, Mirry," said the squire, "where's Arthur?"

"He's gone," replied the girl.

"What, so soon? I thought he was spending the evening with us."

Miriam was silent.

"Isn't he coming back for dinner?"

"No," replied the girl.

The squire gave his daughter a keen, searching glance, and then his eyes lit up with delight. He felt sure he knew the truth, and he rejoiced accordingly.

"Anyhow, you will stay, Bob?" said the squire. "I



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wanted to have a few friends here as it was Miriam's birthday, but she would not allow me to invite any one. She wanted to be alone, she said."

"In that case I'd better not stay," suggested Endellion, with a laugh.

"Of course she didn't mean you," cried the squire. "As you know, you are like one of the family. But you know what Mirry is, and when she's made up her mind about anything I dare not try to alter her. But, by gad! I'll have my way about your spending the evening with us, anyhow."

"Miriam shall decide," said Endellion, looking at her steadily. "If she tells me to stay, it shall be so; but if she shows any hesitation, I shall know she would rather I should go. Now, then, what do you wish, Miriam?"

The girl felt her heart fluttering wildly; it seemed to her there was a kind of destiny in her decision.

"Dad," she said, "hadn't you better send Seccomb for Bob's evening clothes?"

"Good!" laughed the squire; "we'll have a quiet, happy evening together. No one will drop in, except it's Borlase."

Nothing except of the most commonplace had been said, and yet to Miriam the air was tense with excitement, and every word was laden with important issues. She was glad beyond measure that Endellion was to spend the rest of the day with them, and yet she was afraid to be left alone in his company.

"What a day, isn't it?" cried the squire. "I don't remember the time when I've been so happy. Ah, I've a lot to thank God Almighty for."

It was indeed a day to rejoice in. Light, fleecy clouds flitted across the sky, a soft, caressing breeze fanned the flowers and the trees, honey bees hummed

lazily, while the whole countryside was ablaze with glory.

"God was extravagant when He made Devonshire," said Endellion.

"Did you ever see anything so beautiful?" cried the squire. "Can any other country in the world produce anything like it?"

"No," replied Endellion. "I have never seen such loveliness anywhere. Look at the moors, away at the very edge of the horizon. You can almost see the purple glow of the heather."

"Ah, and here comes tea," cried the older man; "I always say it's a shame to have tea indoors on such a day."

Endellion sat back in the garden chair and watched two trimly dressed maids as they prepared for tea. Life was very sweet to him just then; it seemed as though all the dark, bitter past were gone for ever, while the future was all aglow with the promise of joy. Miriam, who had gone into the house for a few minutes, came towards him, and his heart danced gaily as he saw her. The love which he had declared a few weeks before had become more than ever the great overmastering force of his life. She was indeed all the world to him, and then and there he vowed that nothing should stand in the way of his winning her.

The squire also looked towards her with love-lit eyes. His only child was as dear as life to him, and her happiness was his great desire. That he was proud of her any one could see, and there was little wonder.

"There's not a finer girl in Devonshire," he reflected, and perhaps he was right. The slight pallor which had been caused by the morning's accident had passed away, and her face was flushed with the glow of youth

and health and happiness. Indeed, she seemed a part of that fair summer day ; even as the summer air and the gaily coloured flowers which bloomed everywhere were unsullied by the dust of the world, so Miriam Donnithorne seemed unsullied by unworthy thoughts and desires.

They chatted gaily as they sat drinking tea beneath the shade of a wide-spreading tree, and nothing suggested storm or strife. Neither the sky nor the green countryside told of anything but peace and content and beauty.

And no one seemed more joyous than Endellion. He had put every unpleasant thought in the background of his life, and he lived in the blissful present. No pangs of remorse troubled him, and the dark past seemed buried for ever.

After tea the squire left them. He had one or two matters to attend to, he said, and thus Endellion and Miriam were left together.

"Let's go for a walk, Miriam," he said.

She rose without a word, and side by side they walked into the leafy woods. Without, all nature was calm and bright, but within the young man's heart was a great longing which nothing but the knowledge of Miriam's love could satisfy.

"Miriam ?" he said.

"Yes, Bob." She uttered the words mechanically, for she did not feel that it was Bob Dulverton who walked by her side.

"Are you still angry with me ?"

She did not reply.

"This is the first time I have had a chance of speaking to you since I told you I loved you," he said. "You were very angry with me then. No doubt your anger was justified. I behaved like

a brute ; all the same, I do not withdraw one word— not one word. I could not if I were truthful. I meant what I said. I know why I was so brutal ; it was because I knew what was in Arthur's mind, and because I could not bear to think of him as your husband."

Still she did not speak.

"Well, my words have come true, haven't they ?" he went on. "You've seen for yourself that he is not your true mate. That's why you've driven him away."

She tried to be angry. She tried to say something that would punish him for his presumption, but she could not.

"Am I speaking too soon ?" he continued. "Do you distrust me, dislike me still ? Do you still feel angry with me ? You must not, Miriam ; you must love me, for you are life itself to me. If you cannot love me this beautiful day would be black indeed. Tell me."

And still she did not speak. She did not even yet know the truth, neither did the words Endellion was speaking sound real to her. Why it was she could not tell, but she was afraid to yield to the promptings of her heart. A voice seemed to forbid her, an unseen hand seemed to warn her against him. But her anger had gone. She no longer felt as she had felt when he had first declared his love.

"Have you no word to say, Miriam ? I am no longer your old thoughtless, harum-scarum playmate, but an earnest, almost desperate, man. Will you not speak ? Every fibre of my being is crying out for you."

Her heart was throbbing wildly ; in one sense she longed to say what he wanted to hear, but she could not.

"Bob, I can't," she said.

"Can't what?" he asked. "Miriam, I love you—love you. Will you not be my wife?"

"No," she said.

"Why?"

"Bob, there is something between us, something forbidding me. I don't, that is—I dare not."

"But tell me why. I swear that I will give my life to make you happy. I swear that I will never cease to love you—never, never. All I have and am are yours."

The girl looked up as he spoke, and she saw his eyes eloquent with love, and she knew that she loved him, even as he loved her. But even yet she could not tell him what he wanted to hear.

"I can't, I can't," she repeated.

"But you love me!" he cried. "You do, I know you do. You might take an oath that you did not, but I should not believe you. You are mine, you belong to me."

"No, no, Bob," and she almost shuddered as she spoke.

"But why? I have the right to ask that."

"Because I do not, cannot trust you."

"Why do you not trust me?"

"I do not know. I cannot tell."

Her words angered him. Why should she not trust him? He was sincere in his love. He meant every word he had said. All his heart, his life, had gone out to the girl by his side; why, then, should she not trust him?

"But I have the right to know," he said grimly; "I must know—I will know."

"Bob," she said, "are you not deceiving me? Is there not something wrong about you, something

you are hiding deep in the depths of your heart, something you dare not let any one know ? ”

“ Is there a man who lives who has not his secrets ? ” he asked. “ There is no man so good and so pure that he can lay bare his whole life. And yet, Miriam, I tell you this, my life may have been wild, but it has been clear.”

“ Are you sure, Bob ? Oh, forgive me, but I can't feel that you are the real Bob. You seem to be acting to me ; you seem to be wearing a mask. I can't get rid of the feeling that you are trying to deceive me. ”

“ And if I can prove to you that I am not ? ” he asked. In spite of himself, a great fear had come into his heart, a ghastly, unnameable fear. He felt what had caused doubts to rise in the girl's heart ; he knew why she felt a barrier between them. He knew, too, that if she knew the truth she would spurn him as the liar, the fraud he was. And he determined that she should not know. He would fight down her doubts, her fears, her forebodings, and conquer them. Why should his hard, bitter past stand between him and happiness ? He had harmed no one, he had entered into possession of that which the rightful owner had bestowed upon him.

“ You have more than once accused me of wearing a mask,” he went on, as he saw her hesitate, “ and I cannot prove to you that I am not. I can only give you my word.”

“ And will you give me your word,” she said, “ your honest, sacred word ? You Dulvertons have always prided yourself on your truthfulness. Will you give me your word ? ”

“ And if I will, Mirry ? ”

“ Then—oh, Bob, if you will do that, I cannot help myself ! ”

"Miriam! You mean that! Really mean it!"

"Mean it! Why, Bob, you know. Only tell me. I am angry with myself, ashamed of myself. I have fought against the feeling ever since the first night you came home—and, oh, Bob, tell me!"

There was a tone of tender pleading in her voice. It seemed to him as though she were asking him to give her the happiness which he was holding back from her. The thought of giving her up was like pulling out his heart-strings, it was worse than death. No, he could not tell her the truth. Indeed, there was no need to tell it. She could never have loved the real Bob Dulverton. His life had been dissolute, depraved, while his own had been clean. No, he had done right in claiming what was rightfully his, and he would not give up a lifetime of happiness for a little false sentiment. And, more, her own confession had told him that if he made known the truth he would blacken her life and drive her to misery. Besides, at that moment he did not feel as though he had been deceiving her. His one great falsehood seemed as nothing; it was just a vague, intangible something in the far-off background of his life.

And so he told the great lie, told it unhesitatingly, boldly, confidently.

"I am wearing no mask, Miriam: I am keeping nothing back from you, and I love you, love you. All my life is yours. Look into my eyes, and see for yourself."

And she obeyed him. She lifted her eyes, and looked into his, her heart yearning all the time. She felt that the wall of partition was breaking down, that the great black cloud was rolling away. His eyes were earnest and sincere, his voice was the voice of truth.

"Tell me, Miriam," he said, almost solemnly, "tell me you will be my wife."

"If you will have me, Bob;" and her answer was a sob of joy.

He put his arm around her, and their lips met. The kiss he gave her was of true love. All his heart went out with it, and to Miriam there was no more fear, no more doubt.

"Oh, Bob," she said, "I am so happy!"

Half an hour later they were back at the house, and Squibb Swathorne was shaking Endellion's hand while the boys were rolling down his face.

"Bob," he said, "there has been nothing I could have wished for more. I never dreamed I could have been so happy. Why—why— Oh, Bob, I wish your father had lived to see this day!"

"I will give my life to make her happy," said Endellion, and his voice was hoarse with emotion.

"I know you will, my boy—I know you will. It's all as I could have wished it. Everything's right—everything. I'm good, please God, for twenty years yet, and by that time my grandchildren will be old enough to take possession of the place."

He laughed and cried all in a breath. "Oh, Mirry," he cried, kissing her, "how blind I've been! But I am happy. And, 'pon my word, here comes Borlase. What do you think, my dear fellow? You know how I've always liked him—ay, loved him—as if he were my own son. Well, he's going to be. He and Mirry are engaged."

CHAPTER XXV

HOW ENDELLION'S EYES WERE OPENED

THAT was the happiest night Ralph Endellion had ever known. Never had the old black past seemed so completely blotted out. Never had the future been so bright. There was not a cloud in his sky. The year was indeed at the spring and the day at the morn.

After dinner the squire and the vicar went into the billiard room, leaving Endellion and Miriam together, and the time fled by on golden wings. In their new-born happiness they thought of nothing but pleasant things; indeed, life seemed to contain nothing else, and when at length they parted it was only to tell each other that they would meet on the following day. Endellion and the vicar rode back together, for Mr. Borlase was also a horseman, and did most of his visits on horseback.

"I wish you joy, Bob," he said, "and I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. I'll be quite frank with you. When you first came back, I doubted you, I—well—I did not like you; but all that kind of thing has passed away. You are far more fitted for Miriam than Arthur is."

"Thank you, Mr. Borlase."

"It'll be joy unspeakable to see Mirry mistress of the Manor House—and, well—I thank God from the

bottom of my heart. You don't want to keep the matter a secret, I suppose?"

"For my own part I should be glad if our engagement could be made public at once," replied Endellion. "But—well, Miriam thinks it would be unkind to Arthur to announce it immediately. Perhaps you can understand."

"Yes, I understand," replied the vicar, "and, of course, I shall say nothing about it until I get your permission."

In spite of the excitement of the day Endellion fell asleep almost as soon as he laid his head on the pillow; and when he awoke the following morning it was to see the sunlight streaming into the room, and to hear the birds filling the heavens with music.

He had intended to ride to Donnithorne Hall immediately after breakfast, but on coming downstairs he found a message from Binns, informing him of the urgent necessity of his presence at a distant farm. He therefore sent word to Miriam telling her of the reason for his absence, but assuring her that he would be with her at lunch if at all possible. As events would have it, however, it was not until dinner-time that he appeared.

