

# SOPHIA.\*

BY STANLEY J. WEYMAN.

XX (Continued).

UNFORTUNATELY, a young woman had appeared a little before this, in a town not far off, in the guise of a countess with all the apparatus of the rank; she had taken in no less worshipful a body than the mayor and corporation of the place, who had been left in the issue to bewail their credulity. The old clergyman knew it, it was rife along the countryside, and being by nature a simple soul—as his wife had often told him—he had the cunning of simplicity. He bade himself be cautious, and happily bethought him of a test. “Your carriage should be still there,” he said, “where you left it.”

“I have not dared to return and see,” she answered. “We might do so now, if you will be kind enough to accompany me.”

“To be sure, to be sure. Let us go, child.”

But when they had crossed the ridge—keeping as far as they could from the door of the plague stricken house—he was no whit surprised to find no carriage, no servants, no maid. From the brow of the hill above the ford, they could follow with their eyes the valley and road by which she had come, but nowhere on the road, or beside it, was any sign of life. Sophia had been so much shaken by the events of the night that she had almost forgotten the possibility of rescue at the hands of her own people. Yet the moment the notion was suggested to her, she found the absence of the carriage, of Watkyns, of the grooms, inexplicable. And she said so; but the very expression of her astonishment, following abruptly on his suggestion that the carriage must be there, only deepened the good parson's doubts. She had spun her tale, he thought, without providing for that point; and now sought to cover the blot by exclamations of surprise.

He had not the heart, however, good honest soul, to be unkind; and felt himself in as great embarrassment as if the deceit had been his own. He found himself constrained to ask in what way he could help her; but when she suggested that she should rest at his house, the assent he gave was forced and spiritless.

“If it be not too far,” she said, struck by his tone and thinking also of her unshod feet.

“It's—it's about a mile,” he answered.

“Well, I must walk it,” she decided.

“You don't think—I could send,” he suggested weakly, “and—and make inquiries—for your people, ma'am?”

“If you please, when I am there,” she said; and left him no resource but to start with her. But as they went, amid all the care she was forced to give to her steps, she could not but notice that he regarded her oddly, looking askance at her when he thought her attention elsewhere, and looking away guiltily when she caught him in the act.

After walking some half mile, they turned to the right and came presently in sight of a little hamlet that nestled among chestnut trees in a nook of the slope. As they approached this, his uneasiness became more marked. Nor was Sophia left long in ignorance of its cause. Over the low wicket gate that gave access to a neat thatched house beside the church, the first house, as it happened, to which they came, appeared for a moment an angry woman's face—turned in the direction whence they came. It was gone as soon as seen; but Sophia, from a faltered word which her companion let fall, learned to whom it belonged; and when he tried the wicket gate it was fastened against him. He tried it nervously, his face growing red; then he raised his voice. “My love,” he cried, “I have come back! I think you did not see us. Will you please to come and open the gate?”

An ominous silence was the only answer. He tried the gate a second time, his patient face working. “My dear,” he cried aloud, a quaver in his voice, “I have come back!”

“And more shame to you, Michieson!” a shrill voice answered; the speaker remaining unseen. “Do you hear me? More shame to you, you unnatural, murdering father! Didn't you hear me say, I would not have you going to that place? And didn't I tell you if you went you would not come here again! You thought yourself mighty clever, I'll be bound, to go off while I was asleep, my man! But now you'll sleep in the garden house, for in here you don't come! Who's that with you?”

“A—a young lady in trouble,” he stammered.

“Where did you find her?”

“On the road, my love. And in great——”

“Then on the road you may leave her!” came the sharp answer. “No, my man, you don't come over me that way. You brought the hussy from that house! Tell me she's not been into it, if you dare! And you'd

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bring her in among your innocent, lawful children, would you, and give 'em their deaths!"—with rising indignation. "Fie, you silly old fool! If you weren't a natural, with all your learning, you'd have been over to Sir Hervey's and complimented madam this fine morning, and been 'pointed chaplain! But 'tis like you! Instead of providing for your wife and children, as a man should, you're trying to give 'em their deaths, among a lot of dead people that'll never find you in a bit of bread to put in their mouths! I tell you I've no patience with you."

"But, my dear——"

"Now send her packing! Do you hear, Michieson?"

He was going to remonstrate, but Sophia intervened. Spent as she was with fatigue, her feet sore and blistered, she felt that she could go no farther. Moreover, to eyes dazed by the horrors of the night, the thatched cottage among the rose briars, with its hum of bees and scent of woodbine and honeysuckle, was a haven of peace. She raised her voice. "Mrs. Michieson," she said, not without a quaver in her tone, "your husband need not go to Sir Hervey's, for I am Lady Coke."

With an exclamation of amazement, a thin, red faced woman, scantily dressed in an old soiled wrapper that had known a richer wearer—for Mrs. Michieson had been a lady's lady—pushed through the bushes. "Lord's sake!" she cried, and she stared a moment with all her eyes; then she burst into a rude laugh. "You mean her woman, I should think!" she said. "Why, you saucy piece, you must think us fine simpletons to try to come over us with that story! Lady Coke in her stockinged feet indeed!"

"I have been robbed," Sophia tried to explain—trying also not to break down. "You are a woman, ma'am. Surely you have some pity for another woman in trouble?"

"Aye, you are like enough to be in trouble, ma'am! That I can see!" the parson's lady answered with a sneer. "But I'll trouble you not to call me a woman!" she continued, tossing her head. "Woman indeed! A pretty piece you are to call names, trapesing the country in a—why, whose cloak have you got on? *Michieson!*" in a voice of thunder, "what does this mean?"

"My dear," he said humbly—for Sophia, on the verge of tears, dared not speak lest she should betray her misery—"the—the lady was robbed on the road; she was traveling in her carriage——"

"In her carriage!"

"Her servants ran away—as I understand," he continued, rubbing his hands, and smiling in a sickly way, "and the postboys did not return, and—and her woman——"

"Her woman!"

"Well, yes, my dear, so she tells me—was

so frightened she stayed with the carriage. And her friend, a—another lady, escaped in the dark with some jewels—and——"

"*Michieson!*" his wife cried again in her most awful voice, "did you believe this—this cock and bull story that you dare to repeat to me?"

"Well, my dear," he answered in confusion, as he glanced from one to the other, "I—at least, the lady told me——"

"Did you believe it? Yes or no, sir—did you believe it?"

"Well, I——"

"Did you go to look for the carriage?"

"Yes, my dear, I did."

"And did you find it?"

"Well, no," he confessed; "I didn't."

"Nor the servants?"

"No, but——"

She did not let him explain. "Now, Michieson," she cried, with shrill triumph, "you see what a fool you are! And where you'd be if it were not for me! Did she say a word about being Lady Coke until she heard her name from me? Eh? Answer me that, did she?"

He glanced miserably at Sophia. "Well, no, my dear, I don't think she did!" he admitted reluctantly.

"So I thought!" madam sniffed. And then, with a cruel gesture, "Off with it, you baggage! Off with it!" she continued. "Do you think I don't know that the moment my back is turned you'll be gone, and a good cloak with you! No, no, off with it, my ragged madam, and thank your stars I don't send for the parish constable!"

But her husband plucked up spirit at that. "No, my dear," he said, "she shall keep the cloak till she can get a covering. For shame, wife, for shame," he continued, with a touch of simple dignity. "Do you never think that a daughter of ours may some day stand in her shoes?"

"You fool, she has got none!" his wife snarled. "And you give her that cloak, sir, at your peril."

"She shall keep it till she gets a covering," he answered firmly.

"Then she'll keep it somewhere else, not here!" the termagant answered in a fury. "Do you call yourself a parson and go trapesing the country with a slut like that? And your lawful wife left at home alone!"

Sophia was white with exhaustion and could scarcely keep her feet, but at this she could be silent no longer. "The cloak I shall keep, for it is your husband's. For yourself, ma'am, you will bitterly repent, before the day is out, that you have treated me so."

"Hoity toity! You'd threaten me, would you?" the other cried viciously. "Here, Tom, Bill! Ha' you no stones? Here's a besom ill speaking your mother! Aye, I

thought you'd be going, ma'am, at that!" she continued, leaning on the gate with a grin of satisfaction. "It'll be in the stocks you'll sit before the day is out, I'm thinking!"

But Sophia was already out of hearing; mortification, rage, almost despair, in her breast. She had gone through so much in the night, the normal things of life had so crumbled round her, she was ill fitted to cope with these farther misfortunes. The reception with which she had met, in a place where of all places peace and charity and a seat for the wretched should have been found, broke down the remains of endurance. As soon as a turn in the road hid her from the other woman's eyes, she sank down on a bank, unable to go farther. She must eat and drink and rest or she felt that she would die.

Fortunately, the poor parson—worthy of a better mate—had not quite abandoned her cause. After standing a moment divided between indignation and fear, he allowed the more generous impulse to have way and followed and found her. Shocked to read exhaustion plainly written on her face, horrified by the thought that she might die at his door—that door which, no one knew better, should have been open to the distressed—he half led and half carried her to the little garden house to which his wife had exiled him; and which by good fortune stood in an orchard, beyond, but close to the curtilage of the house. Here he left her a moment, and procuring the poor drudge of a servant to hand him by stealth a little bread and milk over the fence, he fed her with his own hands, and waited patiently beside her until the color returned to her face.

Relieved, and satisfied that she was no longer in danger, he began then to fidget; glancing furtively at her and away again, and continually moving to the door of the shed; which looked prettily enough on grass dappled with sunlight and overhung by drooping boughs on which the late blossoms lingered. At length, seeing her remain languid and spiritless, he blurted out what was in his mind. "I daren't keep you here long," he said with a flush of shame. "If my wife discovers you, she may do you a mischief. And hereabout the fear of the smallpox is such, they'd stone you out of the parish if they knew you had been at Beamond's—God forgive them!"

Sophia looked at him in astonishment.

"But I have told you who I am," she said. "I am Lady Coke. Surely you believe me?"

He shook his head. "Child! Child!" he said in a tone of gentle chiding. "Let be! You don't know what you say! There's not one acre in this parish is not Sir Hervey Coke's, nor a house, nor a barn. Is't likely his honor's lady would be wandering shoeless in the roads?"

She laughed hysterically. Tragedy and

comedy seemed strangely mixed this morning! "Yet it is so," she said. "It is so."

He shook his head in reproof, but did not answer.

"You don't believe me?" she cried. "How far is it to Coke Hall?"

"About three miles," he answered unwillingly.

"Then the question is easily settled. You must go thither, yes, you must go at once!" she continued sharply, the power to think coherently returning, and with it the sense of Lady Betty's danger. "At once, sir!" she repeated, rising in her impatience, while a flood of color swept over her face. "You must see Sir Hervey and tell him that Lady Coke is here, and Lady Betty Cochrane is missing; that we have been robbed, and he must instantly, before coming here, make search for her."

The old parson stared. "For whom?" he stammered.

"For Lady Betty Cochrane, who was with me."

He continued to stare; but now with the beginnings of doubt in his eyes. "Child," he said, "are you sure you are not bubbling me? 'Twill be a poor victory over a simple old man."

"I am not! I am not!" she cried. And suddenly bethinking her of the pocket that ordinarily hung between her gown and petticoat, she felt for it. She had placed her rings as well as her purse in it. Alas, it was gone! The strings had yielded to rough usage.

None the less the action went some way with him. He saw her countenance fall, and told himself that if she was acting, she was the best actress in the world. "Enough," he said with dignity. "I will go, child. If 'tis a cheat, I forgive you beforehand. And if it is the cloak you want, take it honestly. I give it you."

But she looked at him so wrathfully at that, that he said no more, but fled; snatching up his stick and waving his hand as he passed out of sight, in token of forgiveness, if, after all, she was fooling him.

## XXI.

THE good vicar pushed on sturdily until he came to the highroad and the turn for Beamond's farm, some half mile on his way. There his heart began to misgive him. The impression which Sophia's manner had made on his mind was growing weak; the improbability of her story rose more clearly before him. That a woman tramping the roads in her petticoats could be Lady Coke, the young bride of the owner of all the countryside, seemed, now that he weighed it in cold blood, impossible! And from misgiving he was not slow in passing to repentance. How much

better it would have been, he thought, had he pursued his duty to the dead and the parish with a single eye, instead of starting on this wild goose chase! How much better—and even now it was not too late! He paused, debating it, and as good as turned. But in the end he remembered that he had given the girl his word, and, turning his back with a sigh on Beamond's farm, he pursued his way in the opposite direction.

He had not gone far when he saw, coming along the road to meet him, a young man of a strange, raffish appearance, who swung a stick as he walked, and looked about him with so devil may care an air that the good man set him down, the moment he saw him, for a strolling player. As such he was for passing him with a good day, and no more. But the other, who had also marked him from a distance, stopped when they came to close quarters.

"Well met, Master Parson!" he cried. "And how far may you have come?"

"A mile or a little less," the vicar answered mildly. And seeing, now they were face to face, that the stranger was little more than a lad, he went on to ask him if he could be of service to him.

"Have you seen anything of a lady on the road?"

The clergyman started. "Dear, dear!" he said. "'Tis well met, indeed, sir, and a mercy you stayed me! To be sure I have! She is no farther away than my house at this very minute!"

"The devil she is!" the young man answered heartily. "That's to the purpose, then. I was beginning to think—but never mind! Come on and tell her woman, will you, where she is?"

"Certainly I will. Is she here?"

"She's round the next corner. It's on your way. Lord!"—with a sigh of relief, not unmingled with pride—"what a night I have had of it!"

"Indeed, sir!" the parson said with sympathy; and as they turned to proceed side by side, he eyed his neighbor curiously.

"Aye, indeed, and indeed! You'd say so if you'd been called out of bed the moment you were in it, and after a long day's tramp, too! And been dragged up and down the country the whole livelong night, my friend!"

"Dear, dear! And you were in her ladyship's company," the parson said with humility, "when she was stopped, I suppose, sir?"

"I? Not I! I've never set eyes on her."

"Her servants fetched you, then?"

"Her woman did! I've seen no more of them."

The vicar pricked up his ears. "Nor the carriage?" he asked.

"Not I! Hasn't she got the carriage with her?"

Mr. Michieson rubbed his head. "No," he said slowly; "no, she has not. Am I to understand, then, sir, that—you are yourself a complete stranger to the parties?"

"I? Certainly. But here's her woman. She can tell you all about it. Oh, you need not look at me!" Tom continued with a grin, as the vicar, startled by the sight of the handsome, gipsy-like girl, looked at him dubiously. "She's a pretty piece, I know, to be straying the country, but I'm not in fault. I never set eyes on the little witch until last night." And then, "Here, child," he cried, waving his hat to her, "I've news! Your lady is at the parson's, and all's well! Now you can thank me, that I did not let you go into the smallpox."

Lady Betty clasped her hands, her face radiant. "Are you sure? Are you quite sure?" she cried, her voice trembling. "Are you sure she is safe?"

"She is quite safe," Mr. Michieson answered; and he looked in wonder from one to the other. There was something suspiciously alike in their tumbled finery, their disheveled appearance. "I was even now on my way," he continued, "to Coke Hall to convey the news to Sir Hervey."

It was Tom's turn to utter a cry of astonishment. "To Sir Hervey?" he stammered. "To Sir Hervey Coke, at the hall, do you mean?"

"To be sure, sir."

"But—why, to be sure, I might have known she was some relation," Tom cried. "Was she going there?"

"She is his wife, sir."

"Oh, but that's a flam at any rate!" Tom answered impulsively. "Sir Hervey's not married, man. I saw him myself, ten days ago."

"Where?" the girl cried, interrupting him sharply.

"Where?"