Never until that moment did he dream that Miriam could be so demonstrative in her affection. "I am so glad you have come, and that all is well," she repeated again and again.

"Why, did you fear anything had happened to me?" he asked.

"I am afraid my happiness is too great to last," she said. "It all seems so wonderful, Bob. I seem to be walking on air. Last night, after you had gone, I could not sleep—I simply couldn't. The joy of everything was too great. But, Bob, everything will be well, won't it?"

"Of course it will. Why, it's not like you to have gloomy recodings, Mirry."

"I know it isn't; but everything has been so unreal. When you didn't come this morning I felt as though you would never come. Nothing seemed real, Bob; not even you."

"But am I not real now?" he said, kissing her.

"Oh, yes, it's all right now you've come. I fear nothing now."

Throughout the whole evening all was as gay as marriage bells. The squire was in the best of spirits, and rejoiced in their joy. There was no happier man in England, he declared, and although Miriam was to be taken away from him, he should spend most of his time at Dulverton Manor, so that he should not lose her.

"Bob," said Miriam, just before they parted that night, "I'm not troubling about anything to-night."

"That's right, my queen. You're sure?"

"Absolutely sure. There's not a cloud in my sky."

"And I'll try to keep all clouds away," he cried. "If I can help it, not one shadow shall fall on your life."

"Do you know what is such a comfort to me, Bob? It is the consciousness of your strength. Other men seem small and puny beside you. You seem to have caught the spirit of the great country where you've lived; there is such an open-air feeling about you. I used to hate the idea of being dependent on any one, but I love the thought of being dependent on you. All my old fears have gone. I shall never be afraid of anything or any one while you are by my side."

He caught her in his arms, and lifted her as though

she were a feather. "I don't know what weakness or tiredness feels like," he laughed.

"And it's not only physical strength," she said, "it's something deeper, something more wonderful. Bob, you've no fear of any one, have you?"

"No. I fear no one," he replied.

"I am so glad of that."

"But why do you ask, Miriam?"

"Oh, I daresay it's nothing; but—but Arthur was speaking about you yesterday. He—he has always been jealous of you, Bob."

"Yes, I know. But what did he say about me?"

"Oh, he said he had cabled to a sort of detective in Australia about you, and that this man had written to say he'd found out something wrong about you, and that he would give him all details later. You are not afraid of what any man can tell about you, are you, Bob?"

"No," he said confidently. "Let him hire forty detectives if he likes."

"I am so glad," she said, with a sigh of content, "for I trust you so fully, so completely now. As you know, up to yesterday I felt as though something was wrong; but it's all gone. No matter what any one said about you, I shouldn't believe them."

A cold feeling crept into his heart; he could not understand why.

"You are sure you trust me?" he asked.

"Completely, absolutely," she replied.

"Suppose," he said, and his voice suddenly became hard, "suppose some one told you that I had been guilty of a great crime? Suppose it were seemingly proved that I was a forger, a thief, a liar?"

"If you told me you were not, I should not believe what any one else said," she replied.

"You are sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Yesterday every cloud of doubt departed as if by magic, and now I believe in you so wholly, completely, that it does not matter what any one might say. If I didn't believe in you——"

"Yes, what then?"

"Why—why, everything would be impossible. The sky would be black, life would not be worth the living."

"But you do believe in me?"

"Absolutely, completely, Bob. Can't you see it in my eyes?"

She looked up at him as she spoke, and he caught the flash of the deep grey orbs. Yes, there was no doubt she spoke the truth. Peace, trustfulness, content were mirrored there as truly as clear, still water mirrors the heavens above.

He did not know why, but the fact of Miriam's absolute trust in him seemed to alter his whole outlook on life. While she doubted him he grew angry with her, and in his heart came the determination to fight her doubts, and conquer them. And now he knew he had conquered them, that she not only loved him with all the fervour of a pure heart, but that she trusted him with all the strength of a nature that was incapable of deceit.

"Miriam," he said, "as you know, I love you with all the strength of my life, but I am not worthy of you. Oh, no, I am not. I know it. Not that I—I have cared for other women—it's not that, you are the only one, the only one. But, suppose I told you that my past had been shameful, sordid, disgraceful, what then? It would not be what some one else told you, but what I told you."

She misunderstood him altogether. She had heard

the stories of Bob Dulverton's past life, of wild orgies, of disgraceful companions, of gambling debts, and she imagined that he was thinking of these things.

"Would you forgive me then?" he urged, after a short silence.

"I could forgive anything while I knew you did not deceive me, Bob. That is the only thing I could not forgive. But I fear nothing, because I believe in you. Since yesterday I have seen your heart, and I know you are incapable of deceit. I could not love you and trust you so completely if I did not. It has become a sort of religion with me. I simply know you would not try to deceive me."

All her heart went out with her words, and yet he felt as though he were standing on the brink of a precipice. His brain reeled; everything was dire confusion.

A few minutes later he was galloping wildly towards Dulverton, but he had no idea where he was going. Had the horse turned its head in the opposite direction, he would not have known. His brain was on fire, his heart was torn with conflicting emotions.

Presently he realised that he was at his own door, and he remembered that he had given instructions for every one to go to bed. He would probably be late, he had said, and could manage for himself. Mechanically he stabled his horse, and then, having let himself into the house, he sat down in the library and tried to think.

Nothing had happened, and yet everything had happened. He loved a pure, God-fearing, devoted girl with all the strength of his being, and he had won her love, her trust. He knew that when she had promised to be his wife she had promised him everything. The last wall of partition was broken down;

Miriam had given her heart, her life to him. She had swept aside the last vestige of doubt, and she trusted him entirely. He knew that the keynote of her character was revealed in the words she had spoken to him. "I could forgive everything while I knew you did not deceive me, Bob. That is the only thing I could not forgive." She was absolutely truthful herself; that was why she had for so long fought against herself; but once her trust was obtained, she gave her whole life to him.

And he was an incarnate lie!

He had known it ever since he came to England, but it had never troubled him until now. He had been simply fighting a battle, and when he thought he had won everything, he knew himself to be what he was. While Miriam doubted him, while she accused him of wearing a mask, and of acting a part, he grimly determined that he would overcome her opposition, never heeding the inwardness of the part he had been playing. Then came the revelation of his love, and all else was swallowed up in the desire to win the woman who had become everything to him. And he had done it. She had given him her heart, her life, and because of it she trusted him implicitly, blindly. And he was an incarnate lie!

He saw himself as he really was, saw what he had really done; the past few months stood out before him in all their ghastly nakedness. The implicit trust of a good, pure, truthful woman had opened his eyes, and he saw!

Like lightning his mind went back to the night of the storm in Australia, when he first saw Bob Dulverton. At first he had scouted the lie that sought to find entrance at the door of his heart. He had been in the wilderness of temptation. The devil had said

to him, "All these things will I give thee if——" and at length he had yielded. He had taken the vile thing to his heart and nursed it. His wonderful likeness to Bob Dulverton had opened the door to everything, and he had come to England, trying to deceive himself by the thought that his mind was only half made up, but in reality determined to carry his plans into effect.

And everything had been so easy. The housekeeper, the steward, the lawyer, the servants, the neighbours—all had received him with open arms. None had really doubted him save Miriam, and he had learnt to love her—to love her with an absorbing passion. He had won her, too—the fairest, truest girl in Devonshire.

Well, and why not? No one suffered because of his deceit. Nay, every one was the better for it. The servants were happier, the tenants were more contented, while the estate itself would be enriched because of what he had done. Why, then, could he not do what he had intended to do? why could he not marry the woman he loved and be happy? There was no danger. Bob Dulverton would never come back and claim his own. He had himself seen him placed in a lonely grave. No man doubted him, and Miriam loved him, trusted him.

There lay the sting of everything: Miriam trusted him, believed him incapable of telling a lie, while all the time he was an incarnate lie! And he loved her!

Had he been without conscience, had he lost his manhood, he could have gone forward without hesitation. But he was not without conscience, his manhood was not dead. The nobler part of his nature had been lying in the grave of unworthy desire, and then, because he loved, and was loved by a pure, truthful woman, the true man had risen from

the grave and asserted his rights. What Miriam had failed to do by her dislike and her doubt she had accomplished by her love and her trust.

But what could he do ?

Again he was led up into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil, and it seemed to him that the temptation was ten times stronger now than it was when he had first yielded. Then the thread could be easily snapped—it was no thicker than gossamer—but now, it held him with terrible power. Desire, self-interest, reason, the happiness of his dependents, all told him that it would be madness to do what conscience was urging. Nay, was it conscience ? Was it not rather a foolish sentiment, a sudden madness ? He had told himself many times that he had freed himself from conventional religious beliefs, that he no longer believed in the fairy tales of his childhood. Why, then, should he trouble about these fantastic ideas of honour ?

Suppose—of course he should not do it, but suppose—he told the truth ; what then ? Miriam's life would be blighted, her heart broken ; it might kill her. As for her father—no, it could not be right to blacken the closing years of the man who had given him his love.

But would not Miriam at some time discover the truth ? Could a great lie like his remain for ever undetected ? Of course all seemed safe, but God had strange ways of unearthing the truth. Well, suppose he married Miriam, and the truth became known ? then he would make her suffer a thousand times more than if he told her the truth now.

Oh, why had everything been so easy ? Why had nature made him so much like Bob Dulverton ? Why had chance led him to take a career of fraud ? Nay,

rather, why had he not been man enough at the very outset to say, "Get thee behind me, Satan?"

Yes, of course he could find excuses for himself. He had been cursed with a great curse; for no fault of his own he had been driven from all that he had loved, and his life had been blighted. He had cursed his father many times for this. His inheritance was the harvest of one of the most despicable lives ever lived. What he had done was done that he might be freed from the curse which he did not deserve. God would do nothing for him, therefore he had taken his destiny into his own hands.

Well, and what had he done? Again the miserable sophistries with which he had tried to hide the real issues were swept away. What was he better than his father? Perhaps his sins were not so coarse, so vulgar, but was he, at heart, any better? The devil tempted his father, and he fell. He had paid the penalty too. He had died, cursed by thousands and mourned by none. Then came his own turn. He had determined to make the name of Endellion honoured, and because he had failed to do so in a few years he had yielded to the first plausible temptation. And was he better than his father, whom he had scorned and cursed? His father was a forger and a swindler. What was his own career? He, Ralph Endellion, was a forger and a swindler. Almost every day he was forging Bob Dulverton's name. Every day he was swindling the public. His whole life was a gigantic fraud. He was a living lie. He was not the man he pretended to be. He had no right to the house he was living in. He was stealing the very food he ate. He was a usurper, and a living lie. He scorned Arthur Dulverton, he had sneered at him as a little, mean puppy of the fetch-and-carry order, and yet he was

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living in his house, eating his food, occupying his place. He was righteously indignant because of his father's deeds! What was he better than his father?

And worse than all, he had won the love of a pure woman; he contemplated taking her as his wife, he who, if the truth were known, would be arrested as a forger, a usurper. Why, he had been ready to curse her with a great curse, for if the truth became known, she, as his wife, would be dragged into the mire of his disgrace.

Yes, he had won her love, her trust. Her kisses were still warm upon his lips, her words of endearment, of trust, still rung in his ears. What was his love worth if he would lay her open to such a ghastly future?

Oh, it was all true, terribly true; but what should he do? He had gone too far to turn back. If he told the truth a part of his shame would be hers. She would be the subject for the slander of a thousand gossiping tongues. Her name would be associated with his. Newspapers would have articles about him. "Like father, like son," they would say; "the father was a fraud who deserved his doom, and the son is no better"; and Miriam's name would be associated with it all. Perhaps he would be haled before the judges and imprisoned, while Miriam would have to hide her head in shame.

But, on the other hand, could he do her the more cruel injustice of marrying her, knowing what he knew? And then all the old questions had to be gone over again.

For hours he fought his battle, for hours struggled with the devil, who held him firmly in his grip. When he was in Australia he knew nothing, thought little of consequences. Now he knew. The love and trust

of a pure woman had opened his eyes; it revealed to him the fact that he was a man, that God had breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and he had become a living soul.

The night passed and the morning came, but he never sought his couch. Presently the song of the birds told him that a new day had dawned, and he went out into the grounds. Oh, how fair everything was! He had learnt to love the old place; every tree, every field, every farm was as dear to him as if the Dulverton blood really ran in his veins. But more, it was the home to which he had promised to bring Miriam. He saw her there as its happy mistress, as his loving wife. Could he give it all up?