"Aye, where, sir, since you are so free with his name?"

"In Clarges Row in London, if you must know," Tom answered, his face reddening at the reminiscence. "And if he'd been married, or had had thoughts of being married then, he'd have told me."

Lady Betty stared at him, her breath coming quickly; something began to dawn in her eyes. "Told you, would he?" she said slowly. "He'd have told you? And who may you be, if you please?"

"Well," Tom answered a trifle sharply, "my name is Maitland, and for the matter of that, my girl, you need not judge me by my clothes. I know Sir Hervey, and——"

He never finished. To his indignation, to the clergyman's astonishment, the girl went off into an ungovernable fit of laughter; laughing till she cried, and drying her tears



only that she might laugh again. Sir Tom fumed and swore; while the vicar looked from one to the other, and asked himself—not for the first time—whether they were acting together, or the man was as innocent in the matter as he appeared to be.

One thing he could make clear; and he hastened to do it. "I don't know why you laugh, child," he said patiently. "At the same time, the gentleman is certainly wrong on the fact. Sir Hervey Coke is married, I know, for I had it from the steward some days ago, and I am to go with the tenants to the hall to see her ladyship next week."

Tom stared. "Sir Hervey married!" he cried in amazement; and forgot the girl's rudeness. "Since I saw him? Married? It seems impossible! Whom do you say he has married?"

"Well, 'tis odd, sir, but it's a lady of the same name as yourself," the vicar answered. "Maitland?"

"Yes, sir! A Miss Maitland, a sister of Sir Thomas Maitland, of Cuckfield."

Sir Tom's eyes grew wide. "Good Lord!" he cried. "Sophia!"

"A relation, sir? Do I understand you?"

"My sister, sir, my sister!"

The clergyman stared a moment, then without comment he walked a few paces aside and looked over the hedge. He smiled feebly at the well known prospect. Was it possible, he asked himself, that they thought he could swallow this? That they deemed him so simple, so rustic, that such a piece of play acting as this could impose upon him? Beyond a doubt they were in league together; these two with their fine story and their apt surprises, and "my lady" in his garden. The only point on which he felt any doubt was the advantage they looked to gain; since the moment he reached the hall the bubble would burst.

He turned by and by, thinking in his honest cunning to solve that doubt. He found Tom in a sort of maze, staring at the ground; and the girl watching him with a strange smile. For the first time the good vicar had recourse to the wisdom of the serpent. "Had we not better go on to the hall at once?" he said blandly. "And send a carriage for my lady?"

"Go to the hall without seeing her?" Tom cried, awakening from his reverie. "Not I! I shall go to her straight."

"And so shall I, sir, by your leave," the lady cried pertly. "And at once. I know my duty."

"And you shall show us the way," Tom continued heartily. "No more going up and down at random for me! Let's to her at once. We can easily find a messenger to go to the hall when we have seen her. But, Lord! I can't get over it! When was she married, my girl?"

"Well," Betty answered demurely, "'twas the same day, I believe, as your honor was to have been married."

Tom winced and looked at her askance. "You know that, you baggage, do you?" he cried.

"So 'twas said in the steward's room, sir."

But the vicar, his suspicions fully confirmed by their decision not to go to the hall, hung back. "I think I had better go on," he said. "I think Sir Hervey should be warned."

"Oh, hang Sir Hervey!" Tom answered handsomely. "Why is he not looking after his wife himself? Lead on! Lead on, do you hear, man? How far is it?"

"About a mile," the vicar faltered; "I should say a—a long mile," he added, as he reluctantly obeyed the pressure of Tom's hand, and turned.

"Well, I am glad it's no farther!" the young man answered. "For I am so sharp set I could eat my sister? You've parson's fare, I suppose? Bacon and eggs and small beer?" he continued, clapping the unfortunate clergyman on the back with the utmost good humor. "Well, sir, you shall entertain us! And while we are dining, the messenger can be going to the hall. Soap and a jack towel will serve my turn, but the girl—what's your name, child?"

"Betty, sir."

"Will be the better for the loan of your wife's shoes and a cap. Sophy really married? Where was it, my girl?"

"At Dr. Keith's, sir."

"The deuce it was!" Tom cried ruefully. "Then, that's two hundred out of my pocket. Were you with her then, child?"

"No, sir; her ladyship hired me after she was married."

Tom looked at her. "But—but I thought," he said, "that you told me last night that you had been brought up with your mistress?"

Betty bit her lip. "Oh, yes, sir," she said hastily; "but that was another mistress."

"Also of the name of Sophia?"

"Yes, sir."

"And for which Sophia were you weeping last night?" Tom asked with irony.

Betty's face flamed; if the truth be told, her fingers tingled also, though the slip was her own. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to throw off the mask and tell the young man who she was. But for a reason Betty did not choose to adopt this course. Instead she stooped, pretending that her boot lace was untied; and when she rose there were tears in her eyes.

"You are very unkind, sir," she said in a low voice. "I took a—a liberty with my mistress in calling her by her name, and I—I had to account for it, and didn't tell quite the truth."

Tom was melted, yet his eye twinkled. "Last night or today?" he said.

"Both, sir," she whispered demurely. "And I'm afraid, sir, I took a liberty with you, too, talking nonsense and such like. But I'm sure, sir, I am very sorry, and I hope you won't tell my mistress."

The maid looked so pretty, so absurdly pretty, in her penitence, and there was something so captivating in her manner, that Tom was seized with an inordinate desire to reassure her. "Tell, child? Not I!" he cried generously. "But I'll have a kiss for a forfeit. You owe me that," he continued, with one eye on the parson, who had gone on while she tied her shoe. "Wilt pay it now, my dear, or tomorrow with interest?"

"A kiss? Oh, fie, sir!"

"Why, what is the harm in a kiss?" Tom asked; and the rogue drew a little nearer.

"Oh, fie, sir!" Betty retorted, tossing her head and moving farther from him. "What harm, indeed? And you told me last night I should be as safe with you as my mistress need be!"

"Well," Tom exclaimed triumphantly, "and shouldn't I kiss your mistress? Isn't she my sister? And—pooh, child, don't be silly! Was ever waiting maid afraid of a kiss? And in daylight?"

But Betty continued to give him a wide berth. "No, sir, no, I'll not suffer it!" she cried sharply. "It's you are taking the liberty now! And you told me last night you had seen enough of women to last you your life!"

"That was before I saw you, my dear!" Tom answered impudently. But he desisted from the pursuit, and resuming a sober course along the middle of the road, became thoughtful almost to moodiness; as if he were not quite so sure of some things as he had been. At intervals he glanced at Betty, who walked by his side, primly conscious of his regards, and now blushing a little and now pouting; and now, when he was not looking, with a laughing imp dancing in her eyes that must have effected his downfall in a moment if he had met her eyes at these times. As it was, he lost himself in thinking how pretty she was, and how fresh; how sweet her voice and how dainty her walk, how trim her figure, and—

And then he groaned; calling himself a fool, a double, treble, deepest dyed fool! After the lesson he had learned, after the experience through which he had passed, was he really, really going to fall in love again? And with his sister's maid? With a girl picked up—his vows, his oaths, his resolutions, notwithstanding—in the road! It was too much!

And Lady Betty, walking beside him, knowing all and telling nothing, Betty the flirt? "He put his coat on me, I have worn his coat.

He said he would tie me to a gate, and he would have tied me"—with a furtive look at him out of the tail of her eye—that was the air that ran in her mind as she walked in the sunshine. A kiss? Well, perhaps; some time. Who knew? And Lady Betty blushed at her thoughts. And they came to the corner where the garden house lay off the road, the vicarage still out of sight.

At the gate of the orchard the poor parson stood waiting for them, smiling feebly, but not meeting their eyes. He was in a state, if the truth be told, of the most piteous embarrassment. He was fully persuaded that they were cheats and adventurers, hedge players, if nothing worse; and he knew that another man in his place would have told them as much and sent them about their business. But in the kindness of his heart he could no more do this than he could fly. On the other hand, his hair rose on end when he pictured his wife, and what she would say when he presented them to her. What she would do were he to demand the good fare they expected, he failed to conceive; but at the mere thought, the dense holly hedge that screened the house seemed all too thin a protection. Alas, the thickest hedge is pervious to a woman's tongue!

In the others' ease and unconsciousness he found something almost pitiful; or he would have done so if their doom had not involved his own punishment. "She is here, is she?" Tom said, his hand on the gate.

The vicar nodded, speechless; he pointed in the direction of the garden house.

Betty slipped through deftly. "Then, by your leave, sir, I'll go first," she said. "Her ladyship may need something before she sees you—if you please, sir?" And dropping a smiling courtesy, she coolly closed the gate on them, and flew down the path in the direction the vicar had indicated.

"Well, there's impudence!" Tom exclaimed. "Hang me, if I know why she should go first!" And then as a joyful cry rang through the trees, he looked at the vicar.

But Michieson looked elsewhere. He was listening and shivering with anticipation. If that cry reached her! Meanwhile Tom, innocent and unconscious, opened the gate and passed through; and thinking of his sister and his last parting from her, went slowly across the dappled grass until the low hanging boughs of the apple trees hid him.

The parson, left alone, looked up and down the road with a hunted eye. The position was terrible. Should he go to his wife, confess, and prepare her? Or should he wait until his unwelcome guests returned to share the brunt with him? Or—or should he go? Go about his business—was there not that sad pressing business at Beamond's farm?—until the storm was overpast?

He was a good man, but he was mortal. A few seconds of hesitation, and he skulked down the road, his head bent, his eyes glancing backwards. He fancied that he heard his wife's voice, and hurried faster and faster from the dreaded sound. At length he reached the main road, and stood, his face hot with shame, considering what he should do next.

Beamond's? Yes, he must go about that. He must, to save his self respect, go about business of some kind. There was a large farm two miles away, where his church warden lived; there he would be sure of help. The farmer and his wife had had the disease, and were in less terror of it than some. At any rate, he could consult with them; in a Christian parish people could not lie unburied. In vital matters the parson was no coward, and he knew that if no one would help him—which was possible, so great was the panic—he would do all himself, if his strength held out.

In turning this over he tried to forget the foolish imbroglio of the morning; yet now and again he winced, pricked in his conscience and his manhood. After all, they had come to him for help, for food and shelter; and who so proper to afford these as God's minister in that place. At worst he should have sent them to one of the farms and allowed it out of the tithe, and taken the chance when Easter came and Peg discovered it. Passing the branch road on his left, which Tom and Betty had taken in error in the night, he had a distant back view of a horseman riding that way at speed; and he wondered a little, the sight being unusual. Three minutes later he came to the roadside ale house which Betty had visited. The goodwife was at the door and watched him come up. As he passed, she called out, to learn if his reverence had news.

"None that's good, Nanny," he answered; never doubting but she had the illness at Beamond's in her mind. And declining her offer of a mug of ale he went on, and half a mile farther turned off the road again by a lane that led to the church warden's farm. He crossed the farm yard heavily, and found Mrs. Benacre sitting within the kitchen door, picking over gooseberries. He begged her not to move, and asked if the goodman was at home.

"No, your reverence, he's at the hall," she answered. "He was loading hay in the Furlongs, and was fetched all in a minute this hour past, and took the team with him. The little lad came home and told me."

The vicar started, and looked a little odd. "I wanted to see him about poor Beamond's death," he said.

"'Tis true, then, your reverence?"

"Too true. There's nothing like it happened in the parish in my time."

"Dear, dear, it gives one the creeps! After all, when you've got a good husband, what's a little marking, and be safe? There should be something done, your reverence. 'Tis these gipsies bring it about."

The vicar set back the fine gooseberry he had selected. "What time did her ladyship arrive yesterday?" he asked, his voice a little unsteady.

Mrs. Benacre lifted up her hands in astonishment. "La, didn't you know?" she cried. "But, to be sure, you're off the road a good bit, and all your people so taken up with the poor Beamonds, too? No time at all, your reverence! She didn't come. I take it, it's about that Sir Hervey has sent for Benacre. He thinks a deal of him, as his father before him did of the old gaffer. I remember a cocking was at the hall," Mrs. Benacre continued garrulously, "when I was a girl—'twas a match between the Gentlemen of Sussex and the Gentlemen of Essex—and the old squire would have Benacre's father to dine with them, and made so much of him as never was!"

The vicar had listened without hearing. "She stopped the night in Lewes, I suppose?" he said, his eyes on the gooseberries, his heart bumping.

"'Twasn't known, the squire being at Lewes to meet her. And today I've had more to do than to go fetching and carrying, and never a soul to speak to but they two hussies and the lad, since Benacre went on the land. There, your reverence, there's a berry should take a prize so far away as Croydon."

"Very fine," the parson muttered. "But I think I'll walk as far as the hall and inquire."

"'Twould be very becoming," Mrs. Benacre allowed; and made him promise he would bring back the news.

He went down the lane, and midway saw two horsemen pass the end of it at a quick trot. When he reached the road the men were out of sight; but his heart sank lower at this sign of unusual bustle. A quarter of an hour's walking along a hot road brought him, much disturbed, to the park gate; it was open, and in the road was the lodge keeper's wife, a child clinging to her skirts. Before he could speak, "Has your reverence any news?" she cried.

He shook his head.

"Well, was ever such a thing?" she exclaimed, lifting up her hands. "They're gone, to be sure, as if the ground had swallowed them. It's that, or the rogues ha' drowned them in the Ouse!"

He felt himself shrinking in his clothes. "How—how did it happen?" he muttered faintly. What had he done? What had he done?

"The postboys left them in the carriage

the other side of Beamond's," the woman answered, delighted to gain a listener, "and went back with fresh horses—I suppose it would be about seven this morning; they could not get them in the night. They found the carriage gone, and tracked it back so far almost as Chailey, and there found it, and the woman and the two grooms with it; but not one of them could give any account except that their ladyships had been carried off by a gang of men, and they three had harnessed up and escaped. The postboys came back with the news, and about the same time Mr. Watkyns came by the main road through Lewes, and knew nought of it till he was here! He was fit to kill himself when he found her ladyship was gone," the woman continued with zest; "and Sir Hervey was fit to kill 'em all, and serve 'em right; and now they are all out and about searching the country and a score with them; but its tolerable sure the villains ha' got away with my lady, some think by Newhaven! What? Is your reverence not going to the house?"

"No," he muttered, with a sickly smile. "No." And he turned from the cool shadows of the chestnut avenue, that led to the hall, and setting his face the way he had come, hastened through the heat. He might still prevent the worst! He might still—but he must get home as quickly as he could. He must get home. He had walked three miles in forty minutes in old days; he must do it now. True, the sun was midsummer high, the time an hour after noon, the road straight and hot and unshaded, his throat was parched and he was fasting. But he must press on. He must press on, though his legs began to tremble under him—and he was not so young as he had been. There was the end of Benacre's lane! He had done a mile now; but his knees were shaky, he must sit a moment on the bank. He did so, found the trees began to dance before his eyes, his thoughts to grow confused; frightened, he tried to rise, but instead he sank down in a faint and lay inert at the foot of the bank.

## XXII.

It was a strange meeting between the brother and sister. Tom, mindful how they had parted in Clarges Row, and with what loyalty she had striven to screen him and save him from himself—at a time when he stood in utmost need of such efforts—was softened and touched beyond the ordinary; while Sophia, laughing and crying at once in the joy of a reconciliation as unexpected as it was welcome, experienced as she held him in her arms something nearer akin to happiness than had been hers since her marriage. The gratitude she owed Providence for preservation through the dangers and chances of the

night, strengthened this feeling; the sunshine that flooded the orchard round her, the grass below, the laden sprays of blossoms above, the songs of the birds, the very strangeness of the retreat in which they met, all spoke to a heart peculiarly open at the moment to receive impressions. Tom recovered, Tom kind, formed part of that beauty of the world which welcomed her back, and shamed her repining; while her brother on his side, sheepish and affectionate, marveled to see the little sister whom he had patronized all his life, transmogrified into Lady Coke.