What should he do? Again the same question. Oh, how he loved the girl to whom he had just become betrothed! But did he? Did he love her as a man ought to love the woman whom he sought to make his wife? If so, he would think of her, and not of himself.

Well, what would Miriam have him do? Yes, that brought the matter to a direct, vital issue; it was the key that would open the door of the future.

He stood bareheaded while the morning sun lit up the whole scene; and as its bright rays fell upon him, he knew that God had spoken.

CHAPTER XXVI

ENDELIION'S STORY

Yes, the way was plain now. If he loved Miriam truly, he could no longer hide the truth from her. He must tell her, he must tell her that very day. It was his duty. At first he had thought of leaving without saying a word to any one, save a message to Lawyer Dolgeth saying he was going away never to return; but that would be a coward's act. His love for Miriam told him that it was her right to know the truth. His love for her was ghastly mockery while he withheld from her the story of his life. He had sinned not only against heaven, but against the woman he loved, and he must do all in his power to atone. At least he owed her this, and he must pay the debt. It would be like walking through the fires of hell, but he must not shrink. At least his love was real enough for that.

Strange as it may seem, a kind of peace came into his soul as the result of his decision. Perhaps it was because all his powers were exhausted, and he was practically incapable of feeling; perhaps the consciousness that he was trying to do what was right brought its own reward. Be that as it may, his sufferings were not quite so great, and he found his way to his bedroom, and in a few minutes fell asleep.

When he woke it was to feel a great weight on him. The sunshine flooded the room, but to him the day was dark. Mechanically he looked at his watch. It had stopped; he had forgotten to wind it when he went to bed. He lay for a few seconds in a dazed condition, then the stable clock began to strike. He counted the strokes, and he found it was eleven o'clock. What did it mean? Why was he remaining in bed so long after his usual time? He tried to think, but could not. His mind refused to act. Then suddenly everything came to him in a flash.

The old question came rushing into his mind, and he was fighting his battle over again. The decision to which he had come the night before seemed pure madness now. Why should he give up what was dearer than life? Why should he commit suicide in such a way? for it would be suicide. He would be destroying everything worth living for.

He jumped out of bed and plunged into his bath. The sting of the cold water made him better. Health came surging back to him; not only health of body, but health of mind. No, he had decided rightly. He dared not keep silence and marry Miriam Donni-thorne. Knowing what he knew, the very joy of possessing her as his wife would be hell to him. Her truthfulness, her love, her trust would be a constant reproach to him, her very caresses would drive him mad. How could he take a girl who was incarnate truth to be his wife, while he was a living lie?

"Mr. Binns is waiting to see you, Mr. Robert," said Peters, as he came into the breakfast room.

"Mr. Binns?" he said questioningly.

"Yes, sir; he said you had promised to meet him this morning at ten."

"Oh yes, I forgot. We are to go to Blakedown

this morning. All right, Peters, I'll be ready in ten minutes."

"Miriam has gone to Exeter to-day," he reflected. "I told her I should not be able to come until this evening, so she said she would go to Exeter. Well, better so."

Throughout the day the steward never suspected anything. Never had Endellion's business qualities shown to better advantage; never had he seemed more anxious about the welfare of the estate.

"Mr. Robert," said the steward, as they returned to Dulverton, "not even your uncle is a keener business man than you."

"No?" queried Endellion.

"No, sir. In two years the estate will be worth twenty per cent. more because of what you've done."

"You see that, do you? You think that if—if—well, if I were to die to-day, nothing would be the worse for my home-coming?"

"Don't talk about dying," said the steward. "It's true you look a bit pale, but there's not a healthier man in England than you. But as for the estate being worse—why, as I said, in two years' time it'll be worth several hundreds a year more. People are talking a great deal about your going into Parliament, Mr. Robert, and I hear you are to be invited to stand for East Morton. Is there any truth in it?"

"Yes. I've been invited to stand."

"Ah," said Binns, "you'll go in with a run. Of course you've accepted?"

"No."

"But you will?"

"No—that is—no."

"But why not, sir? Your father would have

rejoiced in it—and—and—— Well, you could do such a lot of good."

"No, Binns, I am afraid it's impossible. I'm not the man for the British House of Commons."

"Excuse me, sir, but you are. And I'm not the only one who says so. As for Squire Donnithorne, I hear he's very keen on it."

The man's words were like probing a wound. They brought back everything. He would have to give up this too. He would have to sacrifice not only home and love, but a position in the country. Surely there must be some way out of it. Perhaps when Miriam realised the whole truth, she would——

But he dared not let his thoughts go further, because he knew that he had been harbouring an impossible dream.

He ate his dinner in silence and loneliness. He knew that Miriam was expecting him to dine at Donnithorne Hall, but he dared not go. His food would choke him. At eight o'clock he mounted the grey mare, and rode towards Donnithorne Hall.

"It's my last visit," he said to himself, "and to-night will be the last time I shall sleep at Dulverton."

It was still broad daylight, and as he rode along the country lanes the peasants touched their hats respectfully. He had been in the neighbourhood only a few months, but he knew he had won the affection of the people. Every salute he received revealed the fact. And he was going away, going away for ever.

For he had no doubt about what Miriam Donnithorne would do. When she had heard his story she would drive him from the door. As for the squire, he had only loved him because he believed him to be Bob Dulverton. Yes, there stood Donnithorne Hall, and within its walls was the only woman he had ever loved.

And she loved him. He had won her love, but in order to do it he had been a living lie.

A groom took his horse as he came up to the house, and the old man-servant who opened the hall door welcomed him with a smile.

"The squire's gone over to Little Petherick Vicarage, sir—he's spending the evening with Mr. Borlase; but Miss Miriam's in. You'll find her in the library, sir."

Without a word he walked to the room the old servant had mentioned. He knew why she was there. It was the room he liked best. It was called the library, but in reality it was a lounge, and furnished according to masculine taste. It overlooked the park too, and from its windows the waters of the lake shone in the light of the lowering sun.

He had made up his mind how to meet her. As soon as she saw him, he told himself, she would come towards him with lovelit eyes; but he would suffer no caresses; he would tell her that he had come to bid her good-bye for ever.

With fast beating heart he opened the door, and then all his resolutions went to the winds. No sooner did Miriam see him than she rushed towards him, and they were locked in each other's arms. He was in heaven again. It seemed to him that nothing mattered now. What mattered truth or honour when he held the one woman in the world to his heart? What mattered that he was there under a false name, a false personality, and that the veriest scullions in the parish would despise him if they knew the truth, while he possessed the trust and love of Miriam Donnithorne? He rained kisses upon her, he murmured a thousand loving words in her ears, he held her close to his heart. No, he could not, would not give her up. What had he to do with conventional morality, what cared he for

the world's morals? Love was all, and love sought to give happiness, and he would give her happiness; he would hold her as his own though the thunders of the Judgment Day shook the earth to its foundations.

"You are crying, my love; why is it?"

"It's for joy, Bob. I was afraid you weren't coming. But I don't mind anything now."

She stood with her head resting on his shoulder, sobbing for very joy. She had expected him to dinner, and had delayed it half an hour, in spite of the cook's protests, and at last, when she had consented for it to be brought in, had not eaten a morsel. She had listened eagerly to every sound, wondering and fearing; but now that he had come she was in heaven. Surely God never created anything more beautiful than the love of a pure, innocent girl.

For a second more he strained her to him, while in his heart was a defiance of the world.

"You will never let anything come between us, will you, Bob?"

"No, by the great God who made us, nothing."

All his resolutions had gone to the wind. Miriam was his, and nothing under heaven should rob him of her.

The girl gave a glad laugh. "I can't think why I've been so foolish," she said. "Why should I fear anything after what you told me last night?"

He did not answer her. Words seemed to be frozen upon his lips. Intuitively she felt that something was wrong, and she looked up into his face.

"What is the matter, Bob?" she cried, frightened at the look in his eyes.

Still he did not speak. He knew the time had come for him to do what he had resolved to do, but his heart seemed like water. He could not tell her

that which would mean the death-warrant to everything he held dear.

"Bob, Bob, tell me! what is it?"

A cold hand seemed to be laid on his heart, a hand that froze and crushed all hope and life out of him.

"Nothing," he said, and his voice was toneless.

"But there is; tell me, dear. Look at me and tell me."

Their eyes met as he spoke, and then he knew he must tell her. He could not be a great living lie while he stood in the light of her truthful gaze.

"Kiss me again, Bob, and tell me there is nothing wrong."

He unclasped her arms, and put her away from him.

"No; I will not kiss you. I must never kiss you again."

"What do you mean? Oh, my love, you are ill!"

"Sit down," he said, and his voice was hard, and to Miriam cruel, "and I will tell you that which will send me to hell."

The girl's eyes became terror-stricken, and like one in a dream she allowed him to lead her to a chair. But he remained standing.

"My God! I don't know how to tell you," he cried.

"What is it, Bob? Oh, do not torture me!"

"I must torture you," he said; "it is a part, the worst part, of my punishment. I would not care but for that. And you can never forgive me—never!"

"But, Bob——"

"You must not call me by that name. I have no right to it. No, do not speak. Try to keep silent if you can, while I try and tell you the whole ghastly truth."

He was silent for a few seconds, while she looked at him with wide, staring eyes.

"It was your truthfulness and trust that did it," he went on; "while you doubted me, disliked me, I did not care—I had a sort of joy in deceiving you—but when you told me you trusted me because you believed me incapable of a lie, when I had won your love—then—then—— No, I must tell you."

He spoke like a man in a dream, and his eyes were hard and set, as though he were gazing on some distant object.

"You said you could forgive anything but deceit, lies," he went on, "and I have been the incarnation of lies, I have been deceit itself. And I must be cruel—yes, I must—and yet I would give my life to save you from pain, for—— Oh, Miriam Donnithorne, whatever else is lies, my love for you is not a lie. I would give every drop of my blood for you. I would gladly lay down my life to give you joy. That is why I must be cruel. It is because of my love for you. Never doubt that."

"Then nothing matters, Bob," cried the girl. "I don't mind anything while you love me."

"But you do not know, and you must know. It is your right, only I don't know how to tell you. But let me try. No, don't speak, don't come near to me. If you do I shall hold you in my arms again, and then I could tell you nothing, and you must know everything. I should be a greater scoundrel even than I have been if I kept the truth from you. Listen, then."

He stood a few feet from her while he tried to collect his thoughts.

"I expect you are too young to remember that—yes, between eight and nine years ago—the newspapers were full of the doings of the vilest criminal in England. He became a millionaire through the basest fraud;

he lived the vilest life under the cloak of religion. His name was Endellion; do you remember it? Yes, I see you do. Even you, who were but a young girl, remember him. You could scarcely help it. The whole country was talking about the cheat, the swindler, the hypocrite, the forger, the libertine, the murderer who escaped the gallows. Endellion—Ralph Endellion—I see by your eyes that you remember all about him."

"But you have nothing to do with him," she said piteously.

"Listen. This Endellion had a son. He won some distinction at a big public school, and also when he went on to Cambridge. Let this be said for him, too: at that time he was a clean-living fellow. He knew nothing of the sins of his father. But presently, when the truth came to light, he left his college; as a matter of fact, he was practically driven from it. After his father's death—as you remember, he escaped the gallows by committing suicide—he found himself homeless, friendless, penniless. Let this be said to the son's credit, he would not have a penny of what he might have saved out of the wreck of his father's great swindling transactions. He said he would wipe away the dishonour from his name. It is a good name, one of the oldest in the West of England, and he determined to win honour and fame so that he could lift up his head amongst his own countrymen. But he found it impossible. He was shunned like a leper, no one would associate with the son of Ralph Endellion, and at length he was on the point of starvation. Eventually he left the country. Do you follow me?"

"Yes," cried the girl; "but what has this to do with you and me, Bob?"

"You will see directly. This fellow Endellion eventually found his way to Australia, and earned a living as the paid help of an Australian farmer. You see this farmer lived so far out of the world that he knew nothing of the vile things associated with the name. Well, he stayed there some years; he worked hard and faithfully, and saved something over three hundred pounds. Then he left the farmer because, in a blind sort of way, he determined to get back to civilisation. While he was on his way to Melbourne he stopped, on a night of terrible storm, at a small inn. This inn was miles from town or village. It was simply a rough sort of place situated at a cross-roads. This inn had only one other guest, a fellow about Endellion's age, and when the latter entered both the landlord and his wife were startled at the remarkable resemblance in their appearance. There was, however, this difference between them: Endellion was as strong as a horse, and as healthy as a man could be, while the other was a physical wreck. To all appearance he was near death."

Endellion paused a moment. He seemed to be living over again that night at the cross-roads inn; a vivid picture of everything flashed before his mind's eye.

"Thus two men who did not remember ever having seen each other before drifted together. They did not for some time tell each other their names, although it soon leaked out that they had both belonged to that part of the English community known as gentlemen. Confidences, however, are quickly given in that part of the world. There is something in the primitive, unsophisticated life of the bush that destroys reserve. They sent the inn-keeper and his wife to bed, and then the sick man told Endellion his story."

Again Endellion stopped and looked at Miriam. He saw that she was still looking at him with wide open eyes, and seemed to be trying to connect the story with the man who told it.

"The sick man told Endellion that his name was Bob Dulverton, that he had come from Devonshire, that he had lived a wild, disreputable life, so wild and bad that his father, well-nigh broken-hearted, had driven him from home. But news had reached him some little time before that his father was dead, and he was on his way back to inherit the family estates. Then Endellion told his story, the story I have told you, only in greater detail. Dulverton also told Endellion that if he did not return his father's estate would revert to his uncle and cousin, Arthur Dulverton, both of whom he hated."

"But I do not understand," said Miriam piteously ;
"do you mean to say——?"

"Bear with me a few minutes more, and everything shall be made quite plain," said Endellion. He was speaking in a measured and detached sort of way now, as though he had nothing whatever to do with it. "After they had talked some hours Dulverton, who, as I have said, was the mere wreck of a man, was taken very ill. He had come to the inn through drenching rain, and—well, his constitution had been ruined by—by his past. Endellion got him to bed, and did his best to nurse him back to health again. He rode a long distance for a doctor ; he did all in his power for him. Let that be laid to his credit, anyhow. Indeed, the sick man grew very fond of him, and in his sane moments, and when he was strong enough, told him of his hopes and fears, and of many of the associations of his early life. He told him of a playmate whom he loved very much, the daughter

of a neighbouring squire, whom as a boy he had planned to marry. He also urged that he loathed the idea of the estates going to his uncle and cousin.

"It was not long before Endellion saw that Dulverton could not live. The doctor had told him that the end must soon come, and Endellion knew that he was not mistaken. His life was fast ebbing away, and he found it more and more difficult to utter a few broken sentences."

Again Endellion paused, and walking to the window, looked out upon the park where the trees and the grass were clothed in the light of the sun, which was sinking in a red sky.

"I want you to pay great attention to what follows," he said. "It tells of the only bit of justification which Endellion had for the ghastly fraud he afterwards perpetrated."

As for Miriam, she never took her eyes from the man who had been speaking. She still seemed to be trying to connect him with the narrative which was becoming so painfully, so terribly real to her.

CHAPTER XXVII

OUT INTO THE WILDERNESS

"I THINK I told you," said Endellion, "that Bob Dulverton came to like the man he had met at the lonely inn. You see, Endellion was his only friend, and he did all in his power for him. Not long before he died Dulverton told the other how he hated the thought of his cousin inheriting the estates, and how he wished that he, Endellion, could possess his old home. Probably his mind was unhinged at the time, for, disregarding all the other said, Dulverton showed how this could be made possible. He also made a sort of will, giving everything he possessed to Endellion. I have it here; perhaps you would like to look at it."

He took a piece of paper from his pocket-book, and handed it to Miriam.

"I don't understand, Bob," she said. "Of course you don't mean that you are not Bob?"

"Read," said Endellion.

The girl took the paper almost mechanically. There were only a few words. It simply said that he gave all he possessed to Ralph Endellion. His name was signed at the foot of the paper, Robert Granville Dulverton, and witnessed by the innkeeper and his wife.

"You understand, don't you?" said Endellion

to Miriam. "I am anxious that you should, for it is the only excuse there is for this fraud. Dulverton pleaded with his friend to go back to his old home and take possession, and he signed this paper, in which, as you see, he gave him everything."

Endellion paused a minute. He did not know how to proceed with his story. He wanted to be absolutely truthful, and yet he did not want Miriam to think worse of him than was necessary.

"A little later Dulverton died," he went on presently. "He died with a prayer on his lips ; he died with nothing but love in his heart towards the man who had tried to be kind to him. Then Endellion had to decide about the future. He saw that as Ralph Endellion not a single hope of his life could be realised, but if he went to England as Bob Dulverton a bright future seemed to be assured. He did not give in without a struggle, but the devil was too strong for him. He did not believe that this slip of paper would be of much value in a court of law, but he was convinced that his wonderful likeness to the dead man, and the information that he had gathered about him, would enable him to personate his friend.

"So he came back to England. He told himself that he had not decided what course to adopt, but all the time the matter was settled in his own heart. As you know, he met with practically no opposition. On every hand he was welcomed. Only one person seriously mistrusted him, and that was you, Mirjam. You looked upon him as a man who wore a mask, as a play actor, and Endellion was sharp enough to see that his real danger lay with you. If you suspected him he would never be safe, and before long his mask would be torn off. He did his best to disarm your suspicion, but in vain. Even while you had no idea

of the truth, you could not look upon him as your old playmate." :

He paused again, while the girl, with blanched face and fearful eyes, sat staring at him.

"Then he sank to the depth of his infamy. In order to ward off the danger which lay in this direction, he determined to win your love."

Miriam started as if she had been stung by a scorpion.

"Do you mean to say——?" she cried; but Endellion did not allow her to complete the sentence.

"Stop!" he cried. "Doubtless the thing was ghastly, but judge fairly. One night, as you remember, he was base enough and bold enough to try to woo you; but no sooner did he try to do so than the secret of his heart was revealed to him. What he told you was true. The words he spoke only suggested the intensity with which he loved you. But even yet no moral qualms disturbed him. He felt that you distrusted him, and while he was conscious of this antagonism, he was determined to fight and conquer. The Endellions are an old fighting race, and perhaps he inherited something of the spirit of his forbears. Forgive this long story, Miriam. Forgive the way I am telling it, but I am trying to speak in a detached sort of way, so that you can see everything as it really is.

"I won't keep you much longer now. He won your love and your trust. You told him that you loved him, that you trusted him absolutely, and it was then that he saw what he had done. While you doubted and disliked him he fought to hide the truth from you; but when you trusted him and loved him he could no longer be a liar. Of the battle he fought I need say nothing; but oh, Miriam! you can see,

can't you? The moment you told me that you believed in me entirely I could no longer be the incarnate lie I was. I don't ask you to forgive me—forgiveness is impossible—but I felt that the least I could do was to tell you—everything.”

Miriam Donnithorne sat in her chair as immovable as a statue. Even yet she did not realise the meaning of what she had heard.

“Then—then you are not—not Bob Dulverton?” she stammered presently.

“No.”

“Bob is dead?”

“Yes. He died out in the bush. I saw him buried.”

“And you are——”

“Ralph Endellion, the son of the vilest scoundrel that ever lived.”

“And—and you say you—you love me!”

“Yes, and it's true. Whatever else may be lies, that is true.”

“But—but you are a——”

Again he interrupted her; he could not bear to hear her speak the words which he was sure hung upon her lips.

“Yes, I am an impostor, a liar, a forger. I am usurping another's place; I have been living in another man's house, but—but—— Oh, for God's sake, don't look at me like that!”

The cry was called forth by the look of terror in the girl's eyes.

“But why—why——? Oh, don't come near me—let me think!” she gasped.

“I have told you because I could not help it,” he cried, trying to interpret her thoughts. “I could not go away without letting you know. Your truth-

fulness and trustfulness have made it impossible for me to remain the incarnate fraud I have been. Oh, I know the pain I have caused you—know it by the hell I am suffering; but I could not go away without telling you everything.”

“Go away?”

“Yes—you—you know I cannot stay here any longer.”

“No, no, you could not stay. But let me think—if I can. You—you are the son of—that man. You are not Bob. You have stolen what should be Arthur’s, you have been living in his house, you are false through and through.”

“Yes—yes, it is all true, but I am going away. No one shall ever be troubled with me again. I can see you wish me to go; and, of course, I don’t ask you to forgive me. It is not to be expected, and I don’t deserve that you should. Good-bye.”

She looked at him for a moment with terror-stricken eyes, and seemed to be trying to speak; then Miriam Donnithorne did what she had never been known to do before. Her eyes closed, and she lay back in her chair in a dead faint.

Endellion feared he had killed her, and he felt as though he were going mad. He was perfectly helpless, and ignorant of what ought to be done.

“She is dead, and I have killed her,” he cried. “Oh God, surely I don’t deserve to suffer this too!”

He saw a bell-pull by the mantelpiece, and rung it furiously.

“Your mistress is ill,” he said to the servant who presently answered the summons; “can I go for a doctor?”

At that moment Miriam opened her eyes. Life

and consciousness were coming back. A little later she sat up in her chair, while the servant held some strong spirits to her nostrils.

Presently she turned to Endellion, and as she did so she remembered all he had told her. The young man saw the look of horror in her eyes, saw the loathing with which she regarded him.

"Mary, take me to my room," she said. "I am not well;" but no further word did she speak to Endellion.

Her maid led her out of the room, while Endellion stumbled out of the house, and went towards the stables.

Thus they parted. Thus the very love which he had felt he would give his life to win intensified his agony.

A few minutes later he was riding madly towards Dulverton. His brain was paralysed by the scene through which he had passed; for a time he was almost incapable of thought or feeling—only a kind of blind instinct turned his face towards the home which had become so dear to him.

"Are there any orders, sir?" asked old Peters, when he had entered the house.

"Orders? No, no orders."

The old servant looked at him with loving, anxious eyes.

"Anything wrong, Mr. Bob?"

"Wrong? Yes, everything—that is—no, nothing is wrong."

"You're ill, sir, I'm sure you are ill."

"No, I'm not ill. I'm tired, that's all, and—and, Peters, is everything right in the house?"

"Yes, Mr. Bob," and the old man looked at him wonderingly.

"That's well. Have I been a good master to you, Peters?"

"Yes, sir. Why, you know you have!"

"And no one is the worse for my coming?"

"Worse, sir! Why, there's not a man in the parish or on the whole estate but thanks God that you came back."

"That's right, Peters. Good night."

"Good night, sir. You are sure there is nothing I can do for you?"

"Nothing. I've a lot to do, Peters, and—and I'm very tired."

The old man turned away with a sigh. He had loved his young master when he was a boy, and now he devoted his affection to the man who had taken his place.

"What is the matter, I wonder?" he asked himself, with a sigh. "Perhaps he's only quarrelled with Miss Miriam, or the squire, but I must say that I never saw him look like that before. I pray God that nothing serious has happened."

As for Endellion, he sat for hours in a dazed condition. For a long time he could understand nothing, except that a dire calamity had befallen him. Presently, however, his mind began to assert itself, and everything became real to him.

"I must save her from all the pain I can," he said piteously. "My own suffering is nothing—nothing; at least, it does not matter. But I must save her; yes, I must save her."

He was able to review the situation now, and to reflect with comparative calm upon all that had taken place. After all, nothing had taken place, everything remained unaltered; and yet everything was changed—changed because a man's manhood had risen

from the dead. A woman's trust and a woman's love had aroused his dormant conscience, and made it impossible for him to remain a living lie. There had been no need for him to tell his secret, it might have been locked for ever in his own heart. There was no fear of detection. Old Squire Dulverton would never have risen from his grave, and declared him to be an impostor. Young Bob Dulverton lay under the sod beneath Australian skies. No one had known the truth, no one guessed. Every one had been deceived—willingly deceived—and he could have remained until the day of his death respected and beloved. He could have been buried in the vault of the Dulvertons, while his eldest son, if one had been born to him, could have taken his place.

But a true woman's trust, a true woman's love, had changed everything. Knowing that she trusted him and loved him, he could not keep back the truth. She had aroused his conscience, she had made him feel the difference between right and wrong, and although a thousand specious reasons might justify his silence, he knew he must speak the truth.

And now the end had come. He had come from the wilderness, and he must go back into the wilderness again. He could not be a living lie while a true woman loved him.