He asked her how she came to be so strangely dressed, learned that she also had fallen in with the old parson, and when he had heard, "Well," he exclaimed, "'tis the luckiest thing your woman met me, I ever knew!"

"You might have been in any part of England," she answered, smiling through her tears. "Where were you going, Tom?"

"Why, to Coke's, to be sure," he replied; "and wanted only two or three miles of it."

"Not—not knowing?" she asked, blushing.

"Not the least in life! I was on the point of enlisting, Sophy," he went on, coloring in his turn, "at Reading, in Tatton's foot, when a man he had sent in search of me found me and gave me a note."

"From Sir Hervey?" she cried, startled.

"Of course," Tom answered—"telling me I could stay at the hall until things blew over. And—and not to make a fool of myself," he added ingenuously. "'Twas like him, and I knew it was best to come, but when I was nearly there—that was last night, you know, and lucky it was for you—I thought I would wait until morning and hear who were in the house before I showed myself; and that is why Mistress Betty found me where she did."

Sophia could not hide her agitation on learning what Sir Hervey had done—and done silently. Tom saw her tremble, saw that for some reason she was shaken and on the verge of tears; and he wondered. "Why," he exclaimed, "what is the matter, Sophy? What is it?"

"It's nothing, nothing," she answered hurriedly. "Nothing at all."

"It isn't—that you don't like me coming here this kind of a figure?" he persisted, a little chagrined; and with a boy's high opinion of the importance of his dress. "Coke, I bet, won't mind. He's a good fellow, and—no!"—with sudden conviction—"it's not that. I know what it is. You have been up all night, and had nothing to eat. You will be all right when you have had a meal! The old parson said he'd give us bacon and eggs, and it should be ready now."

Sophia laughed a little hysterically. "I fear it doesn't lie with him," she said. "His wife would not let me into the house. She's afraid of the smallpox."



"Pooh!" Tom said contemptuously. "When she knows who we are she'll sing another note."

"She won't believe," Sophia answered.

"She'll believe me," Tom said. "Come, let us go."

"Do you go first, then, sir, if you please," Lady Betty cried, tossing her head. "I'm sure her ladyship's not fit to be seen! And I'm not much better," she added pertly; and then, a bubble of laughter rising to the surface, she buried her face in Sophia's skirts, and affected to be engaged in repairing the disorder. Tom saw his sister's face relax in a smile, and he eyed the maid suspiciously; but before he could speak Sophia also begged him to go, and see what reception the old clergyman had secured for them; and he turned obediently and went.

He looked back when he reached the gate, but a wealth of apple blossom intervened, and he did not see that the girls had flown into each other's arms; nor did he hear them laughing, crying, asking, answering, all at once and out of the fullness of thankful hearts. His wholesome appetite began to cry cupboard, and he turned briskly up the road, discovered the wicket gate of the parsonage, and marching to it, found that it was locked. Though the obstacle was not formidable to young limbs, the welcome was cold, to say the least of it; and where was his friend the parson? Wondering, he rattled the gate, thinking some one would come; but no one came, and, losing patience, he vaulted over the gate, and having passed round a mass of rose bushes that grew in a tangle about the pot herb garden, saw the door of the house standing ajar before him.

One moment; the next and long before he could reach it, a boy about twelve years old, with a disheveled shock of hair and sullen eyes, looked out, saw him, and hastened with a violent movement to slam the door in his face. The action was unmistakable, the meaning plain; Sir Tom stood, stared, and after a moment swore. Then in a rage he advanced and kicked the door. "What do you mean?" he cried. "Open, do you hear? Are these your manners?"

For a few seconds there was silence in the sunny herb garden with its laden air and perfumed hedges. Then a casement above creaked open, and two heads peered cautiously over the window ledge. "Do you hear?" Tom cried, espying them. "Come down and open the door, or you'll get a whipping."

But the boys, the one he had seen at the door, and another who appeared to be a year or two older, preserved a sullen silence; eying him with evident dread and at the same time with a kind of morbid curiosity. Tom threatened, stormed, even took up a stone; they answered nothing, and it was only when he

had begun to retreat, fuming, towards the gate that one of them found his voice.

"You'd better be gone!" he cried shrilly.

"They are coming for you!"

Sir Tom turned at the sound, and went back at a white heat. "What do you mean, you young cubs?" he cried. "Who are coming for me?"

But they were dumb again, staring at him over the ledge with somber, fearful interest. Tom repeated his question, scolded, even raised his stone; but without effect. At last he turned his back on them, and in a furious rage flung out of the garden.

He went out as he had entered, vaulting the gate. As he did so this time, he heard a woman's voice shrill and insistent, and before he went his way he looked in the direction whence it came, and saw a knot of people coming down the road. It consisted only of three or four women with a rough looking laborer; but while he stood, watching them, a second party, more largely made up of men and boys, came in sight, following the other at a rapid pace; and tailing behind these again came a couple of women and then two or three boys. The women were speaking loudly, with excited gestures, as if they were hounding on the men; and those on the outside of each rank, hurried a step in advance of the others, and addressed them with turned heads. But, after watching them a moment, under the idea that they might be a search party sent by Coke, he reflected that the noise would alarm his sister, and, turning in at the gate, he crossed the orchard.

Sophia came hurriedly to meet him. "What is it?" she asked. "What is the matter, Tom?" The clamor of strident voices, the scolding of the women, had preceded him. "Where is the clergyman? Why, Tom—why, they are coming in here!"

"The deuce they are!" Tom answered; and looking back, and seeing through the trees that the man with the first gang had opened the gate and was leading them in, he went to meet him. "What is it?" he asked haughtily. "What are you doing here? Has Sir Hervey sent you?"

"We want no sending!" one of the women cried sharply. "'Tis enough to send us of ourselves."

"Aye, so it is!" cried a second. "And do you keep your distance, if you be one of them! Let's have no nonsense, master, for we won't stand it!"

"No, master, no nonsense!" cried another shrilly, as the larger party arrived and, joining the first comers, raised their numbers to something like a score. "She's got to go, and you with her if you be of her company! Isn't that so?" the speaker continued, turning to her backers.

The appeal was the signal for a chorus of

"Aye, out of the parish she must go! We'll ha' no smallpox here! She'll go or swim! Out of the parish!"

Tom looked along the line of excited faces, faces stupid or cruel, at the best of a low type, and now brutalized by selfish panic; and his heart sank. But for the present he neither blenched nor lost his temper. "Why, you fools," he said roughly, thinking to reason with them, "don't you know who the lady is?"

"No, nor care!" was the shrill retort. "Nor care! Do you understand that?" And then a man stepped forward. "She's got to go," he said, "whoever she be. That's all."

"I tell you you don't know who she is," Tom answered stubbornly. "Whose tenant are you, my man?"

"Sir Hervey's, to be sure," the fellow answered, surprised by the question.

"Well, she's his wife?" Tom answered. "Do you hear? Do you understand?" he repeated, with growing indignation. "She is Lady Coke, Sir Hervey's wife. His wife, I tell you. And if you raise a finger or wag a tongue against her, you'll repent it all your lives."

The man stared; doubting, hesitating, in part daunted. But a woman behind him, a lean vixen, her shoulders barely covered by a meager kerchief, pushed herself to the front and snapped her fingers in Tom's face. "That my lady?" she cried. "That for the lie! You be a liar, my lad, that's what you be! A liar, and ought to swim with her! Neighbors," the shrew continued volubly, "she be no more my lady than I be. Madam told me she faked for to be it, but was a gipsy wench as had laid the night at Beamond's, and now was for 'fecting us!"

"Any way, she don't go another step into the parish!" pronounced an elderly man, apparently something better off than the others. "We don't want to swim her, and we don't want to stone her, but she must go, or worse come of it! And you, my lad, if you be with her. And the other!" For Lady Betty had crept timidly out of the garden shed, and joined the pair.

"I?" Tom cried, in growing passion. "You clod, do you know who I am? I am Sir Thomas Maitland, of Cuckfield."

"Sir or no sir, you'll ha' to go," the man retorted stubbornly. He was a dull fellow, and an unknown Sir Thomas was no more to him than plain Tom or Dick. "And 'tis best, with no more words!" he continued heavily.

Tom, now greatly enraged, was for answering in the same strain; but Sophia plucked his sleeve, and took the work herself. "I am quite willing to go," she said, holding her head up proudly as she addressed them. "If you will let me pass safely to the hall—that is all I ask."

"To the hall?"

"Yes, to my husband."

"No! No! To the hall, indeed! No! No! That's likely!" cried the crowd, and were not to be silenced till the elderly farmer who had spoken before raised his hand for a hearing.

"'Tis no wonder they shout!" he said, with a smile, half cunning, half stupid. "Why, 'tis the very inmost of the parish! The hall! No, no! Back by Beamond's and over the water, my girl, you'll go—same as Beamond's folk did. There's few live the other side, and so the fewer to take it, d'ye see? Besides, 'tis every one for himself."

"Aye, aye!" the crowd cried. "He's right! That way, no other! Hall, indeed!" And at the back they began to jeer.

"Do you know you've no law for this?" Tom cried, furious and panting.

"Then we'll make a law!" they answered, and jeered again.

Tom, almost beside himself, would have sprung at the nearest and punished him; but Sophia held him back. "No, no," she said in a low tone. "We had better go. Sir Hervey is surely searching for us; we may meet him, and they will learn their mistake. Please let us go. Let us go quickly, or they may—I do not know what they may do."

Tom allowed himself to be convinced; but he made the mistake of doing with bad grace that which he had to do, whether he would or no. "Out of the way, you clods!" he cried, advancing on them furiously and with stick raised. "You'll sing another tune before night. Do you hear, I say? Out of the way!"

They left his front open, moving sullenly aside; and he marched proudly through the gate of the orchard, Sophia and Betty beside him. But his hard words had raised the devil that lies dormant in the most peaceful crowd. He had no sooner passed than the women closed in upon his rear, and followed him with taunts and laughter. And presently a boy threw a stone.

It fell short of the mark; but another stone followed, and another; and the third struck Tom on the leg. He wheeled round in a towering passion, caught sight of the offender, and darted after him. Unfortunately the boy tripped, in trying to escape, and fell, shrieking. Tom got home two cuts; then a virago, her tongue spitting venom, her nails in the air, confronted him over the body of the fallen, and he retired sullenly to his charges, and resumed his retreat.

But the boy's screams had exasperated the rabble. Groans now took the place of laughter, curses succeeded jeers. The bolder threw dirt, the more timid hooted and boo-ed, and all pressed more and more closely on their heels, threatening every moment to jostle them. Tom had to turn and brandish his stick, to drive the rudest back; and finding

that, even so, he could scarcely secure the briefest respite, the lad began to grow hot and confused, and looked about for a way of escape with something between rage and terror.

To run, he knew, would only precipitate the disaster. To defend himself was scarcely possible, for Sophia, in fear lest he should again attempt reprisals, hampered him on one side, Betty in pure fear clung to him on the other. Both were almost sinking with apprehension, while his ears tingled under the coarse jeers and coarser epithets that were hurled at them; yet he dared not suffer them to move a pace from him. Cries of "Roll them in the road! Duck them! Duck them!" began to be heard; and once he only checked an ugly rush by facing about at the last moment. At length, a hundred yards before him, he espied the turning, into the main road; and, whispering the women to keep up their courage, he pressed on sullenly towards it.

He reached it, or he had as good as reached it, when a stone, more weighty and better aimed than those which had preceded it, struck Lady Betty fairly between the shoulders. The girl stumbled forward with a gasp, and Sophia, horror stricken and uncertain how far she was hurt, sprang to her side to hold her up. The movement freed Tom's arm; his sister's furious cry of "You cowards! Oh, you cowards!" burned up the last shred of his self control. In a tempest of rage the lad rushed on the nearest hobbledoy, and felling him with his stick, proceeded to rain blows upon him. The next instant he was engaged, hand to hand, with half a dozen combatants.

Unfortunately the charge had carried him a dozen yards from his companions; and the more timid of the rascals, who were not eager to encounter him or his stick, saw their opportunity. In a twinkling they cut off the two girls, and hemmed them in; and beginning with pushing and jostling them, would soon have proceeded to further insults if Sophia had not flown at them in her turn, and repelled them with a rage that for a few seconds daunted them. Tom, too, heard their cries, and turned to relieve them; but as he sprang forward a boy tripped him up, and he fell prone in the road.

That gave the last impulse to the evil instincts of the crowd. The louts darted on him with a yell of glee, and began to pommel him; and it must have gone ill with Tom as well as with his charges if the crowd had had their way with them for many seconds. But at that instant, without warning, or at the best without any warning that the victors regarded, the long lash of a hunting whip flickered as by magic between the girls and their assailants; it seared, as with a red hot iron, the hand which a sturdy clown, half boy,

half man, was brandishing under Sophia's nose; it stung with the sharpness of a dozen wasps the mocking face that menaced Betty on the other side. The lads who had flung themselves on Tom awoke with yells of pain to find the same whip curling about their shoulders, and to see behind it, set in grim rage, the face of their landlord. At that the harpies who had been hounding them on vanished as if by magic, scuttling all ways like frightened hens. And Sir Hervey let *them* go—for the time; but behind the lads and louts, fleeing and panting and racing and sweating down the road, and aiming, but for the most part fruitlessly, at gates and gaps, the lash fell ever and mercilessly on sturdy backs and fleshy legs. The horse he rode was an old one, known in the district, quick and cunning, broken to all the turns of the hare; and that day it carried fate, and punishment with no halting foot followed hard upon the sin. Sobbing with exhaustion, with laboring chests that at intervals shot forth cries of pain, as the flickering thong licked their haws and they bounded like deer under the cuts, the bullies came at last to the vicarage gate. And there Sir Hervey left them, free at last to rub their weals and curse their folly; sorer but, it is to be hoped, wiser men.

Sophia, clutching a gate, and now laughing hysterically, now repressing with difficulty the inclination to weep, watched him return. She saw him through a mist of smiles and tears, and under the influence of deep emotion forgot that this was the meeting so long and greatly dreaded. He sprang from his horse. "You're not hurt?" he cried. "Child——" and then with astonishment she saw that he was speechless.

Her own words came easily, her manner was eager and unembarrassed. "No," she cried, "nor Lady Betty! You came just in time, Sir Hervey."

"Thank God, I did!" he answered. "Thank God! And you are sure, child, you are not the worse?"

"No," she cried, laughing freely, as people laugh in moments of agitation. "Not a whit! You are looking at my dress? Oh, we have had adventures, a vast lot of adventures, Sir Hervey! 'Twould take a day to tell them, wouldn't it, Betty? Betty's my maid, Sir Hervey." She was above herself, and spoke gaily and archly as Betty might have spoken.

"Lady Betty your maid?" he exclaimed, turning to Betty, who blushed and laughed. "What do you mean?"

"Mean? Why, only—hush, where is Tom? Oh, repairing himself! Why, only a frolic, Sir Hervey! Tom took her for my woman, and we want to keep him in it. So not a word, if you please. This is Betty, the maid, you'll remember."



"I obey," Sir Hervey answered. "But to tell the truth," he continued soberly, "my head turns round. Where did you meet Tom, my dear? What has happened to you? And why are you wearing—that queer cloak?"

"It's not very becoming, is it?" she cried. And she looked at him. Never in her life had she played the coquette, never before; now, for the first time in this moment of unrestrained feeling, her eyes, provocative as Lady Betty's, challenged the compliment. And she wondered at herself.