He went to his desk and began to write. He thought, first of all, of writing several letters, but he concluded that only one was needed. He had no right to write to Mr. Dolgeth, the lawyer, or to Mr. Binns, the steward, but he must write to Lawyer Dulverton, the real owner of the Dulverton estates. At first he did not know what to say. His heart felt very bitter against the rightful owner of the estates of which he had been the possessor. Like Bob Dulverton, he felt

angry that everything should go to a man who was beloved by none, and who would oppress the people he had learnt to love. Again he felt the force of the plea that mastered him months before. Why could not one, to do a great right, do a little wrong? But again his manhood tore away the flimsy sophistries that hid the truth. Besides, he had taken the final step; he had told Miriam everything.

DEAR SIR (he wrote),—When I returned to England a few months ago, you, believing that the true heir was dead, were on the point of entering into the possession of the Dulverton estate. As I am now leaving Dulverton for ever, there is nothing to hinder you from carrying out your former intention. As far as I know everything is in order, while both Mr. Dolgeth and Mr. Binns assure me that the property is much increased in value since I came. This letter is written by the man who has been known among you as your Nephew,
ROBERT GRANVILLE DULVERTON.

He was not satisfied with this epistle, but after reading it again and again he put it into an envelope and addressed it. He also wrote instructions that it was to be delivered at once.

Then he took a time-table, and carefully studied the trains. Yes, there was a London express which stopped at a small junction six miles away. If he could catch it he should arrive at Bristol about seven o'clock on the following morning.

He looked around the room, and then examined the drawers where important documents lay. No, there was no need for him to remain longer. There was nothing for him but to rid the house and neighbourhood of his presence.

He had been very careful about his expenditure since he had come to England, and he still possessed a few pounds. These he took with him; but he took practically no luggage.

When presently all was ready, and he came to the door where Peters had welcomed him a few months before, he paused. He felt as though he were about to commit suicide. He was leaving everything he held most dear, and he was going into a great darkness.

"It is best for her, and it is the least I can do for her," he said, and then he opened the door.

There was a golden glow in the eastern sky, and the birds were beginning to call one to another, but he heeded nothing. With a stern look in his eyes he walked down the drive towards the road which would lead him to the little railway junction.

Presently he reached a hill-top where he could see not only Dulverton, but Donnithorne Hall. The sun had now risen, and lit up the whole countryside. How beautiful everything was! The one house was the home he had learnt to love, the other contained the only woman he had loved, or ever would love. For a few minutes he allowed his eyes to rest on them. Of what was Miriam thinking now? Had she told her father what he had told her? Doubtless she thought of him with loathing and scorn. Well, he deserved it. He had done her one of the greatest wrongs a man can do a woman. He had won her love by lies, by fraud, and because of it he had blighted her life. The world and life could never be the same to her again. For ever and ever the dark shadow of his memory must rest upon her. The thought wrung his heart with unutterable pain, but he was doing the only thing possible. Perhaps—perhaps in time she would forget him, and thus what he had done might cease to harm

her. Perhaps she might love and wed some other man. Perhaps she might turn her thoughts again to Arthur Dulverton.

He turned and walked rapidly away. The day was transcendent in its glory. The waving cornfields glistened in the morning sunlight, the dewdrops hung from every blade of grass, and shone like diamonds. It was a day to rejoice in, it was a day to thank God for. Higher and higher rose the great king of the day. Birds and beasts and flowers were awaking on every hand. It was a day of light, but there was no light for him; he was walking into thick darkness, where God did not seem to be.

Thus Ralph Endellion went into the wilderness.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AFTERWARDS

"Is Miss Donnithorne gone to bed?"

"She's gone to her room, sir. She's not very well, sir."

"And Mr. Dulverton, where is he?"

"He left about an hour ago, sir."

Squire Donnithorne, who had just returned from his visit to Mr. Borlase, felt uneasy. He could not tell why, but he felt that the atmosphere of the house oppressed him.

"Go to Miss Donnithorne's room, and see how she is. There's nothing serious the matter, of course?"

"I don't know, sir. She fainted, and then Mr. Dulverton rang for help. After that she went to her room."

"Fainted! Why—why, I don't understand! And Mr. Dulverton, didn't he—that is, didn't he wait?"

"No, sir, he went away immediately afterwards."

"That's strange. Well, go to her room, and see how she is. If she's awake let her know I've returned."

"Yes, sir."

"What's the meaning of this?" said the squire, when the servant had gone—"Mirry fainting. I never knew her faint in my life. And Bob gone."

What can be the matter?" And he walked to and fro in the room, with an anxious look in his eyes.

The servant returned. "Please, sir, Miss Donnithorne says she'll come down to you."

"She hadn't gone to bed then?"

"No, sir."

The squire was more and more puzzled. It was not like Mirry to faint, and it was more strange that Bob Pulverton should leave her, knowing she was ill.

When Miriam entered the room her ghastly appearance startled him. Her face was as pale as the face of a corpse, while in her eyes was a look such as he had never seen before.

"Mirry, my darling, what is the matter?"

The girl staggered towards him, still looking at him with the same ghastly look of terror in her eyes.

"You are ill, Mirry. Tell me, what is it?"

"Hold me in your arms, dad, and let me rest. I'm very, very tired."

Scarcely knowing what he was doing, the squire led her to a chair, then he drew her on his to knee, and laid her head on his broad chest.

"I'll tell you everything directly, dad," she said, "only let me rest here a few minutes. My head aches so."

The squire held her to his heart as he had often held her when she was a baby. He could not understand what this meant, but his "little maid," as he used to call her, needed his comfort. That was all he knew at present, but he was too wise a man to ask foolish questions.

"Where's Bob?" he asked at length.

"He's gone," and she shuddered.

Again the squire was silent for a time, but he held her closer to his heart. He would give his life to shield his "little maid" from harm.

"He's not coming again," she said, after a time.

"Not coming again?"

"No—he—that is, he's not Bob at all. He told me his name—his real name. I have forgotten it, I think, but it is something horrible. Of course, you have heard of his father."

Her voice did not sound like Miriam's voice at all, and she spoke in an expressionless sort of way. All her faculties seemed to be numbed.

"Not Bob? Mirry, my dear, you are not well. I'll send for a doctor."

"No, I do not need a doctor. At first I felt as though I had received a blow, and as if some one had laid a cold hand on my heart. It was awful pain then, but I feel nothing now, except a headache. That'll be better soon, won't it, dad? Put your hand on my forehead, will you?"

"I don't understand," said the squire, completely bewildered by what he had heard.

"I'll tell you everything soon," said Miriam. "Your hand is cool, and I'm beginning to remember things. Yes, he's not Bob. Bob is dead. Oh, I forgot, here is the paper he gave me; read it, will you?"

The squire took the "will" of Bob Dulverton, and read it in a dazed sort of way.

I give everything I have here in Australia, and all I possess in Dulverton, Devon, England, or elsewhere, to my good friend, Ralph Endellion. I'm dying, but my mind is sound.

ROBERT GRANVILLE DULVERTON.

Witnessed by

AARON BEEL,
MARY BEEL.

“Ralph Endellion!” said the squire, more and more bewildered. “What does this mean?”

“Yes, he came back and took Bob’s place. Don’t you see?”

“No, I don’t see. Miriam, something has upset you. Your mind will be clear in the morning.”

“No, my mind is perfectly clear now. What he told me is all coming back. You see, he was exactly like Bob—that is, the real Bob who was very ill out in Australia.”

Little by little Miriam told the story. Often it was disjointed and confused, but by a series of questions the squire at length learned all that Miriam was able to tell him. At first he was unable to grasp it, but little by little it became real to him. He was able to piece everything together, and to imagine what was not told in actual words.

“Not Bob at all,” he muttered, “and yet I liked him—and—and God help me, but I like him still. The fellow has played the part of a villain, but—I say, Miriam, where is he now?”

“He’s gone away. He said he would leave Dulverton for ever.”

“Then he’s given up everything?”

“Yes, he’s gone away. That is, he’s going away. At least, he said so. I must think about it; yes, I must think about it. But he’s gone away, and oh, dad, I shall never see him again!”

Then, for the first time since Endellion had told his story, she was able to find relief in tears. The squire held her close to his heart while she sobbed out her agony.

“There, there, my darling. I—I know it’s terrible, but you’ve your old dad still. Everything will come right. I’ll make everything right.”

"But you can't, dad, you can't; he's gone away, and—and I love him still."

"What! now that you know what a villain he is?"

"Is he a villain?" she cried piteously. "Somehow I can't feel that he is, and even if he is—I suppose it is wrong—but—but I love him just the same."

"So do I," muttered the squire. "God help me! I suppose I ought to hate him, but I feel as though he were my own son."

When, hours later, they retired to their rooms, it was not to sleep. The blow that had fallen upon their lives was too sudden, too calamitous. All their fond dreams were destroyed in a moment, all their plans for the future proved to be only a castle of cards.

"I'll go and see the young beggar the first thing in the morning," said the squire to himself. "I'll have everything out with him. Perhaps, perhaps—but no, I see no hope."

The night passed away, and the morning came, and still he pondered over the terrible problem. He cursed the man who had blighted his child's happiness, and yet he found excuses for him.

"Endellion! yes, of course I remember all about the business. Who doesn't? People pitied the son too, and said what hard lines it was for him. Of course he was not responsible for his father's doings—he was innocent. And yet he was kicked out from everything—and—and cursed with a name like that. What should I have done if such a thing had happened to me?"

"And, no, the fellow is not such a villain after all. Of course he did wrong, but he came up like a man, and confessed everything when there was no need that he should. No one suspected anything. Why—why—"

But oh, my dear little maid, it is hard for her! But there must be some way out of it; yes, and there shall be too."

Directly after breakfast the squire ordered his horse and rode to Dulverton. When Peters opened the door, he saw by the look on the old man's face that something had happened.

"Is your master down yet?" he asked.

"Master's gone, sir."

"Gone! Gone where?"

"I don't know, sir. I thought he looked poorly last night after he came back from Donnithorne Hall, sir, but he said he was all right, except that he was tired. But when I knocked at his bedroom door this morning, to tell him his bath was ready, I got no answer. Then, the door being opened, I looked in. But the bed hadn't been slept in, sir; it did not look as though he'd been in the room at all, sir. He's not to be seen anywhere. I was hoping you would know yourself, sir, and I've sent over to inquire."

"Oh, he's only gone for an early morning stroll, I expect."

"I don't know, sir. I found a letter addressed to his uncle, Lawyer Dulverton."

"To—to his uncle, eh? Where is it?"

"I've sent it to him, sir. There were instructions on the envelope that I must send it at once."

The squire was nonplussed. All his plans had come to naught. Evidently he had done what he had told Miriam he should. He had left Dulverton for ever, and he had written to Lawyer Dulverton, who was the lawful heir to everything. He would have liked to have seen the letter.

"How long since you sent the letter to Lawyer Dulverton?"

"Half an hour, I should think, sir. You don't know where he's gone, or when he's likely to return, sir, do you? Excuse me for asking, but he looked very funny last night."

"No, I know nothing; but no doubt he'll turn up all right," replied the squire, little believing in his words.

"I hope so; I pray God he may, sir."

"He's been a good master to you, has he?"

"Good master, sir! Why, every servant on the place fairly worships him. The place has been like heaven ever since he came back. But—but I'm sure he had something on his mind last night, sir."

"You say it's half an hour since you sent the letter to Lawyer Dulverton?"

"Yes, sir, quite that. It may be a little more."

The squire mounted his horse again. He did not want to see Lawyer Dulverton; he wanted time to reflect on the new turn matters had taken.

"Yes, of course the rascal has been a villain," he said to himself as he rode back; "but he's not altogether bad. It must have cost him something to give up Dulverton—and Miriam; for he does love Miriam, I'm sure he does—yes, I'm sure he does. Besides, I can't hate him, fight against the feeling as I may. I love him as if—if, well, he'd been really Bob Dulverton. Oh, if I could only see some way out of it—so as to bring a ray of comfort to Miriam. Oh, my dear little girl!"

When he arrived at Donnithorne Hall, Miriam met him with a pale face and a look of hunger in her eyes. She did not speak, but the squire knew what she was longing to hear.

"He's gone," he said.

"Gone! Do the servants know?"

"They know nothing, except that he's gone. That is, they know that his bed has not been slept in, and they can't find him anywhere."

"And that is all?"

"Except that he left a letter for Dulverton."

"What, Arthur?"

"No, for his father."

Miriam was silent for a few seconds.

"I knew he would," she said quietly.