"You are always—the same to me," he said simply. And then, "You are really all unhurt? Well, thank God for that! Thank God! And, Tom—you know, I suppose, how you came to be in this? I am sure I don't, but I thought it was you when I came up."

"I hope you flayed them," Tom growled, as they gripped hands. "See, she's barefoot! They hunted us half a mile, I should think."

Sir Hervey looked and grew red. "I did," he answered. "I think they have learned a lesson, the brutes! And they have not heard the last of it!" And then the postchaise which he had escorted to Beamond's farm on a fruitless search came up; and behind it a couple of mounted servants, whose training scarce enabled them to conceal their surprise when they saw the condition of their new mistress.

Sir Hervey hurried the two ladies into the carriage, postponing further inquiry, set Tom on a servant's horse, and gave the word. A moment later, the party were traveling rapidly in the direction of the hall. Coke rode on the side next his wife, Tom by Lady Betty. But the noise of the wheels rendered conversation difficult; and no one spoke.

But presently Sophia looked at Sir Hervey; and whether his country costume and the flush of color which exercise had brought to his cheek became him, or he had a better air, as some men have, on horseback, or she had learned to appreciate the value of strength, it is certain that he had never seemed to her so young. The moment in which he had appeared to her, towering on his horse above the snarling, spitting rabble, and had driven them along the road as a man drives sheep, was fresh in her memory. He had wielded, and grimly and ably wielded, the whip of authority. He had ridden as horse and man were one; he had disdained weapons, and had flogged the hounds into submission and flight. Now in repose his sinewy, strong figure in its plain dress seemed to her eyes—but how was this?—to wear an air of distinction.

She looked away and looked again, wondering if it really was so. And slowly a vivid blush spread over her pale face. The man who rode beside the wheel, the man whose figure she was appraising, was—her husband. At the thought she turned guiltily to Lady

Betty; but the girl, worn out by excitement and the night's vigil, had fallen asleep. Sophia looked again; and the carriage, leaving the road, swept through the gates into the park.

## XXIII.

"THEY are coming to the hall at four o'clock," Sir Tom said. "And I wouldn't be in their shoes for a mug and a crust. Coke must swinge them," he continued with zest, "like it or not. It'll be go, bag and baggage, next year for most of them, and some, I'm told, have been on the land time out of mind."

He was seated on the broad balustrade of the terrace, swinging his legs; with his back to the park, and his eyes on the windows of the house. Sophia, seated sideways on the stone bench near him, gazed thoughtfully over the park, as if she found refreshment merely in contemplating the far stretch of fern and sward, here set with sparse oak trees, there falling away in half seen dells of bracken and foxgloves.

Recreated by a long night's rest, her youth set off and her freshness heightened by the dainty Tuscan and chintz sack she had put on that morning, she was not to be known for the draggled miss who had arrived in so grievous a plight the day before. From time to time she recalled her gaze, to fix it dreamily on her left hand; now reviewing the fingers, bent or straight, now laying them palm downwards on the moss stained coping. She was so employed when the meaning of her brother's last words came tardily home to her, and roused her from her reverie.

"Do you mean," she cried, "that he will put them out of their farms?"

"I should rather think he would," said Tom. "Wouldn't you? And serve them right, the brutes!"

"But what will they do?"

"Starve, for what I care!" Tom answered callously; and he flipped a pebble from the balustrade with his forefinger. He was not, at his best, a particularly soft hearted young gentleman. "And teach them to know better!" he added presently.

Sophia's face betrayed her trouble. "I don't think he would do that," she said.

"Coke?" Tom answered. "He won't have any choice, my dear. For the sake of your *beaux yeux* he will have to swinge them, and lustily. To let them off lightly would be to slight you; and 'twouldn't look very well, and a fortnight married! No, no, my girl. And that reminds me. Where is he? And where has he been since yesterday afternoon?"

Sophia reddened. "He'd some business," she said.

"I don't think you know."

Sophia blushed more warmly, but she said



nothing; and fortunately Tom at that moment caught sight of the whisk of a certain petticoat descending the steps at the end of the terrace. It is not impossible that he had been watching for it, for he rose on the instant, muttered an unintelligible word, and went in pursuit.

Sophia sat a while, pondering in a troubled way on what he had said. It was right that the offenders of the day before should be punished; their conduct had been cruel. But that her home coming should mean to many the loss of home shocked her. Yet she saw the possibility of it; pride if not love, the wish to do his duty by her, if not the desire to commend himself to her, would move Sir Hervey to especial severity. What bridegroom indeed, what lover, could afford to neglect so obvious a flattery? And if in her case Coke counted neither for lover nor bridegroom, what husband?

She rose. She must go at once and speak to him, intercede with him, convince him that such a course would not pleasure her. But she had not taken two steps before she paused, her pride revolting. After she had changed her dress and repaired her disorder the day before, she had waited, expecting that he would come to see her. He had not done so, he had not come near her; and at length she had asked for him. Then she had learned with astonishment, with humiliation, that immediately after her arrival he had left the house on business, none knew whither.

If he could slight her in that fashion, was there any danger that out of regard to her he would do injustice to others? She laughed bitterly at the thought, yet believed all the same that there was, for men were inconsistent. But the position he had taken up made intercession difficult. Instead of calling a servant, therefore, and asking if he had returned, Sophia wandered aimlessly into the house. She remembered presently that the housekeeper had begged to know when her ladyship would see the drawingrooms, and she sent for Mrs. Stokes.

The old lady found her young mistress waiting for her in the larger of the two rooms. It was furnished scantily after the fashion of the early part of the century; with heavy chairs and a table, that set at wide intervals on a parquet floor; a couple of box-like settees, and as many bull tables—the latter bought on her wedding tour by Sir Hervey's mother, and preserved as the apple of her eye. On either side of the open blue tiled fireplace a round headed alcove exhibited shelves of oriental china, and on the walls were half a dozen copies of Titians and Raphaels, large pictures at large intervals. All was stately, proper, a little out of fashion but decently so. Sophia admired, yawned,

said a pleasant word to Mrs. Stokes, and passed into the smaller room.

There she stood, suddenly entranced. On each side of the fireplace hung a full length portrait. The one on the right hand, immediately before her, represented a girl in the first bloom of youth, lovely as a rosebud, graceful as a spray of jessamine, with eyes that charmed and chained the spectator by their pure maidenliness. A great painter in his happiest vein had caught the beauty and innocence of the model; as she smiled from the canvas, the dull room—for the windows were curtained—grew brighter and lighter. The visitor who entered saw only that sweet face; as the playgoer sees only the limited space above the footlights, and sees that grow larger the longer he looks.

It was with an effort Sophia turned to the other picture; she looked at it and stood surprised, uncertain, even faintly embarrassed. She turned to the housekeeper. "It is Sir Hervey, is it not?" she said.

"Yes, my lady," the woman answered. "At the age of twenty one. But he is not much changed to my eyes," she added jealously.

"Of course—I did not know him then," Sophia murmured apologetically; and after a long, thoughtful look she went back to the other picture. "What a very, very lovely face!" she said. "I did not know that Sir Hervey had had a sister. She is dead, I suppose?"

"Yes, my lady. She is dead."

"It is his sister?"

The housekeeper looked uncomfortable. "No, my lady," she said at last. "It is not his sister."

"No?" Sophia exclaimed, raising her eyebrows. "Then, who is it, pray?"

"Well, my lady, it—it should have been removed," Mrs. Stokes explained, her embarrassment evident. "At one time it was to go to Sir Hervey's library, but 'twas thought it might be particular there. And so nothing was done about it. Sir Hervey wouldn't let it go anywhere else. But I was afraid that your ladyship might not be pleased."

Sophia stared coldly at her. "I don't understand," she said stiffly. "You have not told me who it is."

"It's Lady Anne, my lady."

"What Lady Anne?"