"You think he's gone, really, then?"

"I'm sure of it—sure of it. He said he would do everything in his power to atone."

"The fellow was not bad," muttered the squire.

"No," replied Miriam, "he was not bad."

"But you, Miriam—what about you?"

"I don't know. I wish—oh, dad, I wish I knew where he had gone!"

"But why? Oh, it's a terrible business, but he's better gone."

Miriam was silent.

"Do you know, you've never uttered one word of condemnation," said the squire.

"Why should I?" she asked.

"Why should you?" cried the squire; "why, the fellow's deceived us all. He's a liar, a fraud, a forger, a usurper."

"Yes, he called himself all those things."

"He did, did he?" He looked at her closely.

"I believe you care for him still," he cried. "Think how he's treated you; think how you're suffering."

"I'm thinking what he's suffering," she replied.

"Doesn't he deserve it?" he replied, still trying to work himself into a rage. "As for you, you are innocent of everything, and yet he's blighted your life—that is, if you care for him still."

"Oh, I shall never see him again, dad," she said, "never, never. And he's suffering more than I. He's grieving because of me, and—and he's given up everything, everything."

"But the fellow's done you wrong; he's deceived you, he's deceived every one."

"And he's suffering for it—he's paying the penalty."

"Look here," said the squire at length, "let us be silent about this business, Mirry. We've told no one about this engagement, except Borlase. We agreed we wouldn't, you know. You thought it might wound Arthur's feelings too deeply, and Borlase agreed not to say anything until we gave him permission. The servants may have suspected, but they know nothing. And I'm sure he's told nothing."

"No, he's told nothing."

"So that——"

"Yes, dad, I understand. Of course, we have nothing to say."

"No, nothing," muttered the squire, "nothing. Oh, my darling, thank God you've your old father left."

Two hours later Lawyer Dulverton called, and it was evident that he was greatly excited.

"Donnithorne," he cried, in anything but professional tones, "can you explain this business?"

"What business?"

"Hasn't he told you? Don't you know?"

"What's the matter, Dulverton?" asked the squire. "How can I tell whether I can explain what is in your mind until I know what it is?"

"But hasn't he told you?"

"Hasn't who told me?"

"Why—why, Bob! You must know what I mean. Didn't you see him yesterday?"

"No. I spent last evening with Borlase. He came over here, but I understand he left early. What is it?"

"He's cleared out of the neighbourhood. Why, you know. Peters told me you called at Dulverton."

"Yes, I wanted to see Bob, but Peters told me he didn't know where he was. I concluded that he'd gone for an early ride, or something of the sort, so I came home. What's the matter?"

The squire inwardly prayed for forgiveness for the lie he was trying to act.

"I tell you the fellow's cleared out. He's left this for me. Read it," and Lawyer Dulverton handed him Endelion's letter.

"I say, Dulverton," cried the squire, "this is terrible." He still tried to keep up the farce he was playing.

"There's some trick in all this," cried the lawyer. "As you know, I never believed in him from the beginning, neither did Arthur. I always saw that he was trying to hide something. I tell you he left because he was afraid. The police are after him or something of that sort. Besides, what does the letter mean?"

"It might mean anything," said the squire.

"Then you know nothing?"

"I tell you I didn't see him yesterday, and before then he's never spoken a word to me about—anything like this."

"Do you think he really doesn't mean to come back?"

"It doesn't seem so."

"Then it is for me to take possession," and there was a greedy gleam in the lawyer's eyes.

Squire Donnithorne, who had been holding Endel-

lion's letter between his finger and thumb, read it again, as though he were not quite sure of its contents. It was very non-committal, and with the exception of the closing words, gave no hint of the truth.

"I should say so," he replied presently.

"I must speak to Arthur," said the lawyer. "His head is clearer than mine, and—and—yes, he may be playing me a trick even now."

The squire was silent, although his eyes flashed strangely.

"It might seem as though Arthur will be squire after all," said the lawyer, after a pause. "If—if—I say, Donnithorne, Arthur told me that he had spoken to Miriam, and——"

"Please don't," interrupted the squire. "I can't bear to hear about it now. You see," he went on, "I was terribly fond of Bob, and—and this news has upset me more than I can say. I couldn't have liked him more if he had been my own son, so this news of yours is terrible. I am fairly bowled over, indeed I am."

Lawyer Dulverton left Donnithorne Hall soon after, much to the squire's relief.

"I'm a hypocrite of the first order," he cried, when he found himself alone. "Fancy my accusing him of being a fraud, when I've been acting a lie all the time! Of course I was doing it for Mirry's sake, but—but no man knows what he'll do till he's tempted. As for Dulverton, he doesn't know what to think even yet. He believes that Endellion is Bob, and that—— But the truth must soon come out. Oh, my poor little Mirry!"

As for Lawyer Dulverton, he rode hard till he came to his office, where he found Arthur hard at work.

"Cease working. I've something of importance to tell you," he cried.

"What is it?" asked Arthur.

"This came after you left home this morning," said the lawyer, handing his son Endellion's letter.

Arthur read it eagerly, then read it slowly a second time, as if committing every word to memory.

"Have you been over to the house?" he asked. His face had become bloodless, his lips quivered.

"Yes, he's gone. His bed was not slept in last night. There's no sign of him anywhere. Donni-thorne knows nothing either. What do you make out of it?"

"Be quiet a minute, will you? I want to think. Tell me all you know, tell me everything, what Peters said — that is, everything you can think of."

Lawyer Dulverton gave a detailed account of his visit, not only to Dulverton Manor, but to Donni-thorne Hall, while Arthur Dulverton sat holding Endellion's letter in his hand, yet never missing a word his father uttered.

"I was right!" he cried.

"What do you mean?"

"It was not Bob at all. Bob is dead. This was some fellow masquerading as Bob. That was why Mirry never liked him, in spite of his cleverness. He played his part well, but something has made him afraid, and so he's bolted. My word, did you examine the books? Do you know what money he's taken?"

"No, I was too bewildered."

Arthur Dulverton locked his desk.

"We must go over at once," he cried, "and we must telephone to Dolgeth and to Binns to meet us there."

"Yes, you are right, Arthur, quite right. But you are sure he's not playing another trick?"

"Quite sure," replied Arthur. "We shall never see him again."

A few minutes later the lawyer and his son were driving rapidly towards Dulverton Manor.

CHAPTER XXIX

HOW THE DEBT WAS PAID

FOR the next few days the whole neighbourhood was rife with gossip. There was not a house for miles around in which the affairs of the Dulverton family were not discussed. The imposture was so bold and daring that many would not believe it to be an imposture. Old Peters boldly maintained that it had been young Mr. Bob, and no one else, who for months had been his master, while Mrs. Dixon supported him. Explain his behaviour they could not, but they were none the less certain that it was he.

Mr. Borlase, on the other hand, declared that he had been suspicious all the time, and had no doubt that they had all been deceived. Now that Lawyer Dulverton had made known the contents of Endellion's letter, there were hundreds of things in his behaviour which clearly proved that it could not have been Bob Dulverton. But who was he? Where did he come from, and how could two men be so much alike? Some held to one opinion, and some to another; but no one seemed to guess the truth.

One fact, however, was clear; the young man had left the neighbourhood, leaving no traces behind. Suddenly he had come into the life of the district, and as suddenly he had left it. But no one spoke of him

unkindly or harshly. Indeed, more than one criticised Lawyer Dulverton and his son for accusing the other of fraud, and for taking possession so eagerly. Especially was this the case when it became known that not a penny was missing. Whatever else the stranger had been guilty of, he had not been guilty of extravagance, or of appropriating any of the income of the estate to his own uses. Added to this, both Mr. Dolgeth and Mr. Binns declared that because of certain schemes which the young man had launched the value of the property would be largely augmented. Such of the books as he had insisted on keeping were in perfect order, while the balance at the bank clearly proved that whatever else might have been his motive the idea of swindling had not existed. Every farthing was accounted for, and none of the money which had passed through his hands had been used for himself.

As may be imagined, this fact deepened the mystery which surrounded Endellion's life. Neither Lawyer Dulverton nor his son could understand a man who could perpetrate a gigantic fraud, and yet not seek to benefit himself. He had it in his power to enrich himself by thousands of pounds, and yet not a penny piece had he taken. Even the clothes he had bought had been paid for out of his own private purse.

"That's the one thing I can't understand, and if the truth must be told, it is the only thing that makes me uneasy."

It was Lawyer Dulverton who said this, when, after dinner, he was sitting with his son Arthur in Squire Donnithorne's library.

"How does it make you uneasy?" asked the squire.

"It makes me wonder whether it wasn't Bob after all. He'd do anything to play me a trick."

"You think, then," and there was a grim smile on the squire's lips, "that Bob came back in the ordinary way, and then gave up home, and—and—everything, in order to further some plan of his own?"

"I know it seems silly, but what other explanation can there be? I put it to you, Donnithorne: is it likely that any man could be rogue enough to take on a false name, and pretend to be the owner of an estate like Dulverton, and then go away in such a fashion?"

"Perhaps," said the squire slowly, "he wasn't a rogue at heart. Perhaps—who knows—but he may have had a conscience, and his conscience would not allow him to remain a living lie?"

"Then you do not believe it was Bob?"

"No," replied the squire slowly.

"And yet no one welcomed him as eagerly as you did, squire; it was you who arranged for a public reception, and it was you who treated him as if he were your own son. As you know, Mirry never trusted him; in fact, she told him more than once that he was wearing a mask, and that he seemed to her a kind of play actor."

It was Arthur who spoke, and he watched the squire's face closely.

"Did Mirry say that?" asked the squire.

"Repeatedly," replied Arthur, "and she told me again and again that she did not like him."

"There's no accounting for women," replied the squire.

"Anyhow, he's gone," said Arthur, "and I don't believe we shall ever hear of him again. We must be thankful that things are—as they are. As you know, I never liked him, never believed in him; but I will admit he was a clever fellow. He deceived every one, and liar and swindler though he was, nearly everybody seemed to like him."

"I do not believe he was either a liar or a swindler." There was an angry note in the squire's voice. "He's cheated no one."

"At any rate, he's been living in our house for months," replied Arthur; "he's been riding our horses, ordering our servants, eating our food, and trading on our name. If that isn't being a swindler I don't know what is. Ah, here comes Mirry. What do you say, Mirry? Your father will not have it that the fellow who has so deceived us is a liar or a swindler. What is your opinion?"

Miriam, who had just entered the room, looked from one to the other without speaking. She seemed to find a difficulty in controlling herself, for she clenched and unclenched her hands nervously.

"I think it is useless for us to discuss people whose motives are so—so far removed from our own," she replied presently.

"Still, I wish the fellow had—had been more of a thief," said the lawyer. "He would never dare to come back then."

"Ah, you fear he will come back?" asked the squire.

"I don't know what I fear," replied the other. "It's true I've taken possession of Dulverton, but I never feel safe."

"I suppose you've got rid of Peters and Mrs. Dixon?" said the squire.

"Yes, and every one thinks he has the right to criticise my action. Besides, they've painted the fellow as an angel of light."

"Have you tried to find him?" asked the squire, and Miriam looked eagerly at the lawyer for his reply.

"No. I—I didn't think it was any use."

"What! have you made no inquiries at all? I

thought Arthur threatened to have him exposed and prosecuted."

"I gave up the idea," replied Arthur. "You see—well, I didn't wish to have our affairs discussed more than they were; besides, father doubted whether we could prosecute him, even if we found him. You see—the whole situation was peculiar. We could claim nothing from him except—payment for the food he had eaten, and that sort of thing."

"Besides," said the squire, "he might have defended himself, and, who knows? he might have turned out to be Bob after all."

"But you said just now that you did not believe it was Bob," and there was a suggestion of uneasiness in Arthur's voice.

"Who can be certain? The man who could do what he has done is capable of anything."

"Yes, it's better to let sleeping dogs lie, and yet—well, it's no use denying it, I don't feel comfortable," said Lawyer Dulverton.

As the weeks lengthened into months, and nothing was heard from the late occupant of Dulverton Manor House, however, he began to feel more easy in his mind. Whoever he was, the lawyer felt sure he would never come back again.

Endellion had left an impression on the district. Many still believed he was Bob Dulverton, and those who did not thought of him kindly. He had been kind and courteous to every one, and had endeared himself to the people by many gracious acts.

Nearly a year after Endellion left the district Arthur Dulverton again asked Miriam Donnithorne to be his wife, but with no better success.

"At least you can tell me why, Mirry," said Arthur.

"Because I do not love you," she replied.

"Mirry," said Arthur, "I cannot help believing that—that you cared for that swindling fellow. I know you were the only one who really saw what a scoundrel he was, but I believe you loved him, and that but for him you would marry me."

The girl became pale to the lips.

"How dare you!" she cried angrily; and before Arthur had time to recover from his astonishment she had left him.

And yet she knew he had spoken the truth. She who loved truth and honour above all things had given her heart to a man whose life had been a living lie. Ever since he had left her she had fought against her love. The words he had spoken of himself when he had made his confession to her seemed burned into her memory, and she knew they were true. He was the son of a vile man. He had been a thief, a forger, the personification of deceit, and yet she could not drive him out of her heart. Unknown to her father, she had set inquiries on foot concerning him, but could learn nothing. She had gone to London and engaged one of the cleverest private detectives that the metropolis could produce, but without result. No trace of him could be found. Whether he was in England or not the detective could not tell; whether he were alive or dead it was impossible to know.

"You see, miss," said the detective, "you don't give me a fair chance. You know things about him which I don't, and you keep them back from me."

"You know what all the people in the neighbourhood know," replied Miriam.

"Yes, that's true enough; but that's nothing. Some of them think he's young Squire Dulverton, while some have it that he's a swindler. All I know is that he was reported to have come home from Australia,

that he took possession of Dulverton Manor, that he passed off for the squire's son, and then left, leaving no trace behind."

"But it was for you to find the trace."

"Under the circumstances that was impossible. I tell you I've made every inquiry in my power; in fact, I've given months to the business, but I'm as much in the dark as ever. You see he had a week's start of me, and in that week a clever fellow like he evidently was could make it impossible for any man to find him."

Thus it came about that two years after Endellion had left Miriam was utterly in ignorance of his whereabouts. Often she feared he was dead, and yet she could not make herself believe it. She felt he was in the world somewhere, even although they would never meet again.

"It's strange, after all," said the squire one evening, after they had for a long time been sitting silently in the library of Donnithorne Hall.

"What is strange?" asked Miriam. She knew what was in his mind, although she tried to appear in ignorance.

"About that fellow," he replied. "I—I thought he would have written or something of that sort. I wonder if he's still alive?"

"What makes you ask such a question?" she asked eagerly; and her face was very pale.

"It's now nearly three years since he left," replied the squire, "and there's not been a whisper of news about him. If he'd been alive I should surely have heard."

"Why should you have heard?"

"Oh, I—well, I made inquiries."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't mean to tell you, Mirry; but I—well, I went to London, and set a detective fellow to work. I was careful not to—to let him know anything about you; but I told him all I dared, and—and—well, he couldn't find out anything."

"Why did you wish to know where he was?"

"Because I thought you wanted to know," replied the squire; "and because I thought he might need help."

"And would you have helped him?"

"Oh, yes. I know what you are thinking," he said impatiently. "I know I ought to be thankful he'd left us. Doubtless it is best as it is. And yet—well, I liked the fellow, Mirry. If he'd been my own son I couldn't have been fonder of him. Of course he was a rascal, and all that, but he did the best thing he could after—after he really saw what he'd done. He was tempted, and he fell; but he acted as a man should afterwards. And so, when I'd got over the affair a little, and was able to think quietly, I wanted to hear about him. I didn't know why, but I did; that was why I set a detective to work. But it's no use; he's gone, and I suppose we ought to be thankful."

Miriam made no reply, but sat looking over the park.

"You haven't forgotten him, Mirry?"

"No."

"It's best you should. Drive him out of your mind and heart, my darling. It's no use brooding, and of course—if we found him—everything would be impossible."

"Yes."

"You see, he could never dare to come back here. He'd be driven out of the neighbourhood."

"I wasn't thinking of that."

"No! What?"

"It was I who drove him away. He has never allowed us to hear where he is because he thought——"

"Thought what?" asked the squire, as she paused.

"That I could never forgive him," she said. "After he had told me—everything, I let him go without a word. I was so bewildered that I did not know what I was doing. I know I looked at him with a kind of horror—and I shall never forgive myself. He was like one death-stricken. It's all over, dad; we shall never see him again."

The squire sat for a long time without speaking.

"I know I ought to be glad, Mirry," he said, with a sigh, "but I'm not. Even now I can't help liking the fellow, and—I—I don't believe he was a scoundrel."

Miriam went to her father's side and kissed him.

Just then the postman appeared bringing the evening letters, and a few minutes later Miriam saw that her father had received some important news.

"Mirry," cried the squire, "come here. What does this mean?"

The girl hastened to his side. She could not tell why, but she felt sure that the letter had connection with the subject they had been discussing.

"Read it, Mirry, read it!" he cried excitedly. "It is from some lawyer in London, and—and—— But see what it says! He must be alive after all!"

"DEAR SIR,—We are instructed to inform you that we have forwarded to Arthur Dulverton, Esq., Dulverton Manor, Little Petherick, Devonshire, the sum of £500 (five hundred pounds) in payment for the use of his house, etc., from April 2nd to July 17th, 19—. Our client, who placed this money in our hands, says that no further explanation is necessary; but he was

particularly anxious that you should be informed without delay.—We are, sir, yours faithfully,

GILCHRIST AND McILBRADY."

"What does it mean?" gasped the squire.

Miriam's eyes were luminous.

"It means that he is in England, in London!" she cried. "It means that he has wiped out every possibility of the Dulvertons—speaking of him as they have spoken. It means— Oh, thank God, thank God!" and she flung her arms around her father's neck.

"He must be doing well, too!" cried the squire; "and Mirry, he must have been a trump in spite of everything."

"And he has not forgotten us!" she cried.

"Of course he hasn't; he wanted us to know that he had played the game, that although he'd fouled the pitch once he was doing everything in his power to do the right thing."

"Can't we go to London to-night, dad?" cried the girl.

"Go to London! To-night?" gasped the squire.

"Yes, yes; don't you see? He's in London. I want him to know that—that— Oh, can't you see, dad?"

The squire became thoughtful.

"No, I don't, Mirry," he said. "It's true he's acted squarely, but—but the past can't be blotted out. He could never come here again."

"But I can go to him!" cried the girl, her eyes shining.

"But you never would!" said the squire, aghast at her words. "Don't you see, my darling, he's made everything impossible?"

"No," cried the girl. "He did wrong, but he's

paid the debt; he's done everything in his power to atone. I drove him away. I knew his heart was breaking, but I acted the part of a coward, a hypocrite. I knew he was an honourable man, but I did nothing to help him, to comfort him. And I am ashamed. He may—want me still, and if he does—— Oh, don't you see, dad?"

"It may be a hoax," said the squire; "perhaps, after all, Dulverton hasn't got the money."

"Father, how dare you?" cried the girl.

"I'll go and see. I'll ride over to Dulverton this very night," stammered the old man.

"But tell them nothing," said the girl; "do not let them know anything about this."

The squire looked at her steadily, as if trying to understand what was in her mind. Presently, however, he ordered his horse, and rode towards Dulverton, while Miriam went upstairs, and after taking a long look in the glass, began to pack her boxes as if for a journey.

It was late when the squire returned, but he found Miriam waiting for him.

"They've received the money," he said, in answer to the girl's questioning look.

"Did they tell you?"

"No; but they've received it."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, by careful questions. Evidently they were anxious that I should know nothing about it; but I'm sure they've received it."

"You didn't let them guess that you knew anything about it?"

"Oh no, I was very careful."

"But they told you nothing?"

"No; they seemed more anxious than ever that

—that I should think he was a rogue and a black-guard.”

“You can have no doubt now which is the honourable man,” cried the girl; and her eyes were not only lustrous with joy, but there was a laugh in her voice.

The next day Squire Donnithorne and Miriam caught an express train to London.

CHAPTER XXX

THE WILDERNESS

“The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them.”
—*The Book of Isaiah.*

“I AM sorry, sir, but I cannot tell you. I do not know where he is.”

“But you say that he called here?”

“No, I did not say that.”

“But he must have called—or written. How else could you have got the money?”

“The matter was arranged through a friend. He told me he was acting for the person who gave him the money. I am nearly as much in the dark as you are. We, as a firm, simply acted as an intermediary.”

“I don't understand. I should like an explanation. You see it's important.”

Squire Donnithorne and Miriam were seated in a solicitor's office in Lincoln's Inn Fields, while Mr. Gilchrist, the senior partner of the firm, tilted himself in the office chair, evidently amused at the squire's vehemence. They had called the previous evening, but found the office closed; and when Mr. Gilchrist came, at ten o'clock in the morning, he found them waiting.

“I'll tell you all I know about the matter,” said the

lawyer presently, "which you will see is very little. Some days ago a man called here, and requested us to act for him in a matter which interested him. He gave his name as George Roberts, and said he had been asked by a friend to place £500 in our hands, which was to be forwarded to Mr. Dulverton, of Dulverton Manor, Devonshire. He refused to give any address, or to tell where he had come from. He appeared to be a superior working man, or he might have been a farmer, or something of that sort. Of course the matter seemed somewhat out of the ordinary, and I questioned him closely, but I could get very little out of him. This, however, he did tell me. A friend of his owed £500 to Mr. Dulverton for rent, and this friend had asked him, as he was coming to England, to place the sum in the hands of a respectable firm of solicitors, requesting them to see that the money was sent, and to obtain the receipt. After some consideration we consented, and—well, that is all."

"And the man paid you the £500?"

"Yes, and, curiously enough, he paid it in gold. The money being all right, we sent Mr. Dulverton a cheque for the amount."

"But surely that is not all?"

"Very nearly, but not quite. As the man gave us no address we kept Mr. Dulverton's receipt until he called again. This he did early on the morning of the day before yesterday. When I gave him the receipt he told me he had forgotten an important part of his friend's request, which was that you should be informed of what had been done. I asked him if some explanation to you was not needed, and he replied that he knew nothing about the business, but that his friend had told him you would understand. He was very emphatic in his request that you should be informed,

however, and said that although he did not expect to see his friend for some months he knew that the first question that would be asked of him when they met was whether he had carried out this part of the instructions."

"And Mr. Dulverton sent you the receipt?" It was Miriam who spoke.

"I think I mentioned that he had, Miss Donni-thorne," replied the lawyer.

"And did Mr. Dulverton send you any explanation with it?" she asked.

The lawyer hesitated, then looked into the girl's face.

"I do not know whether I am justified in answering that question," he replied; "but he did not. He sent a formal receipt for the money, and nothing else."

"And this man Roberts, what was he like?" and she spoke eagerly.

"A man about fifty, I should say—a short, thick-set man, with a grey, bushy beard, and a mop of iron-grey hair. As I told you, he might be a superior working man, or perhaps a farmer. I could not say definitely."

"Was he an Englishman?"

"He spoke English perfectly, although with an accent. I should say he was an Englishman who lived in one of our colonies. He might have come from Canada, or from the United States, or from Australia, or Africa. I could not be certain."

"There was nothing in his conversation to tell from what part of the world he had come?"

"Nothing."

"And you do not know where he is now?"

"I've not the slightest idea."

"I'd give you £500 if you could find out the address

of the man who—who sent his friend with the money,” broke in the squire.

The lawyer shook his head.

“Impossible, Mr. Donnithorne. I haven’t the slightest clue. The man paid me a liberal fee for my services, but he would tell me nothing. As I told you, I’ve not the remotest idea where he came from. You might as well search for the proverbial needle in a haystack. There is absolutely nothing by which to trace him, and I couldn’t tell where to begin my search.”

The squire sighed. “I suppose you are right,” he admitted sadly.

“We are helpless in the matter, Mirry,” remarked the old man to his daughter, when they had once more returned to Devonshire. “Evidently he doesn’t wish to let us know where he is, although he wanted us to know he was honest, and that he was doing well.”

“He’s alive, and he’s still thinking of us,” she replied, and in her eyes was a look which the squire could not understand.

After that the years passed by, and nothing more was heard of Ralph Endellion. Newspapers were sent to Donnithorne Hall from various parts of the world, but his name was never mentioned in any of them. Except for the incident which I have just narrated, Ralph Endellion’s whereabouts were hidden in thick darkness. He had left Dulverton in the silent hours, and except for what the stranger had said the shadow of night rested upon him.