"Lady Anne Thoresby. I thought," the housekeeper added in a faltering tone, "your ladyship would have heard of her."

Sophia looked at the lovely young face, looked at the other portrait—of Sir Hervey in his gallant hunting dress, gay, laughing, debonair—and she understood. "She was to have married Sir Hervey?" she said.

"Yes, my lady."

"And she—died?"

"Yes, my lady, two days before their wed-

ding day," Mrs. Stokes answered, her garrulity beginning to get the better of her fears. "Sir Hervey was never the same again—that is to say, in old days, my lady," she added hurriedly. "He grew that silent it was wonderful, and no gentleman more pleasant before. He went abroad, and 'tis said he lost twenty thousand pounds in one night in Paris. And before that he had played no more than a gentleman should."

Sophia's eyes were full of tears. "How did she die?" she whispered.

"Of the smallpox, my lady. And that is the reason why Sir Hervey is so particular about it."

"How do you mean? Is he so greatly afraid of it?"

"Oh, no, my lady! He had it years ago—himself. But wherever it is, he's for giving help. That's why we kept it from him that 'twas at Beamond's farm, thinking that, as your ladyship was coming, he would not wish to be in the way of it. But he was wonderful angry when he learned all about it, and went off as soon as his reverence came. And I can pretty well guess what he's gone about," she added sagaciously.

"What?" Sophia asked.

Mrs. Stokes hesitated, but decided to speak. "Well, it happened once before, my lady," she said, "that they could get no one to help bury, and Sir Hervey went and set the example; and you may be sure there were plenty then as had had it, and had no cause to fear, ready to come forward to do the work. And I've not much doubt, my lady, it's for that he's gone with Mr. Michieson this time. He'd stay away a night—at the old keeper's hut, I expect," Mrs. Stokes continued, nodding her head sagely, "just to see to his clothes being destroyed and the like. For there's no one more careful to carry no risks, I will say that for his honor."

Sophia stared. "But do you mean," she cried, "that Sir Hervey would do the work with his own hands?"

"Well, it's what he did once, I know, my lady," the housekeeper answered apologetically. "It was not very becoming, to be sure, my lady, but he was not the less thought of about here, I assure your ladyship. You see, my lady, 'tis in the depth of the country, and the land is his own, and it's not as if it was in London. Where, I know, things are very different," she continued with pride, "for I have been there myself with the family. But about here I'm sure he was not the less considered, begging your ladyship's pardon."

"I can believe it," Sophia said, in a voice suspiciously quiet and even. And then, "Thank you, Mrs. Stokes, you can leave me now," she continued. "I shall sit here a little."

But when Mrs. Stokes—feeling herself a trifle snubbed—had withdrawn and closed the door of the outer room upon her, Sophia's eyes grew moist with tears, and the nosegay that filled the open bodice of her sack rose and fell strangely. In that age philanthropy was not a fashion. Pope indeed had painted the Man of Ross, and there was a Charitable Corporation, lately in difficulties, and there was a Society of the Sons of the Clergy, and there were other societies of a like kind, and in the country infirmaries were beginning to be founded on the patterns of Winchester and Shrewsbury; and to subscribe to such objects after dining well and drinking deeply was already, under the Walpoles and the Pelhams, a part of the fine gentleman's life. But for a man of condition to play the Borromeo, to stoop to give practical help and run risks among the vulgar, was still enough to earn for him a character as eccentric as that of the famous nobleman who had seen more kings and more postillions than any of his contemporaries.

In the eyes of the world; but not in Sophia's, or why this dimness of vision as she gazed on Sir Hervey's picture? Why the unrest of the bodice that threatened to find vent in sobs? Why the sudden rush of shame and self reproach? More sharply than any kindness shown to her—in the long, consistent course of his dealings with her—more keenly even than his forethought for her brother, this stabbed her. This was the man she had flouted, condemned, rejected. This was the man whose generous, whose unselfish offer she had accepted—to save her reputation—with grudging resignation; but whose love she had deemed a floor clout, not worthy the picking up! Was it wonderful that, cynical, taciturn, almost dull as the world thought him, he was "not the less considered" here.

How handsome he had been at twenty one, with wit and laughter and the gay insouciance of youth written on his face! Time, the lapse of thirteen years, had robbed his features of their bloom, his lips of their easy curve, his eyes of their sparkle. But something, surely, time had given in return. Something, but Sophia could not say what. She could not remember, though she tried to think, how he looked now; she could only recall an odd smile, kindly, long suffering, even a little quizzical, with which he had sometimes met her eyes. That she could recall perfectly; and as she did so, standing before his portrait, in the stillness of this long abandoned room, with the dead air of old potpourris in her nostrils, she grew frightened. What was it she had thrown away? And how would she fare if it were now too late to recover it?

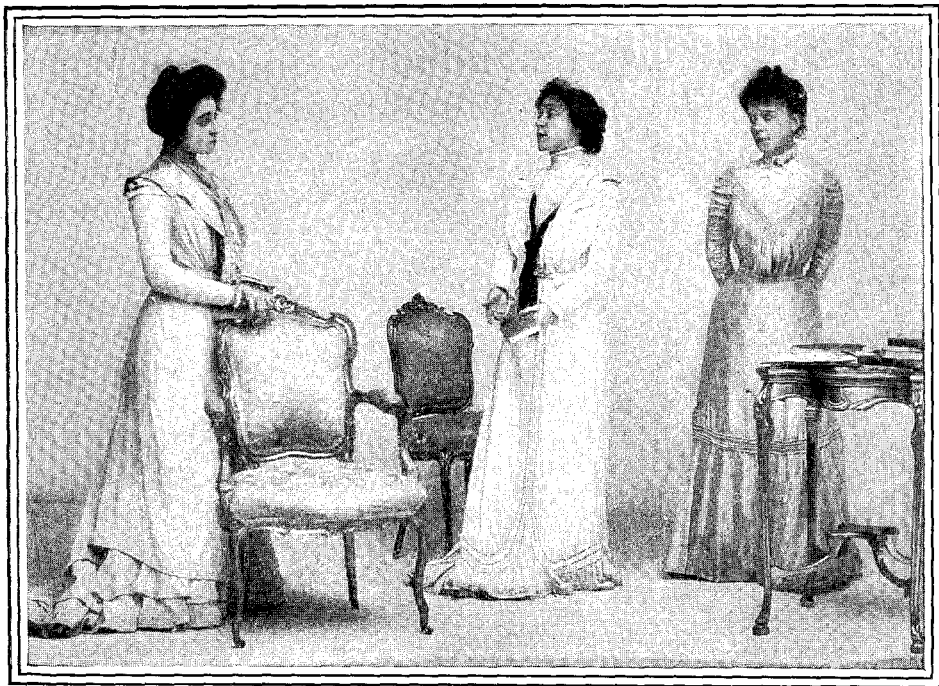
(To be continued.)



# The Stage

## "MISS HOBBS" AND ITS "KINGSEARL MAJOR."

The present season, now about half over, has thus far been marked by a decided decrease in the number of successes as compared with the last theatrical year. One of the Broadway houses has had four "frosts" in succession, another two, while a third lost money for six weeks on a venture which the manager's pride insisted on keeping before the public. Oddly enough, the biggest hits have been made by the syndicate on the one hand, and by the head and front of the opposition to it on the other—Mrs. Fiske, with her "Becky Sharp." The play that has to its credit the longest metropolitan run flies the flag of the so called trust, and is "Miss Hobbs," with Annie Russell as its star. On its opening, September 7 last, most of the morning critics said some nice things



SCENE FROM THE SECOND ACT OF "MISS HOBBS," SHOWING ANNIE RUSSELL, IN THE NAME PART, GIVING HER VIEWS ON THE EVILS OF MATRIMONY TO "MILLCENT FAREY" (MABEL MORRISON) AND "MRS. PERCIVAL KINGSEARL" (CLARA BLOODGOOD).

*From a photograph by Sarony, New York.*