Miriam Donnithorne passed from girlhood into womanhood, but although many sought her hand in marriage, she plighted her troth to no man. Many wondered that she should remain single, and some believed that she loved the man who had come to

Dulverton Manor as the squire, and then departed so mysteriously. But beyond Mr. Borlase, no one knew the truth, while even he was ignorant of those things which many longed to know. But no one thought of her with pity. She had been the good angel of the district, and the light of her father's life as a girl; and now that she was no longer a girl she still brought sunshine into the homes of the poor and the sad, and her presence was like a benediction wherever she went.

Five years after Endellion left the district Lawyer Dulverton died, and Arthur became squire. By this time Endellion had become only a memory, although Arthur Dulverton often had a fear in his heart lest his cousin should come back and claim his rights.

At the end of six years Arthur brought a wife to Dulverton from Somersetshire. But the event brought no great joy to the people in the district.

"Ef 'twas ounly Maaster Bob and Miss Donnithorne 'twould 'ave been summin' like," said many of the people.

"Wonder ef 'twas Maaster Bob after all?" said others. "Ef 'twas 'ee, why ded a go away, and why doan't a come back? 'Ee was somethin' like a squire, he was."

But "Maaster Bob" did not come back. The real Bob lay in a lonely grave in Australia, and the man who had personated him had gone away into the darkness.

"What do you think of this girl whom Arthur has married?" asked the squire.

"Oh, I think she'll suit him perfectly," replied Miriam.

"I thought he'd never marry any one but you, Mirry. He has told me a dozen times that he could never think of another woman."

"I'm glad he has," she replied.

The squire sighed.

"I'm good for a few years yet," he said presently, "but I wonder sometimes what will become of you when I'm gone. Do you ever intend to marry, Mirry?"

But Miriam did not reply. There was a far-away look in her eyes as her father spoke, which the old man could not understand.

"You've not forgotten him, Mirry?"

She shook her head.

"Do you think he—he'll ever come back?"

"I am afraid I dare not. But if he does——"

She did not conclude the sentence, but her father knew, in spite of all that had taken place, that Endellion was the only man in the world for her.

The Australian Parliament was holding its last sitting before the recess. But, as was unusual under such circumstances, every member was in his place. The excitement was intense, for the fate of the Government hung in the balance. The Premier had brought forward a measure which not only received the condemnation of the opposition, but alienated most of his supporters. It was felt almost everywhere that the head of the Australian Government had not only wrecked his party, but had committed political suicide. Speaker after speaker rose and condemned him, and the man who a few months before had been the idol of his party was met with almost universal malediction.

Then suddenly a new atmosphere was felt. A member had risen who, in the past, had not been looked upon as a party man, but on this occasion he supported the Government, and as if by magic he entirely changed the tide of feeling and opinion.

The place of this member was not among the front benches of the Parliament House; nevertheless, no man for the whole session had made such a marked impression. For nearly an hour he held the attention of the House, and more than once he had aroused the assembly to a great pitch of enthusiasm. He was still a young man, not yet forty, although there were deep lines on his cleanly-shaven face, and his hair was almost white. He was the owner of a large tract of land far away from Melbourne, and was spoken of as a prosperous settler, but neither his presence nor his speech suggested an Australian farmer. As many remarked, he looked like an English aristocrat, and his mode of speech suggested not only careful thought but wide culture.

He had been a member of the Australian Parliament only a year, but during that time he had impressed his fellow members by his ability, and now at the final sittings of the assembly he had established a reputation not only as an orator, but as a statesman.

When he sat down he had accomplished a rare feat; by sheer force of reasoning he had changed the opinion of many. Those who at the beginning of the day determined to vote against the Premier now voted for him. He had made a speech which altered the history of a nation.

That he was gratified no one could doubt. But he showed none of the jubilation that might have been expected. In his eyes was a look of sadness, and he seemed to care little for the congratulations he received. But he had done what he had determined to do. The cause for which he had pleaded had become triumphant. A new and necessary law would be placed on the statute book.

"I congratulate you, Endellion," said the Premier,

when the House had broken up. "Your speech was the best I have listened to for years. It will be heard of in the old country. There is no doubt about that."

"That is a matter of small importance," replied the other, "but the thing we set out to do is done; that is what gratifies me."

"Yes, and you've saved the Government, and you've saved me, my friend. No other man could have done it. We were standing on the brink of a precipice. Many were prepared to go over on the other side, and—— Well, I shall sleep soundly to-night."

"I'm glad of that," replied Endellion quietly.

"Will you come up to my house? I want a chat with you," said the Premier.

"I meant to have caught the half-past eight train. I want to get back home. Still, if I can be of any service——"

"You can, my friend, of very great service. Do you mind waiting for five minutes? I'll be ready for you then."

Many eyes watched the two talking together.

"It's a great day for Endellion," remarked one man.

"Yes, and a great day for the country, too," said another. "We shall see him in office before long. Well, he deserves it. There isn't an abler man in Australia."

"Striking-looking fellow, isn't he?"

"Yes; you know his history, of course?"

"No, nothing in particular. He's reputed to be a very wealthy man."

"His father was a gigantic swindler and a terrible blackguard. He only saved himself from hanging by committing suicide. Surely you remember the affair. It is nearly twenty years ago now; but surely you've not forgotten the Endellion trial?"

"You don't mean to say that he's the son of that fellow?"

"He is though!"

"Well, that doesn't matter now. He's wiped out all the disgrace associated with his father's name. In this country, thank God, we don't blackball a man because his father was a scoundrel. Why, there's nothing to keep him from being Premier."

"Absolutely nothing, except——"

"Except what?"

"He isn't a fellow to make friends. He's a lonely man; he has no chums, and—— Well, he isn't very approachable."

"But think of his ability, man! See how he carried everything before him! Besides, although he doesn't make friends, he's not 'sidey.' Perhaps he remembers his father's history, and feels sensitive."

"Well, he shall have my support, anyhow. Is he married?"

"No. I suppose he lives alone in a big house up country."

Two days later Ralph Endellion was on his way to his home in the heart of Australia. He alighted at a little station some few miles from the Cross Roads Inn, where he found a horse waiting for him. He gave some order to a man who evidently acted for him as a kind of bailiff, and then rode away. After riding a few miles he stopped at a small inn.

"Aaron, Aaron Beel!" he called.

"Yes. Oh, it's you, squire! What is it?"

"Feed my horse and rub him down, will you?"

"Yes, squire. Staying the night?"

"No, I shall get home at once."

The man took the horse, while Endellion went away

alone. Presently he came to a lonely grave, and he read the lines on the gravestone.

Sacred to the Memory

OF

ROBERT GRANVILLE DULVERTON

WHO DIED FEBRUARY 10, 18——.

AGED 28 YEARS.

He died with his face towards the light.

Endellion sighed as he read. It seemed to him as though the ten years which had passed away since he laid his friend there had been bridged over.

"God deals with us in strange ways," he reflected.

A few minutes later he returned to the house.

"Been looking at his grave?" asked Aaron.

Endellion nodded.

"Things have changed since then," remarked Aaron.

"A chap who was here to-day was tellin' me 'bout your speech. He said you'd be Prime Minister before long, if the King didn't send for 'ee to come to England. I 'ear that they be wantin' a man of your stamp in the old country."

"They don't want me in the old country, Aaron."

"Well, and we don't want to lose 'ee. There's only one thing you do want, squire."

"What's that?"

"A wife."

He started as though some one had given him a knife thrust.

"Come, bring out my horse," was all he said.

After long hours of riding he reached a well-built,

homely-looking house. It had the appearance of an old English manor house, although it was not old. Great trees grew around it, while a river coiled along the valley beneath. The gardens, too, were far more reminiscent of England than of the interior of Australia. In the near distance was a comfortable-looking village.

A man took his horse, and he walked slowly to the front door of the house. A wide panorama stretched before him. Mile upon mile of country met his gaze. There were many hundreds of acres of cornfields, and vast stretches of cattle land.

"A few years ago much of this was wilderness," he reflected, "and now it's as fair as an English county."

The sun was near the horizon. In another half an hour it would be dark. He had ridden a good many miles since he had left the little wayside station, but he did not go into the house.

"Ten years, and never a word," he reflected. "Ten years I have been in the wilderness; ten years I have lived on the memory of two happy days. Of course she was right to drive me away. What could she have done else? But, my God, it was a fight!"

"Please, sir——"

"I'll come in a few minutes, Mrs. Bray, but don't disturb me now."

He spoke almost impatiently to the woman who, seeing him, had come to him with a message; evidently he wanted to be alone.

He went some little distance from the house, and went on with his reflections.

"All I can see is mine," he said to himself. "I am a rich man. Since my return everything I have touched has prospered—everything. And now the Premier wishes me to take office. I am flattered on every hand. But it's all Dead Sea fruit. If—if——"

But it's no use. When I had made my confession she looked at me with horror, loathing. Well, it was no wonder, I—I——"

He shook himself as if to drive unpleasant thoughts from him.

"Still, I did the right thing," he went on. "I acted the only part which a man whose conscience was not quite dead could act. Besides, everything I have I owe to her. She has always been an inspiration to me. The memory of her has always kept me from acting a dishonourable part. She has been God's ministering spirit to me. Where is she now, I wonder? Married, I expect. Oh, my God, but it's hard! If—if——"

He felt as though he were not alone. Some presence seemed to be near him which he could not explain.

"Why am I always thinking of her?" he went on. "Why can't I drive her from my mind? It is ten years since I left her and came into the wilderness. She must be the wife of another man by now, and I have no right to——"

He started violently. He saw the form of a woman coming towards him. Nearer and nearer she came, and his heart stood still as he watched her. She came close to where he stood.

"Great God, don't mock me!" he cried, as he looked at her.

Their eyes met: hers, filled with wonder and hope and love and awe; his, wide open with amazement, and longing too great for expression.

"Miriam!" he cried.

She did not speak, but he saw that she was trembling, as if shaken by some great emotion.

"Miriam!" he repeated.

And still she did not speak. Words seemed to be

struggling for utterance, words that would not come. But she did not take her eyes from him, and as he looked at them his heart began to burn.

He opened his arms and took a step towards her, and a minute later her head lay upon his breast.

"I will put thy sins behind my back."

He did not know why he thought of these words then, he did not know that they were spoken by an old Hebrew prophet, far away in the morning of time; but they came to him like some wonderful balm.

"You have forgiven me, Mirry?"

"I have nothing to forgive. I—I have only love."

She had spoken at last, and her words were as sweet to his ears as the songs of the angels on the plains of Bethlehem.

"My God, I thank Thee," he said.

For some time neither spoke again. Words were needless. They knew the truth, just as a child knows the love of a fond mother without knowing the language she speaks.

"How did you find out where I was?"

It was not what he meant to ask at all. Sometimes under the greatest emotions people ask questions which seem of no importance.

"I have been seeking for you ever since you left. A few weeks ago we saw in an Australian newspaper that Mr. Ralph Endellion was a member of the Australian Parliament, so we came, and when we saw the account of your speech we learnt where you lived."

"We?"

"Yes, my father came with me."

Night had fallen, and still they remained alone. They were as the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden, and the world was young.

"Let us go in," he said presently, and when they entered the house Squire Donnithorne met them.

The two men stood grasping each other's hands, and each tried in vain to speak.

"My word, my dear lad, you look better than I thought you would! And I'm glad to see you." And that was all. There was no suggestion of anger—no word of reproach.

"And I will put thy sins behind my back."

Again those words came to Endellion, and they were indeed the words of God.

"I tried to do right. I tried to atone!" was all he said.

They talked far into the night. A thousand things were said which I will not record here, for they were not spoken for the ears of the world. But the dark places shone with light, the rough places were made plain, and the sorrow which had endured for the night had ended with the joy of the morning.

"But what about you, squire?" said Endellion at length. "Even if Miriam will make this a home, it is not home to you."

"Ah, but you must come back to Devonshire sometimes," said the squire.

"I dare not. For your sake, I dare not."

"No one would connect Ralph Endellion, the Australian statesman, with Bob Dulverton," said the squire.

"You've changed so that no one would recognise you."

"If I only could!" he said, after a long silence.

When at length he returned to his room Endellion fell upon his knees, and poured out his heart in passionate thanksgiving.

"God has put my sin behind His back," he said, as he rose from his knees.

He went to the window, and saw the morning breaking. He remembered the time when he left Dulverton, and went away into the wilderness. Then he thought of the words of the old Hebrew prophet :

“The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose.”

THE END

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